



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (108/2006)

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## REFUTING THE IDEA OF JIHAD AS A PERPETUAL WAR BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS

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6 October 2006

The most critical aspect of the jihadists' worldview is their idea of perpetual war. They hold to the belief that non-Muslims will never allow Muslims to live in peace and thus armed jihad is the only kind of relationship that could exist between the faithful and the non-Muslims.

To them, armed jihad is a standing obligation until the end of the world which has to be observed until all lands submit to the rule of Islam. The basis of relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, thus, is armed war, not peace. Muslims are not allowed to enter into any permanent peace agreement with non-Muslim countries. If at all necessary, the period of the peace agreement should not exceed ten years.

Jihadists argue that verses on jihad in the Quran were revealed in stages and Allah revealed verses 1-40 of chapter 9 – *At-Taubah* or Repentance - (in particular verse 5 of the chapter) of the Quran for the final stage. They claim that these last verses had abrogated the earlier verses that state jihad is only permissible when Muslims are attacked.

Muslim scholars who disagree argue that such an understanding of jihad has contributed to the development of a binary perspective in the jihadist's mind amounting to the "either you are with us or against us" syndrome. The effect of this understanding is the promotion of hate, animosity and hostility towards all non-Muslims. This understanding has precluded any opportunity for peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. This thus explains the socially exclusivist call for a non-integrationist and non-accommodative stance common to jihadist thinking.

The view is also tantamount to encouraging negative mindsets and attitudes among Muslims towards non-Muslims. Muslims who accept it will develop misconceptions on how he should relate with non-Muslims, emotionally and socially. Non-Muslims generally will be seen as enemies first, to be proven otherwise later. This then will develop into prejudices and intolerance, which in turn will negatively influence the perspective of non-Muslims towards Islam and Muslims. Either way, the outcome is destructive.

### **No evidence of abrogation**

In reality, the majority of Muslim scholars reject the abrogation argument of the jihadists because there is no strong evidence that the above verses were revealed to abrogate the other revealed texts. With regard to verse 5 of chapter 9, there is no mention about it abrogating

earlier verses on defensive jihad, according to At-Tabari and Ibn Katsir, two of the most prominent exegetes (interpreters) of the Quran. In fact, Al-Qurtubi reported that some scholars, among them Adh-Dahhak and Atho', were of the view that verse 5 of chapter 9 was abrogated by other verses in the Quran (47:4).

### **Linking all verses on jihad together**

The prevalent opinion among Muslim scholars is that verses on jihad cannot be interpreted independently of each other. They are to be studied together to derive the true understanding of jihad in Islam. In this respect, Muslim scholars have agreed that verses that are general and unconditional, such as the command to fight the pagans everywhere and at all times (9:5, 14, 36), must be interpreted as conditional, that is as a command to fight aggressors only (2:190, 194). Thus, the meaning of verses from chapter 9, which is unconditional, would fall under the meaning of the verses that exhort Muslims to fight the non-Muslims only when Muslims are attacked.

Muslim scholars also ruled in favour of "*la ama illa wa huwa makhsus*" (that there is no generality without exception). Therefore, they are always cautious when approaching verses that are unconditional. They will make serious efforts to look for other verses or *Hadith* (Prophet's Traditions), which possibly would limit the generality of the verses. A similar attitude should be applied when relating to the verses of chapter 9. By following this methodology scholars would be able to determine the limits to the scope in which an unconditional verse is to be applied. Consequently, the verse after it has been qualified would be interpreted within this scope and not beyond it.

Classical Muslim scholars, like Abu Hanifah and Ahmad b. Hanbal, also argued that, except for verse 29, the verses of chapter 9 of the Quran referred specifically to the Arab pagans of that time. Some scholars were more specific by saying that the verses were revealed with respect to the people of Mecca or the tribe of Quraish. Imam An-Nawawi, among many other scholars, wrote that the verse did not refer to the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). Thus, it is inappropriate to apply these verses to all non-Muslims today.

Even if one looks carefully at verses 1 to 40 of Chapter 9 from the Quran, one will find that the command to fight was not directed to all Arab pagans. The generality of the verses in the first group is restricted by other verses in Chapter 9.

Putting verses 4, 7, 8, 12 and 13 of chapter 9 together will suggest that Muslims who have entered into peace agreements with non-Muslims are enjoined to be strict in honouring them. It is clearly stated in the Quran that if "they have not failed you in anything and have not backed up anyone against you [Muslims]" such non-Muslims should not be fought against. Thus, the aggression was only directed towards hostile tribes who broke their agreement and attacked Muslims.

### **Importance of Contextual Understanding**

Muslim scholars also point to the importance of understanding the context of the revelation of the final verses on jihad. The most appropriate interpretation of the final revelation on jihad is that it referred to non-Muslims who had been in a prolonged state of war against Muslims through unprovoked aggression and violence. Their hostility remained even after Muslims migrated to Medina in search of peace. Despite entering into various treaties with the

Muslims in Medina, those tribes time and again treacherously violated them. In that late stage in the Prophet's mission, it became clear that peaceful relations with those tribes were impossible, hence the instruction in that chapter to denounce the treaties and wage war.

It is thus important to understand the dynamics of the relationship between the Quraish and the Muslims in Medina to have a full appreciation of the situation. The fact that Allah mentioned in verse 5 of chapter 9, "who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Messenger", is proof that the verse was revealed to the pagan people of Mecca at the time because that attribute could only fit them.

Understanding religious texts in their proper context is very important. When these texts are not read in their proper textual and historical contexts, the result can be a distortion and misrepresentation, as can be found in many teachings of Muslim extremist groups and jihadists.

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