



WISE Muslim Women's Shura Council

VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A VIOLATION OF ISLAM

The Shura Council is a global and inclusive council of Muslim women scholars, activists, and specialists. The Council endeavors to connect Islamic principles to society's most pressing issues and develop holistic strategies for creating positive social change.¹ In the following statement, **the Shura Council condemns violent extremism as an absolute violation of the teachings of Islam.**

Introduction

Islamic teachings seek to unify people in order to engender harmony, cooperation, collective achievement and prosperity. Violent extremism, on the other hand, fractures individuals, families, and communities, preventing people from reaching their full potential as social and spiritual beings.

Despite these facts, prominence of violence in the public discourse surrounding Islam is unmatched. Violent extremism mars the name and reputation of Islam globally, spreading gross distortions of the Qur'an and example of the Prophet Muhammad. In a globalizing world, it has become more and more important to set the record straight regarding Islam's injunction against violent extremism.

The Shura Council confirms that Islam stands for peace, harmony, and the elimination of *all* forms of violence, including violent extremism and violence committed in the name of religion. The Shura Council is committed to resisting patriarchal and destructive interpretations of Islam and replacing the cycle of violence with non-violent solutions.

Violent Extremism and Refutations

The religious justification used by Muslim extremists to commit societal violence is usually *jihad*. Derived from the root *j-h-d*, which implies the exertion of energy, "jihad" has layered, varying, and contested meanings, though all relate to a "struggle towards excellence in the way of God."

Although sometimes translated as "holy war," jihad does not mean warfare. Rather, the Arabic word for warfare is *harb*; "armed combat" is *qital*. Warfare and armed combat are not holy in Islam; they are simply justified or unjustified. Nevertheless, extremists have evoked the language of jihad – and its Qur'anic references – to justify violence. Consequently, any challenge to violence committed in the name of Islam must examine these particular passages and clarify their meanings. In doing so, several factors must be taken into account:

- A. A holistic analysis of Qur'anic verses;
- B. The literary context of the relevant verses;
- C. The Prophet's example;
- D. The historical context of the verses' interpretation;
- E. Limitations on military jihad;

¹ For more information about the Shura Council, please visit <http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/about/shuracouncil/>.

- F. The principle of active forbearance (*fada'il al-sabr*);
- G. contemporary understandings of jihad; and
- H. the principles of Islamic law (*maqasid al-Shari'ah*)

Utilizing these widely-accepted interpretive techniques, legal and literary traditions and discourses, and our contemporary contexts, we demonstrate that violent extremism cannot be carried out in the name of Islam and that the Qur'an sanctions only defensive warfare.

A. Holistic Analysis of Qur'anic Verses

When read in isolation, various passages of the Qur'an seem to treat warfare differently. However, when the Qur'an is read as a whole and against the historical circumstances within which verses were revealed, we find a consistent pattern, advocating non-violence.

Meccan Jihad

While the Prophet and his followers were in Mecca for twelve years, the Qur'anic verses revealed during this period recognized the right of self-defense in cases of wrongdoing. Yet these verses did not give permission to the Muslims to use force. Instead, the Qur'an commanded them to endure patiently and forgive the wrongdoers. For example, Surah 16, verse 125 says:

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in the best and most gracious ways; for the Lord knows best who have strayed from His Path and who receive guidance.

Jihad in the Meccan period, which was longer than in the Medinan period, entailed *non-violent resistance to persecution*. This took the form of: a) first secret and then public preaching of their faith; b) freeing slaves who had converted to Islam; and c) emigrating to Abyssinia and later to Medina. It is interesting to note that the Prophet sent the early Muslims west towards the Christian empire of Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) and told them they would find safety there. He did not send them with a message of war or conquest.

Permission to Use Force in Self-Defense

After the Prophet and his followers emigrated to Medina, the Qur'anic message often responded to the Muslims' particular historical and political situation. In Medina, the Prophet held together a coalition of political allies representing inhabitants of diverse religions, whose rights were recognized as full members of the community, according to the Constitution of Medina. As the Meccan Arabs continued to attack the Muslims and their property, the Qur'an gave permission to use force in defending themselves and their right to practice religion freely.

2. The first verses (22:39-40) which allow fighting ("qital," which is one aspect of jihad under specific conditions), state:

Permission is given to those who fight because they have been oppressed, and God is able to help them. These are those who have been wrongfully expelled from their homes merely for saying 'God is our Lord.' If God had not restrained some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which God's name is mentioned frequently would have been destroyed.

It is noteworthy that these verses clearly state that, apart from resisting oppression, Muslims may only resort to fighting to defend the basic religious freedom of all righteous people (not just Muslims) to worship the one God.

Medinan Jihad

After war broke out between the Muslims and the Meccans, who never ceased to persecute the Prophet and his followers, the "sword verses" (below) were revealed. These verses have been frequently taken in isolation and out

of their literary and historical context, both by those trying to prove Islam to be a violent religion and by Muslims to justify violence. Yet these passages must be read in the holistic context of the entire Qur'an and in light of the historical context they were addressing.

