

Violence and Muslims

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Under what circumstances does Islam tolerate violence or armed struggle? What are the Islamic ethics of war? When Does Islam allow what the western media calls “terrorism,” especially when Muslims are the target of violence and terrorism? Can Muslims use violence to counter violence? Given existing realities, we need to answer such questions. American and British aggression in various countries, the Hindutva aggression in India, and the general global anti-Muslim environment have disturbed Muslims everywhere. What steps should be taken to counter such negative trends?

Ethics and Violence

In essence, violence is an unethical act. In a civilized world that values ethical principles, violence is used only to deter and punish criminals and to defend oneself. One may use dialogue, persuasion, communication, and information to achieve an objective, but not violence. Violence cannot be used to achieve religious objectives, because it is an instrument of coercion. Islam, which is based on compassion, love, tolerance, gentleness, and forgiveness, prohibits coercion (2:256). Violence, destruction, and cruelty violate Islam’s very nature (7:199).

Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, commanded gentleness and forbade harshness and violence. *Sahih Muslim* records that Ayesha narrated that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “God is kind, and likes kindness. For kindness, God rewards what He never gives due to violence or through any other means” and that he said to Ayesha: “Be kind and avoid violence and indecency. Kindness makes a situation best and unkindness makes it worst. This is why the Qur’an prohibits offensive violence and discourages violence even as a defensive means” (41:34-35).

Muslims should avoid violence as much as possible and present the real picture of Islam: that of love, kindness, and forgiveness. The Qur'an has presented examples in which violence was justifiable but avoided, as in the story of Adam's two sons (5:27-32).

Permission To Kill

The early Makkan Muslims were not permitted to use violence to kill, even though they were subjected to constant violence and some of them were tortured and martyred. One might think that they were very small in number and quite weak. But around the sixth year of Muhammad's mission, peace be upon him, many influential and powerful persons (e.g., Umar ibn al-Khattab and Hamzah ibn `Abd al-Muttalib) embraced Islam and were proponents of using violence. The Prophet, peace be upon him, rejected their request and allowed those who wanted to emigrate to go to Ethiopia.¹

God allowed the Muslims to use violence after they established themselves in Medinah, because the enemy targeted them, attacked their land, and some Muslims still in Makkah were tortured (22:39, 2:190). Thus, the resulting wars were self-defensive in nature. No lands were occupied, for the goals were to end aggression and enable people to hear the message of Islam (2:193, 4:75).

After creating humanity and giving them life and death, God tests them (67:2) through tyranny and aggression caused by people who try to prevent others from choosing their way of life. Thus, among the major objectives of jihad is to restore freedom and the right to choose, liberate oppressed people, and defend Muslims' life and property. But if the resulting war engenders its own tyranny and aggression, it becomes forbidden. This is also true if it results in the loss of civilian or noncombatant lives (6:151, 17:33).

Although Qur'an 17:33 allows violence to repel violence, it neither projects violence as the only course, nor does it give people the right to take the law into their own hands. Instead, the state is responsible for ensuring that justice is done. Islam seeks to prevent violence and teaches forgiveness instead of revenge (42:40-43).

Islam also reminds people that God's mission may be fulfilled through nonviolence, as emphasized in 2:28-32 and 42:40-43. Hence, the discussion should not be limited to whether Islam permits violence to quell violence; rather, it should be broadened to determine how God's mission and humanity's purpose can be better achieved.

Violence and Terrorism

When some individuals or groups resort to violence to defend themselves, this violence eventually becomes “terrorism,” which is defined as killing without discriminating between active participants and noncombatants. Muslim fighters are forbidden to kill noncombatants (e.g., children, women, invalids, and the elderly), destroy property, and kill in inhumane ways.

Today, we have nation-states with huge armies and state-of-the-art technology and weapons on the one hand, and, on the other hand, individuals and groups who must operate clandestinely and adopt guerilla tactics to further their cause. Thus, they may not be able to follow all of Islam’s war-related ethical guidelines. Unable to attack the military directly, they may target innocent people, civilian airplanes and ships, and commercial centers.

The mechanics of this counter-violence differ markedly from government-sponsored violence. For instance, the group’s leadership changes quite frequently. Therefore, the leader’s authority over operations is not very strong, and splinter groups emerge and pursue their own policies. Sooner or later, they become “terrorists.”

