Qur’anic Concepts of the Ethics of Warfare: Challenging the Claims of Islamic Aggressiveness

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Dr Joel Hayward*

A frequently quoted saying, with slight variations, insists that, while not all Muslims are terrorists, all terrorists are Muslims. This is a great untruth. According to the American Federal Bureau of Investigation, Muslims have not been responsible for the majority of terrorist attacks identified and prevented or committed throughout the world in the last twenty years. Yet it is true that, even before the Bush Administration instigated a concentrated campaign against anti-American terrorists around the world in 2001—a campaign which quickly came to be known as the War on Terror—several states including America and Israel had already experienced terrorism undertaken unmistakably by Muslims. For example, the bombings of American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998 brought Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to the focused attention of American security services for the first time. These terrorists and their ideological bedfellows embraced an extreme minority opinion within Islam. According to that opinion, militant opposition to any ostensibly oppressive political activity that weakens Islamic states and their interests constitutes a righteous struggle (jihad) on God’s behalf (fi Sabi Lillah, literally “in the path of Allah”). Yet these “jihadists” (a phrase not widely used in those pre-9/11 days) did not garner much public interest until that dreadful day when nineteen of them hijacked four aircraft and carried out history’s worst single terrorist attack.

No-one can doubt that western attitudes towards Islam changed for the worse at that time and have not returned to...
that is closely akin to, and compatible with, the Western war and peace concepts embedded within the Just War doctrine. This paper attempts to dispel any misperceptions that the Qur’an advocates the subjugation or killing of “infidels” and reveals that, on the contrary, its key and unequivocal concepts governing warfare are based on justice and a profound belief in the sanctity of human life.

The Importance of the Qur’an

Sadly, people need to read the holy scriptures of other faiths so it is not surprising that, although Muslims constitute one-quarter of the world’s population, very few Muslims have studied the Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible or the Hindu Vedas and equally few non-Muslims have taken the time to study the Qur’an. Not many people ever “dip” into other holy books to get a quick feel for the language, tone and message. Yet, given the geographical location of our major wars and the strategic importance of the Middle East, as well as the cultural origin of some recent terrorist groups, it is surprising that very few non-Muslim strategists and military personnel have taken time to read the Qur’an alongside doctrine publications and works of military philosophy. The Qur’an is certainly shorter than Clausewitz’s widely read and constantly quoted Vom Kriege (On War) and far easier to understand. The Qur'an is a relatively short book of approximately 7,000 words, which makes it about the size of Shakespeare’s Macbeth. In the just 114 chapters of the New Testament or one-seventh the length of the Old Testament, the New Testament or one-seventh the length of the Old Testament. Critics of the Qur’an who advance what I consider to be an unsustainable argument that Islam is the world’s most warlike major faith — among whom the American scholar and blogger Robert Spencer is both the most prolific and influential — routinely highlight those Qur’anic passages to support their argument that Islam has a clear tendency towards aggressive war, not just peaceful coexistence.4 Such writers commonly focus their attention on a few passages within the Qur’an which seem to suggest that Allah encourages Muslims to subjugate or drive out non-Muslims — and even to take their lives if they refuse to yield. The critics especially like to quote Surah 9, Ayah (Verse) 5, which has become known as the “Verse of the Sword” (Ayt al-Sayf). This verse explicitly enjoins Muslims to kill “pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, believeth them, and lie in wait for them in ever-stratagems (of war).6

The critics often add to their condemnation of the aforementioned Surah 9:5 with equally strong attacks on Surah 9:29. This verse directs Muslims to “fight those who believe not in Allah and the Day of Judgment, who do not comply with Muslim laws, as well as those Jews and Christians who reject the religion of Islam and will not willingly pay a tax after their submission.” Many critics assert that this verse directly supports Muslims to wage war against any and all disbelievers anywhere who refuse to embrace Islam or at least to submit to Islamic rule.7

The critics also place negative focus on Surah 2:190-194, which states:

[190] Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits: for Allah loveth not the transgressors.

[191] And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out of their homes as they turned out your homes; and let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression.

[192] And fight them until there is no more unbelief, and they pay the piliotage levies exactly as we pay it and establish religion in the earth which is (the) pure: yet many of them are of doubtful faith.