Surah 9, verse 5:

And when the sacred months are over, slay the polytheists wherever you find them, and take them captive, and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place.

Surah 9, verse 29:

Fight those who—even if they are People of the Book— do not believe in God or the Last Day and do not consider forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of the truth, until they pay the poll tax willingly, as subjects.

These verses must be read with the earlier passages that prohibit Muslims from initiating warfare, as well as the many verses that urge Muslims to incline to peace if their enemies incline to peace. When read this way, they allow battle only in defense. Qur'anic verses should always be taken together – to ignore one verse and rely upon another is to ignore part of God's word. So although fighting in the defense to practice religion was permitted, 2:190 specifically prohibits Muslims from initiating hostilities: "Fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you; but do not commit aggression, for, verily, God does not love aggressors."

Literary Context of the Sword Verses

When 9:5 and 9:29 are read within the literary context of the entire passage (9:1-29), verses 1-4 clearly show that this passage is addressing a particular group, the polytheistic Meccan Arabs at the time of the Prophet, and their allies. A segment of this group repeatedly broke their treaty with the young Muslim community. In fact, the historical sources indicate that they had attacked and killed allies of the Prophet. Thus, the sword verses instruct Muslims on how to deal with this unprecedented situation involving *those who have broken their treaty obligations*. According to the Qur'an, the cancellation of the treaty is to be announced at the tribes' annual gathering during the pilgrimage, treaty-breakers are given four months clemency, and war should be resumed when these months have passed.

Verse 9:4 makes it very clear that these actions do not apply to those who have not broken the treaty, as the Muslims are instructed to honor their engagements with them.

The eminent early jurists understood the sword verses in this manner, stressing both the Meccan Arabs' aggression against the Muslims and their violation of treaties. The command to wage war against these particular people resulted from these two factors, in addition to the threat they posed. While 9:5 and 9:29 refer to this special case of treaty-breakers, the general Qur'anic rules of warfare are established in 2:190-195.

To summarize, when the divine command permitting military jihad was revealed, it was only after:

- The persistent refusal of the Meccan leadership to allow the peaceful propagation of Islam in Mecca;
- Continuous persecution of the Muslims remaining in Mecca;
- Meccan military campaigns against the Muslims at Medina with the sole objective of eliminating Islam;
- Key security pledges being rejected unilaterally by a number of tribes allied to the Prophet, forcing him into a vulnerable position.

C. Prophet's Example

The Prophet Muhammad, the ultimate model of Qur'anic behavior, never waged a war except in self-defense, and he never initiated warfare against unbelievers during his lifetime.

The Prophet demanded gentleness. He is recorded to have said, "God is gentle and loves gentleness. He rewards for gentleness what he does not give for violence" (Sahih Muslim). He also declared, "He who is deprived of forbearance and gentleness is, in fact, deprived of all good" (Sahih Muslim).

D. Historical Context of the Verses' Interpretation

After the Prophet's death, the young Muslim community found itself with a new religion to defend, persecution to resist, radical social reforms to implement, and novel laws to develop.

Predominant international law at the time was to conquer or be conquered. This was simply how states and empires operated. Muslims generally did not convert the conquered peoples to Islam, but let them pay a tax in return for keeping their religion and obtaining exemption from military duty.

In order to justify the expansion of the territory of Islam, the early Muslims interpreted jihad to allow for the spread of Islamic rule. To accomplish this, many of the early jurists (though not all) claimed that the sword verses superseded or abrogated those verses prohibiting violence or allowing it in self-defense. "Abrogation" (*naskh*) became a standard technique for interpreting the Qur'an at that time.

Even this notion of expansionist jihad was a limitation on the violence of the time, since it outlawed all forms of warfare except jihad. Nevertheless, although the Muslim community may not have survived in the 7th century Middle East without an effective strategy of expansion, this doctrine no longer applies to the current geopolitical world.

E. Limitations on Military Jihad

In situations when military jihad was allowed by the jurists, they developed an entire body of law that outlined specific rules and limitations. For example, they required that a call to war could only come from a publicly recognized caliph or imam. An individual may not legitimately issue a call to war. This requirement is especially relevant today, as there is no such recognized leader of the worldwide Muslim community (*ummah*).

Moreover, jurists developed very clear prohibitions on warfare. Those waging jihad were not allowed to do the following (below), among other things. These prohibited actions are, nevertheless, among the hallmarks of many of those who engage in violent extremism in the name of Islam today:

- attack noncombatants and civilians of any kind;
- arbitrarily destroy property;
- commit suicide;
- engage in the secret and clandestine use of force (as opposed to a declared and formal war);
- engage in cheating and treachery;
- commit rape;
- terrorize populations;
- wage war against other Muslims.