Islam prohibits all terrorism, regardless of the situation, as the following authentic narration from Imam Malik’s *Al-Muwatta’* outlines:

When Abu Bakr Siddique, the first Caliph, sent an army to Syria under the command of Yazid bin Sufyaan, these were Abu Bakr’s instructions to his army commander: “Do not kill a child, women, or elderly persons; do not cut and destroy a fruit-bearing tree; do not cause destruction of a populated area; do not burn or disperse the honey-bees; do not be dishonest, unfair, and unjust in dealing with the property and wealth you acquire during the war; and do not be a coward.”

The Qur’an (7:85, 2:205) also prohibits destroying property, wealth, and crops, as well as demolishing buildings – all actions that cause chaos.

In the last 20 years, certain Muslim groups have been waging war against their own governments, not to mention against the United States, Russia, France, and Britain. This has ostensibly been done in response to these nations’ aggression or anti-Muslim policies. However, their violent policies have led them into those areas from which Islam had asked them to keep away. As a result, innocent people have lost their lives and properties in the United States and other countries (e.g., the Philippines, Indonesia, Yemen, Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia). In India, Muslims have sometimes used violence to repel violence directed toward them.

Not unexpectedly, this violence has sometimes taken the form of terrorism. Such violence clearly violates Islam's ethics of warfare, for those people who attack embassies, airplanes, and tourist buses, or hijack commercial aircraft, almost always kill or injure innocent people. Property and lives are destroyed, and yet the proclaimed goals are no closer to realization. On the contrary, such acts have blackened Islam's image. The media then exaggerate such acts, and ordinary people look at Islam as a violent religion. This is the greatest loss for a people whose mission is to bear witness to God and work for justice and fairness.

Violence and the Current Situation

Let's consider the following situations: The persecution of Islamists in Muslim-majority countries, Muslim-majority areas occupied by aggressors, Muslim minorities subjected to violence in non-Muslim-majority countries, and violence against Muslim groups and countries by the United States and its allies. Even though my focus in this essay is the fourth case, I will briefly comment on the other situations.

Egypt is a good example of the first situation. The violence directed against the Muslim Brotherhood has been ongoing since 1954. The Egyptian model has been imitated in many Muslim countries. In such circumstances, peaceful efforts should be made to seek justice and establish peace.² Palestine is the clearest example of the second situation. Its struggle against Israel comes under the defensive use of violence, which Islam permits. Muslims should employ all allowable strategies to end their occupation and recover their land. Strategic decisions about using peaceful means and/or armed struggle will obviously be made by the participants.

India represents the third situation. Muslims have the right to defend their lives, honor, and properties, which the laws of a democratic country allow. However, some Muslim scholars opine that preemptive measures are also allowed. In my opinion, the following strategies are not correct: Attacking preemptively in order to prevent aggression, avenging an excessive use of force by attacking those who were not responsible for it, and using violence against any person belonging to a specific community if some of its members use aggression and violence against Muslims.

American Aggression

The Bush administration launched a worldwide campaign against terrorism after 9/11. It targets those individuals and groups who are angry at the United States or their own governments, who do not welcome the expanding

American hegemony, and are determined to harm Americans at home and abroad, as well as American interests worldwide. The Bush administration believes that several countries are sponsoring these individuals and groups (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Syria). In addition, it is trying to capture and punish people in Pakistan and Southeast Asia who have committed terrorism against it or may be potential terrorists. Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are coming down hard on Islamists, and their policies and attitudes toward religious schools are changing. Given these new realities, many Muslims claim that the United States wants to suppress and wipe out all such groups, as well as any trends that it considers harmful to its hegemonic aspirations, especially those countries or groups that do not want to Americanize themselves.

Muslims, such as those in Iraq, have the right to defend themselves against a unilateral American attack. However, they have to do it within the framework of international law. We can help the Iraqi Muslims, but cannot call for an open attack on Americans and American interests anywhere in the world. Doing so would be a violation of Islamic teachings, for such acts violate Islam's war-related ethical framework and do more harm to Islam and Muslims than to Americans and their interests.