The critics also like to quote verses from Surah 8, dealing with a religious war against a Mecca which was committed to his community’s destruction.8

But when they read the Qur’an, the opponents of its message place little importance on the obvious differences of experiences and responsibilities between Jesus and Muhammad. Jesus was the spiritual leader of a small and intimate group of followers at a time of occupation but relative peace and personal security throughout the land. He suffered death, according to the Christian scriptures, but his execution by the Rome-governed state came after a short burst of state anger that actually wanted to be moderate, just and inclusive but suffered bitter frustration when the overwhelming majority of those who suppressed faith. By contrast, the Prophet Muhammad (in many ways like Moses and Joshua) found himself not only the spiritual leader but also the political and legislative leader of a massive community that wanted to be moderate, just and inclusive but suffered bitter organised persecution and warfare from other political entities which were committed to his community’s destruction. Muslims understand that the compassion and forgiveness extended by God to humans must be mirrored as much as is humanly possible by their compassion and forgiveness to each other.

Yet readers will also find a few scriptures in the Qur’an that seem to be “Old Testament” in tone and message and are more warlike than, for example, Christians who were often metaphorically encouraged to follow the words of Christ and the New Testament writers. Critics of the Qur’an who advance what I consider to be an unsustainable argument that Islam is the world’s most warlike major faith — among whom the American scholar and blogger Robert Spencer is both the most prolific and influential — routinely highlight those Qur’anic passages to support their argument that Islam has a clear tendency towards aggressive war, not just peaceful coexistence.4 Such writers commonly focus their attention on a few passages within the Qur’an which seem to suggest that Allah encourages Muslims to subjugate or drive out non-Muslims — and even to take their lives if they refuse to yield. The critics especially like to quote Surah 9, Ayah (Verse) 5, which has become known as the “Verse of the Sword” (Ayt al-Sayf). This verse explicitly enjoins Muslims to kill “pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, believeth them, and lie in wait for them in ever-stratagems (of war).6

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Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land and promptly laid siege to Jericho... “they destroyed with the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.”

A double-standard also seems to exist. Many of the scholars and pundits who dislike the fact that Muhammad had to fight military campaigns during his path to peace, and who consider his religion to be inherently martial, overlook the fact that many biblical prophets and leaders — including Moses, Joshua, Samson, David and other Sunday School favourites — were also warriors through necessity. Despite our children’s language. for example, the Book of Numbers (31:15-17) records killing and were sometimes couched in highly bloodthirsty

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Holocaust, the Srebrenica massacre or the Timothy McVeigh terrorist attack in Oklahoma City in 1995, even though Christians committed those horrendous acts and many others. Similarly, a fair assessment of Islam reveals that it is equally non-violence. A historical “reminder” (with both “glad tidings and warnings”) to “all” of humanity.4 With this in mind, Muslims believe that to ignore scriptures on the basis of a “that-was-then-this-is-now” reading would be as mistaken as conversely believing that one can gain meaning or guidance from reading individual verses in isolation, without seeing how they form parts of consistent visions. Second World War only further amplified the violence of the period, with some early rulings on inheritance, alcohol, law, social arrangements and so on being superseded by later passages; a phenomenon known in Arabic as “nudhul” that advocates another earlier covenant. Surahs 5:32-33 records that when Allah developed any particular legal ruling beyond its first revelation and He therefore wanted to supersede the original verses, He would replace them with clarifying verses. A fair assessment of historical evidence reveals that Christianity is a faith of justice that cannot reasonably be considered blameworthy in and of itself for the Armenian Genocide, the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait or the Al-Qaeda attacks on America in 2001, even though Muslims committed those disgraceful deeds. Certainly Islam’s framing scriptures, the Qur’an, contains no verses which are as violent as the biblical scriptures quoted above or any Qur’anic verses more violent than those discussed above and many others. Adopting either approach would be unhelpful, self-serving and ultimately misleading. It is only when the Qur’an’s key concepts which only emerge when the entire book is studied. Despite mounting resistance and persecution, some of it violent and all of it humiliating, Muhammad had to advocate an almost Gandhian or Christ-like policy of forbearance and non-violence.
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community should understand that henceforth they would not be permitted to offer prayer or worship (of more than one god) and idolatry (worship of any man or object except the one god) would ever again be tolerated within Islam’s holy city. From that time on it would be a city devoted to Allah alone. 32. As Surah 9:57 and 58 say: it is no longer proper for idolaters to attend Allah’s mosques, since they have admitted to their unbelief. … Allah’s mosques should be attended only by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day. 42. Muslims were not permitted to engage with them to the end of the term; for Allah loves the righteous.”) after clarifying that the threatened violence makes clear that during that period of amnesty, polytheists or idolaters were to be left untouched so that Muslims would never again be rendered unclean by the paganism of those who had rejoined the forces of oppression and now fought aggressively against the Muslims. Secondly, it stated that, if any of those aggressors left the Muslims alone and free to practice their faith, and if they did not attempt to secure peaceable co-existence, then Allah would not allow Muslims to harm them in any way (“Allah hath opened no way for you to war against them”). 43. The verse went even further. It not only offered peaceful co-existence to those who formally made peace with the Muslims, but also to anyone, even backslidden Muslims, who merely chose to stay neutral; that is, who did not take either side in the tense relations between the Muslims on the one hand and the Quraysh and their allies on the other. 44. THE ORIGINS OF SELF-DEFENSIVE CONCEPTS OF WAR It is worth remembering that, for the first fourteen years of his public life (from 622 to 632), Muhammad had practiced and proclaimed a policy of peaceful non-resistance to the intensifying humiliation, cruelty and violence that the Quraysh, the dominant tribe of Mecca, attempted to inflict on Muslims. 45. Verses of the Sword was a context-specific verse relating to the purification of Mecca and its environs of all Arab polytheism and idolatry so that the sanctuary in particular, and the Ka’aba at its centre, would never again be rendered unclean by the paganism of those people or groups who violated pacts of peace with the Muslims, or who joined the Muslims or those former Muslims (“renegades”) who had rejoined the forces of oppression and now fought aggressively against the Muslims. Secondly, it stated that, if those aggressors left the Muslims alone and free to practice their faith, and if they did not attempt to secure peaceable co-existence, then Allah would not allow Muslims to harm them in any way (“Allah hath opened no way for you to war against them”).
upon him and his fellow Muslims. Throughout that period he had strenuously resisted “growing pressure from within the Muslim ranks to respond in kind” and insisted “on the virtues of patience and steadfastness in the face of their opponents’ attacks.” Muhammad’s response to continued pressure by those in Mecca was no warmonger and forgave and pardoned mortal enemies whenever he could. This “rebellious, combatant” to quote one scholar, urged the use of nonviolent means when possible and, when he gave the order to fight, because they are wronged — and verily, Allah is Most Powerful for their aid (Islamic community), experienced grave hardship and fear. Some of the first Muslims in Medina passionately resented the presence of Muslims and conspired to expel them. From Mecca, Abu Safyan waged a relentless campaign of hostility against Muhammad and the Muslims, who had now become a rival power and a threat to his lucrative trade. He was no warmonger and forgave and pardoned mortal enemies whenever he could. This “rebellious, combatant” to quote one scholar, urged the use of nonviolent means when possible and, when he gave the order to fight, because they are wronged — and verily, Allah is Most Powerful for their aid.41