F. Principle of Active Forbearance (*Fada'il al-Sabr*)

The greater jihad is an attempt to control one's self in ways that serve God. The Prophet is reported to have said during the Farewell Pilgrimage: "... The fighter in the way of God is he who makes jihad against himself (*jahada nafsah*) for the sake of obeying God." Taming their tendency to transgress, these *mujahidin* exert energy to overcome the selfish promptings of their egos. For this reason, the Qur'an equates them with "the patient ones" (*saberin*): "We shall put you on trial so that We know those among you who strive in the cause of God (*mujahidin*) and are the patient (*saberin*)" (47:31). These *mujahidin* are promised guidance: "Those who do jihad for Our sake, We will certainly guide them to our Paths" (29:69).

While some Muslim scholars developed the military doctrine of jihad, others were developing alternative views on jihad. In particular, they developed the doctrine of the “jihad of active forbearance,” based on the holistic understanding of jihad in the Qur’an. This is reflected in the literature which praises the “excellences of armed struggle” (*fada’il al-jihad*) and the competing literature which describes the “excellences of patience” (*fada’il al-sabr*).

The doctrine of patient forbearance (*sabr*) as part of jihad was brought into the mainstream by the 12th century jurist, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali asserted that patience and gratitude were the two halves of faith, and he noted that over 70 Qur’anic verses refer to patient forbearance. He specifically contended that patient forbearance is part of jihad.

This is the non-violent resistance to persecution that the Qur’an urged the Prophet and his followers to adopt in the Meccan period. It has always been a part of Islam’s divine message, and throughout the centuries, a number of prominent jurists elaborated this doctrine.

G. Modern and Contemporary Understandings of Jihad

In the 18th and 19th centuries, when many Muslim lands were under colonial rule, Muslim scholars began to revisit the doctrine of jihad and Qur’anic interpretation in general. The principle of abrogation was rejected by many of these scholars, including Muhammad ‘Abduh, the famous rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo. They insisted that abrogation was merely a temporal technique to understand the Qur’an.

Numerous contemporary jurists argue that any verse must be understood in relation to the Qur’an’s larger message. In other words, all Qur’anic verses on a subject must be studied in relation to one another. These scholars interpret the sword verses only within the context of other verses on warfare and conclude that this permission was given to the Prophet in a specific situation. The larger message of the Qur’an restricts violence and permits only defensive warfare.

Thus, jihad was reaffirmed as the use of force *only* in self-defense. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, for example, insisted (controversially) that even colonization by a foreign power was an insufficient condition for jihad unless there was active suppression of the practice of Islam. Abduh agreed that jihad was defensive war only, though he asserted that invading a country and colonizing its people justified self-defense.

During India’s fight for independence, Badshah Khan, a pacifist and devout Muslim, led his fierce Pushtun army in an unarmed, peaceful protest march against the British. Acting from his religious convictions, Khan waged a remarkable jihad of active, patient resistance.

H. The Principles of Islamic Law (*Maqasid al-Shari’a*)

According to scholarly consensus, the six “principle objectives” (*maqasid*) of the Shari’ah demand the protection and promotion of religion (*din*), life (*nafs*), mind (*‘aql*), family (*nasl*), dignity (*‘ird*), and wealth (*mal*) in society.

Because violent extremism entails the unjust taking away of human life and destruction of property, it absolutely violates at least two of the principle objectives of the Shari’ah: Life and Wealth. Inflicting injury on a person, taking away life, and destroying property violate these objectives of the Shari’ah and cannot be justified in any way as fulfilling Islamic values. In many of its forms, violent extremism also violates other principles, including the mind and dignity of those who experience violence as well as those who engage in it. Violent extremism also tears apart families and the very fabric of society.

All interpretations of Islamic law must conform to these *maqasid*, and clearly, violent extremism violates these protections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a holistic reading of the Qur'an shows, Islam restricted cultural norms regarding violent extremism. To isolate passages which ultimately sought to eliminate violence and use them to legitimize *more* violence than our current norms accept, is to greatly violate the spirit of the Qur'an. Furthermore, the principle objectives of the Shari'ah, which provide the Shari'ah's foundation, ensure the protection of life, religion, mind, wealth, family, and human dignity. All interpretations of Islamic law must conform to these *maqasid*, and violent extremism clearly violates these protections.

Finally, the Qur'an extols patience (*sabr*); in fact, jihad as patient forbearance is equal in value to jihad as force. This does not, however, mean passive indifference; but rather, it is an active, patient, and *non-violent* resistance to injustice. According to the Prophet, jihad is both the *greater* struggle to rid oneself of sin and the *lesser* effort to defend against oppression. It can be considered an internal jihad of the soul *and* an external jihad of correcting injustice in society. This external jihad is of many types: for example, jihad by the word (using verbal persuasion to correct an injustice); jihad by the hands (doing good works to correct an injustice); and jihad by the sword (using force to get rid of an oppressor). It is important to recognize that jihad by the sword is merely a last resort, only after all other forms of jihad have been attempted, and even then, it may only be used in self-defense.

Every chapter in the Qur'an opens with, "In the Name of God, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful," as compassion and mercy are amongst the Beautiful Names of God. And, when God declares in the Qur'an, "*My Mercy extends to everything*" (7:156), mercy is truly rendered a principal law of all creation. Therefore, violent extremism cannot be justified in the name of Islam.