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## **On Violence and Muslims**

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Needless to say violence and Muslims have become inalienable concepts for media, particularly western media. However, this will not stand any scrutiny or critical inquiry. The media does not care to investigate things in depth. It adopts very superficial approach based on prejudices rather than facts. It is therefore very necessary to put things in proper perspective through critical inquiry.

Like Muslims, Islam is also associated with violence. It is not only the western scholars and media but also Muslims themselves who are responsible for spreading such a view. They often talk about *jihad* very loosely without knowing the Qur'anic position about it or its situational context. So Muslims also have to do a lot of re-thinking about *jihad* and its true concept. Loose talk about it harms the image of Islam.

I have often emphasised that peace is central to Islam and war (*harb or qital*, not *jihad*) incidental but this has been reversed in popular public imagination and war (*harb, qital*) has become central and peace incidental. Muslim (not Islamic) history is partly responsible for it. Islam, in fact, appeared in the midst of inter-tribal war in the Arab society and so peace became its main mission. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) went to Madina from Mecca as peace -maker.

The people of Madina belonging to tribes of Khazraj and Aus were tired of inter-tribal war, which had gone on for forty years. They found ray of hope in the Prophet of Islam and invited him to Madina to establish peace between the two tribes. The Prophet gladly accepted the role of peace -maker as it also allowed him to escape from violence against him and his followers in Mecca. Prophet did not want his followers to continue to suffer as they had stood severe persecution for a decade. He wanted peace for all. Peace and security were very central for him.

The Prophet was so concerned with peace that he drew up a covenant between Muslims, Jews and pagans to coexist pursuing their respective religions. The Qur'an stood for freedom of conscience (2:256)

and so the Prophet (PBUH) allowed all in Madina to follow their respective religions and coexist with each other. The Qur'an also says that diversity is Allah's will (5:48). Thus Islam stands for inter-religious harmony. The main concern of the Qur'an is truth (*haq*), justice ('*adl*), compassion (*rahmah*) and wisdom (*hikma*).

The Prophet loved peace so much that at Hudaibiyah he accepted peace even on what others thought as 'humiliating' conditions. The Prophet had gone with the intention of performing Hajj accompanied by 10,000 followers who were armed as he feared attack by the Meccan unbelievers. But when he was met with resistance by the Meccans he readily agreed to negotiate peace instead of fighting and shedding blood. The Prophet did not make it a matter of prestige and returned from Hudaibiyah after negotiating peace without performing Hajj.

This event clearly shows how central peace was for the Prophet. He silently tolerated persecution for years and migrated to Madina when it became unbearable. Even when he entered Mecca finally triumphant he pardoned all his worst enemies including Hindah who had chewed his uncle Hamza's liver after killing him in the battle of Badr. *Qisas* (retaliation) was the well-established practice of Arabs. But the Prophet transcended that Arab social practices so as to establish a society based on higher spirituality and morality. He set an example before Arabs to pardon the enemy rather than seek revenge. Retaliation may satisfy our raw emotions but pardoning results in inner cleansing and spiritual purity.

It is true that the Qur'an, in one of its verses, says there is life in retaliation (*al-hayat fi'al qisas*) but it refers to existing Arab social reality rather than asking Muslims to practice retaliation. Allah desires Muslims to transcend such practices and desist from retaliation as Allah is *Ghafur al-Rahim* i.e. a pardoner and compassionate and a true worshipper of Allah must also develop these qualities in himself/herself.

One has to properly understand the Qur'anic methodology and comprehend its exhortations on different levels. First the Qur'an refers to existing realities and then requires believers to transcend the given situation and accept higher morality. The Qur'an adopts first a practical approach and then wants its followers to try to establish what is ideal and desirable. It adopts same approach as regards war. War may become necessary but is certainly not desirable. One should transcend war and establish peace.