In 624, two years after the migration of Muslims to Medina — two years in which the Quraysh continued to persecute them and then led armies against them — Muhammad finally announced a revelation from Allah that Muslims were allowed open military affairs. The Qur’anic passage on war that one reads when one starts from Allah loveth not the transgressors.!” The verses which command soldiers in battle to strike at necks and fingers. Although these verses may seem out of place in a religious text, they are not out of place when read in the context of arms. Most scholars agree that Surah 2:199 contains that first transformational statement of permission.42

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after his forces entered the city, the panicked hometown Mecca in 630 at the head of an army of 10,000 — leaders and warriors would be slain. There was no bloodshed. He reportedly asked the assembled leaders of Quraysh what fate they anticipated. Expecting death, but hoping for life, they replied: “O noble brother and son of a noble brother! We expect nothing but goodness from you.” This appeal relieved Muhammad and made him smile. He replied: “I speak to you in the same words as Yusuf [the biblical Joseph, also one of Islam’s revered prophets] spoke unto his brothers. ... No reproach on you this day.” Go your way, for you are the freed ones.” He even showed mercy to Hind bint Utbah, Abu Sufyan’s wife, who was under a sentence of death for having horrifically and disgracefully humiliated, persecuted and tried to assassinate Muhammad during the Battle of Uhud five years earlier. Utbah had cut open Hamza’s body, ripped out his liver and chewed it. She then reportedly strung the ears and nose into a necklace and entered Mecca wearing it as a trophy of victory. When justice finally caught up with her five years later she threw herself upon Muhammad’s mercy. Extending clemency of remarkable depth, Muhammad promised her forgiveness and accepted her into his community.

