



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 connects Islamic principles to society's most pressing issues and develops 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. Violent extremism mars the name and reputation of Islam globally, spreading gross distortions of the Qur'an and the example of Prophet Muhammad.

Because violent extremists often try to justify their actions by using religious rhetoric, several factors must be taken into account to challenge violence committed in the name of Islam: a holistic analysis of the Qur'anic verses; the Prophet's example (*sunnah*); the historical context of the verses and their interpretation; limitations on military jihad; the principle of active forbearance (*Fada'il al-Sabr*); and the principles of Islamic law (*maqasid al-Shari'ah*).

Utilizing these widely-accepted interpretive techniques and our contemporary contexts, the Shura Council confirms that violent extremism cannot be justified in the name of Islam and that the Qur'an sanctions only defensive warfare.

Holistic Analysis of Qur'anic Verses: Understanding Jihad

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

Jihad in the Meccan period entailed *non-violent resistance to persecution*. 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 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."*

After the Prophet and his followers emigrated to Medina, the Meccan Arabs continued to attack the Muslims and their property. In this context, the Qur'an gave permission to use force in defending themselves and their right to practice religion freely. The first verses (22:39-40) which allow fighting, 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."*

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

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

of their literary and historical context, both by those trying to prove Islam to be a violent religion and by Muslims to justify violence:

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.”*

However, when 9:5 and 9:29 are read within the literary context of the entire passage (9:1-29), the verses clearly show that this passage is addressing a special case of polytheistic Arabs and their allies, who repeatedly broke their treaties. When the divine command permitting military jihad was revealed, it was only after the following occurred:

- 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.

Such 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. For example, the Qur’an states, “Fight in God’s cause against those who wage war against you; but do not commit aggression, for, verily, God does not love aggressors” (2:190). When read in this way, the Qur’an allows battle only in self-defense.

The 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. 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).

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. To survive in the 7th century Middle East, 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.

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. Thus, jihad was reaffirmed as the use of force *only* in self-defense.

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. 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. These prohibited actions are 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.

The Doctrine of Patient Forbearance (*Fada'il al-Sabr*)

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. In Islam, 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.” 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.

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.

Objectives 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 Islamic law: Life and Wealth. 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. Violent extremism is also inconsistent with the Prophet’s example, the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, and the Islamic emphasis on active forbearance.

Islam, however, does not advocate passive indifference. Rather, it advises 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 can never be justified in the name of Islam.