Some Muslims refer to certain verses, which permit war and ignore the Qur'anic emphasis on ideal of peace. Even paradise according to the Qur'an is place of peace and security as the Quran says enter it (the Paradise *be salamin aaminin* i.e. in peace and security 15:46). Thus

the earth can become paradise only when there is peace and security for all. It will become hell if there is violence and insecurity. Thus the Qur'an clearly aims at higher level of existence and not at animal level of revenge and retaliation.

In Qur'anic text one finds this tension between what is given and what is desirable. Without understanding this tension one cannot begin to understand the true spirit of Qur'an. The Muslim youth who are lured by powerful vested interests to declare *jihad* and court martyrdom are totally unaware of the higher level of Qur'anic teachings. In all situations one cannot simply talk of courting martyrdom. It could be done after exhausting all other alternatives and with minimum use of violence, even where very necessary.

But what we witness is abhorant use of indiscriminate violence killing scores of innocent people. In fact violence is being used to terrorise rather than fighting for justice. Also, who can decide whether all other avenues to solve the matter have been exhausted? Not a self-appointed group but concerned people at large through given democratic institutions. However, various *jihadi* outfits have become self-appointed guardians of whole community and anyone who opposes them is eliminated. They readily kill for personal revenge or motives, totally ignoring Qur'anic morality.

Here I would like to give one example. When Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet, defeated an Arab wrestler in a duel in the battle, he was about to behead him and the wrestler spat upon him. Ali, instead of beheading him, got off his chest and let him go. He was very surprised as he thought that since he spat upon Ali, he will kill him with more brutality. He asked Ali why did he get off his body instead of killing him with greater severity? Ali coolly replied if he had killed him after he spat upon him it would have been for personal revenge rather than for the sake of Allah.

Thus it will be seen that Islam, even in the situation of war, does not give up higher morality. Any war or killing for personal revenge or motive is totally unacceptable. One also has to go into ideological as well as empirical causes of violence. Ideologically speaking, Islam, as pointed out above, does not reconcile with violence. It is therefore necessary to go into empirical causes of violence. Only where it is ideological, one can relate it to Islam or Qur'an but where it is empirical, one cannot hitch it to Islamic wagon.

In most cases one will find that violence in Muslim society is empirically related. One can well argue how can one convincingly distinguish between ideological and empirical as people often invoke ideology to cover up their motives. It is very valid objection and it is this

invocation of ideological for extra-ideological motives that causes all the confusion. The only answer to this is rigorously critical examination of use of violence. There is bound to be a grey area and there can be differences about defining this grey area. But nevertheless some acceptable criteria can be laid down. There is no escape from grey areas in such matters.

Also, violence is more often related to political situation rather than to religious teachings. Violence is thought to be necessary in certain situations: where there is complete breakdown of law and order for whatever reason and in an authoritarian society where any dissent is not permissible at all. In early Muslim society anarchy broke out after murder of the third Caliph Uthman and it took proportion of civil war. More than 70,000 people were killed.

Thus Muslims fought against Muslims and some battles which were part of power struggle were fought. The battle of Camel and battle of Siffin were fought among Muslims themselves and had nothing to do with ideological reasons. In these battles important companions of the Prophet (PBUH) were involved on both the sides of battle lines. Such battles of interest also contributed to the impression that Islam and violence are two sides of a coin.

Thus one must distinguish between what are religious teachings and what are historical developments. What happened in history cannot be ascribed to religion or in other words religion cannot be held responsible for historical developments. But even scholars often confuse between the two. It is also necessary to read religious text in proper context. Normally no religion ever prescribes violence; it stresses peace. So is with Islam. The core teaching of Islam is peace, not violence. However, violence is prescribed only in certain situation for defence and Qur'an strictly prohibits violence for aggressive purposes.

It is true that certain groups like Al-Qaida are using violence and invoke the concept of *jihad* and martyrdom for the purpose. It is highly misleading, to say the least. Young Muslims, often unemployed and without any thorough Islamic background, can be easily induced in the name of Islam, *jihad* and martyrdom to kill and to die. Those who induce them to do so have their own motives.