But is it necessary to completely shun violence? The answer is "yes," due to the following facts:

- In the current situation, the Muslims' use of violence necessarily assumes prohibited forms.
- The violence committed by a few Muslims against the United States so far has already done enough damage to Islam and Muslims. The result has been portrayals of Islam and Muslims as uncivilized, inhumane, and unkind – all elements that lead to increased misunderstanding. Such actions have enabled the Bush administration to form an alliance for aggression against Muslims, which has benefited extreme right-wing Christians and the Zionist lobby.
- Muslims do not have sufficient power to combat American aggression with violence and force. Thus, they should seek to compete in the fields of knowledge, ideology, and culture. Additionally, it is incorrect to think of violence as a deterrent.
- Violence has damaged Muslim societies. Their valuable human and material resources are spent on acquiring weapons and conducting covert operations, instead of investing in education, media, economic development, and other useful projects.

As these individuals and groups must act covertly, they eventually seek help from those who know how to break laws, engage in the smuggling of weapons and sometimes illegal drugs, and procure fake names and travel documents. Sooner or later they seek cooperation from international criminal groups. As Islam forbids people to break established international, national, and Islamic rules, terrorism is once again prohibited.

This leads to a major internal problem for Muslims: replacing the duly emerged leadership with criminals and people with un-Islamic characters. It is both desirable and beneficial for the Muslim leadership to embody Islam's ethical principles and character when dealing with non-Muslims, both in their actions and thoughts. If the leadership has to use force, it respects the limits imposed by Islam. During the communal riots in India, when Muslims protect innocent non-Muslims, non-Muslims also protect innocent Muslims against the members of their own community.

When fighting against the aggression of Hindutva in India, or countering the Zionist, right-wing Christian Evangelists, or those Americans committed to American hegemony, the Muslims' real weapons are their Islamic character and ideology, which they want to communicate to humanity. By resorting to violence, they harm their moral position and Islam's mission.

Future Strategy

Muslims cannot stop others from using violence against them. However, they can help to convince non-Muslims that they and Islam do not constitute any threat to world peace. The following are three important points that, if implemented, may significantly improve the image of Islam and Muslims.

Transparency. For various historical and other reasons, there is a great deal of misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims. One way to counter stereotypes is to explain what is being taught in our religious institutions, what we do at the mosque, and what we are learning in our *da`wah* gatherings and travels. Such transparency is especially required in the financial arena, so that everyone can know exactly where the donations are going. This will also help prevent any corruption.

Democracy. When power is concentrated in one person's hands, consulting other members or officials is impossible. One charge that the Bush administration and its allies have against many Muslim countries is their lack of democracy and freedom. This same charge can be leveled against most Muslim institutions as well, for their leadership is often in the hands

of a small group of people who continue to lead until they die, and then are replaced by their sons or other family members.

Transparency will help Muslims manage and run their institutions effectively, and promote consultation as a democratic approach to decision making, both of which will help them gain credibility and the people's confidence and trust. Eventually, non-Muslims will no longer be afraid of Muslims and will come to know that their activities are predictable.

Grassroots Work. Muslims face the same problems as everyone else: poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, illness, and insecurity. Their degree of suffering may be a little higher than others, but they are not altogether different. To solve these problems, common efforts by both Muslims and non-Muslims have to be launched. Muslims consider the entire world to be their home and so make efforts to improve humanity's condition. This approach is especially significant now, given the current mistrust against Muslims. Regardless of location, all doubts and suspicions toward each other should be replaced by trust, confidence, and credibility. Since the roots of violence are embedded in an environment of hatred and suspicion, violence will never be eradicated until this environment is changed.

Final Thoughts

Efforts to achieve transparency, develop a democratic culture, and improve relations with others are not presented here as solutions to all the problems Muslims face today. Instead, they seek to minimize the hatred and suspicion that have become widespread. If this happens, the possibility of initiating more proactive programs will become a reality. Abandoning violence is not the solution to all of the Muslims' problems, but it may enable Muslims to rid themselves of some of them.

And Allah Knows Best!

Notes

1. A small number of Muslims migrated to Ethiopia in 5 A.H. They returned after hearing that all Makkans had embraced Islam. In 6 A.H., 112 Muslims migrated to Ethiopia and remained there until Prophet's migration to Madinah. After this, they gradually joined the Prophet.
2. See AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, *Violence and Political Struggle* (Urdu) (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2002).