Muhammad’s greatest triumph — his eventual return to his hometown Mecca in 630 at the head of an army of 10,000 — was itself a血less affair marked by tremendous forgiveness. After his forces entered the city, the panicked Meccans had to try to escape, a conundrum with which the first Muslims had to deal. It is thus a manual for life, with sections on war and combat which are relevant when Muslims go to war for defensive reasons, and on, say, pilgrimage when Muslims go on the Hajj for spiritual fulfillment. The Qur’an and the Hadith (the recorded words and actions of Muhammad) show that Muhammad took no pleasure in the violence as a last resort which has been imitated by Muslim warriors to this day, albeit at times with varying emphases. Before World War I, there were also Muslims who dreamed against spontaneous self-defense battles when surprised — the leader must make a formal declaration of war to the enemy force, no matter how aggressive and violent that enemy is. He must communicate a message to the enemy that it will be better for them to embrace Islam. If they did (and Muhammad liked to offer three days for reflection and decision) then the grievance ended. A state of brotherhood ensued. If the enemy refused even that offer, and did not cease his wrong-doing, they forfeited their rights to immunity from the unfortunate violence of war.

Islamic concepts of war do not define and conceptualise things in exactly the same way as Western thinking has done within the Just War framework. Yet the parallels are striking. The reasons for going to war expressed within the Qur’an closely match those within the Christian Gospels, it suggests that there is more spiritual value in doing what is right rather than righting wrongs. For example, the Qur’an repeatedly enjoins Muslims to remember that, “God’s patience, forgiveness and clemency strongly underpinned the early Islamic practice of warfare. Proportionality — one of the core principles of Warfare, which was a key foundational principle in the Qur’anic guidance on war. Doing no violence greater than the minimum necessary to accomplish its ends was a key precept, which was a key foundational principle in the Qur’anic guidance on war. Doing no violence greater than the minimum necessary to accomplish its ends was a key precept, which was a key foundational principle in the Qur’anic guidance on war. 

Mercy between humans, based on forgiveness of someone else’s acknowledged wrongdoing, was something that Muhammad believed precisely mirrored the divine relationship between the Creator and humans. Mercy between humans, based on forgiveness of someone else’s acknowledged wrongdoing, was something that Muhammad believed precisely mirrored the divine relationship between the Creator and humans. The concepts of patience, forgiveness and clemency strongly underpinned the early Islamic practice of warfare. Proportionality — one of the core principles of Warfare, which was a key foundational principle in the Qur’anic guidance on war. Doing no violence greater than the minimum necessary to accomplish its ends was a key precept, which was a key foundational principle in the Qur’anic guidance on war. 

**Qur’anic Concepts of the Ethics of Warfare**

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The verses that talk of combat are clear that war is only permissible against those who are waging war; that is, those in combat.

message that the decisions that pertain to life and death are inevitably brings. An analysis of such matters would not, of course, be complete without making some sense of jihad; that famous word and concept that nowadays is most controversial and misunderstood.

Interestingly, given that jihad is now associated with extremists who are full of hatred, like Osama bin Laden and other terrorists, the Qur’an does not allow hatred to form the basis of a military or other armed response to perceived injustices. It explicitly states that the hatred of others must not make Muslims and jihadi’s ‘angry and unjust’.

This desire for tolerant coexistence even included other faiths and Muslims never stopped believing in the commonality of belief between Muslims and the God-fearing among those who identified themselves as Jews and Christians

This Qur’anic concept of the ethics of warfare is based...
would want to get along harmoniously. Despite his grave disappointment, Muhammad cooperated instead of cooperating, in one of his later public sermons he revealed the divine message that Allah had made all of mankind “into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other).”

This desire for tolerance coexists even included other faiths and Muhammad never stopped believing in the commonality of belief between Muslims and the God-fearing among those who believed in a Deity. His contemporaries (Ahk al-Khit, the People of the Book). They shared the same prophetic line of revelation, after all. Despite rejection by several powerful Jewish tribes, and frustration or triumphant concepts, Muhammad remained convinced that the Jewish and Christian faith communities (as opposed to some individual tribes which acted treacherously) were eminently acceptable to Allah if they followed their own scriptures. Verses specifying precisely this were revealed very close in time to the Verse of the Sword. The verses encourage the Jews and Christians to believe (submit to God) and act faithfully according to their own scriptures, the Torah and the Gospel. The verses state that, if they do so, they along with Muslims (false submitters), will have no need to fear or grieve. The revelation of these religiously inclusive verses late in Muhammad’s life further undermines the thesis that the verses revealed late in his life undid all of the inter-faith exhortation to “strive” with “all effort” (in Arabic it uses two forms of the same word) [jihad] using the powerful words of the Qur’an to convince unbelievers.[74] Jihad is also described in Qur’anic verses as part of a defensive struggle against serious oppression or injustice for “exertion” or “effort” and it actually describes any Muslim’s effort to maintain the Qur’aNIC concept of the Ethics of warfare.

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Notes and References:


2. The Modern 예의 커뮤니티(“to consult existing precedents and then reason from them.”), in A History of Early Islamic Law, pp. 126–130.


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