*Jihad*, as already pointed out, is related more to spreading good and fighting evil (read peace for good i.e. *ma'ruf* and evil for violence and injustice i.e. *nahi*') and not fighting with weapons. *Jihad* has been grossly misunderstood in Islamic society and ignorance about real meaning of *jihad* is used by powerful vested interests. In the past also many monarchs waged territorial wars and invoked the concept of *jihad* to motivate their soldiers to fight.

Similarly the concept of martyrdom has equally been grossly misused. In fact *jihad* and martyrdom are integrally related in popular Islam and it receives re-inforcement from the ulama. In fact the Qur'an does not encourage giving up one's life without a serious purpose. The Qur'an, on the contrary warns believers not to throw themselves in *tahlukat* (to perish needlessly). Thus the Qur'an says, 'and cast not yourselves to perdition with your own hands and do good (to others). Surely Allah loves the doers of good.' (2:195)

Thus the concept of martyrdom must be read in conjunction with this verse. Often perishing needlessly is glorified as martyrdom i.e. what is in fact *tahlukat* is taken as *shahadat*. There is great difference between *shahadat* (martyrdom) and *tahlukat* (perishing). The above verse also talks of doing good to others (*ahsinu*). If suicide bombing is examined in the light of this verse – not to throw oneself into perdition on one hand, and to do good to others, on the other, it (suicide bombing) appears to be contrary to the Qur'anic teachings.

A suicide bomber is doubly guilty according to this Qur'anic verse: he throws himself/herself into perdition and kills others with him/her. So he/she kills himself and kills others whereas the Qur'anic verse prescribes doing good to others. Here one is killing innocent people instead of doing good to them. In suicide bombing which is today an important means of killing in ongoing terrorism, only innocent people are killed including women, children and old, something strictly prohibited by the rules of *jihad* prescribed by the *Shari'ah* law.

It is surprising that many ulama justify suicide bombing as part of *jihad* and describe those killed by becoming suicide bomber as 'martyrs'. It is nothing but their emotional response to what USA and Israel are doing rather than the Qur'anic teachings. Through such emotional response they bring bad name to Islam and Muslims as then Islam is equated with violence and fanaticism.

Also, we should not mechanically transplant 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabic situation to contemporary situation. Islam and Muslims were faced with enemies from their own society and tribes. Muslims also belonged to the tribe of Quraysh and *kafirs* (unbelievers) too belonged to that tribe. They were even blood-related and did not belong to enemy nations. The Jews were also part of Madinan society and with whom the Prophet (PBUH) had entered into a covenant giving them full freedom to practice their faith and in return help Muslims defend Madina in the event of attack from outside (i.e. Mecca).

The unbelievers of Mecca attacked Muslims of Madina and hence the Qur'an urged upon them to defend and court martyrdom in the battle-field (it never included killing civilians who were not in the battle

field). There is no precedent in early Islamic history of the time of the Prophet (PBUH) or during the time of the caliphs in which innocent civilians were ever targeted as in suicide bombing.

Martyrdom was praised as the Muslim community as a whole was in danger through wars of aggressions launched by Meccan unbelievers. And it was fledgling Muslim community and whole community was in danger. It was thus highly necessary to fight for defending the Muslim community as a whole. Today the situation is very different. Muslims are spread all over the world and are divided into separate nations and communities. Those who are courting 'martyrdom' are not saving even few; let alone, entire Muslim community. In many cases they are killing Muslims themselves.

Thus it is difficult to call suicide bombers as martyrs at all. The Qur'anic concepts must be applied on the Qur'anic grounds only. We cannot stretch these terms on our own conditions as the modern day suicide bombers do or those who induce them to do so. And no Islamic country as a whole is in mortal danger as the early Islamic community was. In fact many Muslim countries have conflicting interests and are far from unanimous on the question of war against any non-Muslim country like the USA.

In those days the Prophet (PBUH) used to receive guidance from Allah in the form of revelation (*wahi*) as to what to do in certain situation. He guided Muslims accordingly. Thus he did not take decisions as Mohammad as a man but as a messenger of Allah. We have this guidance today in the form of Qur'an and Qur'an is very clear on such issues which it calls *muhkamat* i.e. clear and firm in meaning (3:7). We have to obtain guidance strictly on Qur'anic grounds and not interpret them in arbitrary manner to fulfil our worldly desires. This is how the Qur'an is unfortunately being interpreted by those who invoke it for waging *jihad* and courting martyrdom'.

Thus we should not only bear the context in which the Qur'anic *ahkamat* (injunctions) were revealed but also apply them with great sense of responsibility so that arbitrary interpretation should not bring harm to anyone. Today's context should be borne in mind while applying these injunctions. Since the key Qur'anic values are justice ('*adl*'), benevolence (*ihsan*), compassion (*rahmah*) and wisdom (*hikmah*) any interpretation should not injure these values.

Any arbitrary use of violence will greatly harm these values and needless to say killing innocent people through suicide bombing does injure these values. Such killings are against justice, benevolence, compassion and wisdom. We should not mechanically invoke the verses on use of violence in the Qur'an or on concept of martyrdom to justify

what results in gross violation of these values. If one carefully considers Qur'anic injunctions it is permissible to use violence for defence but never for revenge and all terrorist killings are either for revenge or for terrorising others. A violence, which terrorises cannot be *jihad fi sabilillah* (war in the way of Allah). All terrorist killings are totally in violation of the Qur'anic spirit.

The young people who are induced to become human bombs are often lured through the concept of martyrdom – i.e. if they die for the 'cause of Allah', they will go to paradise as mentioned in the Qur'an. This appears to be very attractive proposition for them and they easily accepted the self-destructive assignment. As pointed out above such death is destruction (*halakah*) rather than martyrdom.

What is martyrdom and how to define it? A martyr is one who dies in a just war, a war which is fought in defence of human lives and in defence of *deen* of Allah. All the wars fought during the Prophet's time were the wars fought for these purposes and it is the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) who himself decided to fight these wars in consultation with his important companions. As far as these wars or battles were concerned neither there was any trace of personal revenge or anger or destruction of any innocent life. Only the combatants were killed. Also, such wars were not motivated by any political considerations. They were motivated only by defence of *deen* (religion) and defence of values Islam stood for.

Thus it is necessary to define the concept of martyrdom rigorously. All violent deaths or deaths courted in any attack cannot be termed as martyrdom. The Muslims in those days were highly oppressed and defenceless community. In Mecca they silently bore all conceivable persecution. When the Prophet (PBUH) migrated to Madina along with his companions who slowly joined him there, they were not left in peace. The Meccan leaders of unbelievers attacked them and it was in those circumstances that the Prophet (PBUH) took decision to defend innocent lives and the Qur'an described those killed in these battles as *shuhadah* (martyrs) and observed that 'And speak not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, (they are) alive, but you perceive not.' (2:154)

Thus those who die in Allah's way never die but are ever alive. Their bodies die but their spirits remain ever alive. A suicide bomber perceives he is dying for a cause but even if it is true he is killing innocent people who are non-combatant and are not responsible for persecution or exploitation. In many cases those killed are themselves victims of the system rather than running the system. Those who order these young men to become suicide bombers themselves are not struggling for a cause but responding to political games. Islam stresses

*haq* and *sabr* i.e. truth and patience (as well as persistence) and only those who die for these are entitled to be called martyr.

Seen in this light suicide bomber may not be entitled to be called a martyr. It is the prime duty of every Muslim to see that no innocent life is harmed and what can be achieved through peace (*salam*) should never be sought to be achieved through war. War should be the last weapon of a *mu'min* (a true believer) and what can be achieved through peaceful struggle should never be achieved through violent means. A martyr is one who dies rather than kills.