

Islam and Violence: A Study of The Relevant Verses in The Quran

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Abstract

One's biasness determines what one make out of the Quran. Those who think that Islam is a violent religion have firmly fixed in their minds that there is so much violence in the Quran. On the other hand, those who think that Islam is a peaceful religion, admit that there are verses that appear violent but overall, it is a peaceful religion. The objective of this study is to find out if Islam is a violent religion. This study uses library research methods by looking at the Quran, the Hadith, academic articles, online reputable Islamic organizations' articles and books written by prominent classical scholars as well as the opinions of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Data analysis is done by comparing the different opinions and coming to a conclusion. It was found that those who claim that Islam is violent have conveniently ignored verse 6 Surah al-Tawbah, which commands Muslims to give protection to non-Muslims. They also rely on the doctrine of abrogation by claiming that the violent verses, which were revealed later, have abrogated the peaceful verses. This study concludes that Islam is a peaceful religion but the doctrine of abrogation as interpreted by Al-Qaeda and ISIS have made it violent.

Keywords: Violent, Violence, Peaceful, Islam, Q 9:5.

Introduction

There is just too much controversy to some Quranic verses, dubbed as the 'sword verses.' Base of these few verses, Islam is labelled as a violent religion. How can one write about this subject without being bias? Where should one begin? From the peaceful verses and to the violent verses or from the violent verses to the peaceful verses. The Quran is not written in the order of chronological revelation for us to see the development. According to Neal Robinson (Robinson, 2003), there are only a few verses that can be dated chronologically based on the internal clues of the Quran. The very first 5 verses of Surah Al-Alaq, (Chapter 96) was revealed in the year 609 and is believed to be the first to be revealed. Verse 41 of Surah An-Nahl (Chapter 16) and verse 13 of Surah Muhammad (Chapter 47) both refer to migration of Muslims from Mecca to Medina in 622. Verses 1–7 of Surah Al-Anfal (Chapter 8) and verses

120–175 of Surah Ali Imran (Chapter 3) refer to battles of Badr (624CE) and Uhud (625CE) respectively. The last verse is verse 3 of Surah Al-Maidah (Chapter 5). It was revealed a few months before he died. In the absence of solid chronological details, the best way to start the topic is by looking at the formative years of Islam.

Violence in the Formative Years of Islam.

During the early period of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) prophethood, he had very few followers and all of them had to endure ill-treatment by the Qureshi. Quranic text revealed during this period, where Muslim were the minority, called for patience towards persecutors and steadfastness towards Islam despite the persecutions. We see the idea of 'Freedom of Religion' in the entire Surah of Al-Kafirun (109), verse 1-6 where Allah makes it clear:

Say: O ye that reject Faith! I worship not that which ye worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. And I will not worship that which ye have been wont to worship. Nor will ye worship that which I worship. To you be your Way and to me mine. (Yusuf Ali)

Hashim Kamali (Kamali, 2014) notes that the Quranic textual development during this period revealed that individual possessed the right to choose their religion. Here is another Meccan verses. In Surah Yunus (10) verse 108, Allah says:

Say: "O ye men! Now Truth hath reached you from your Lord! those who receive guidance, do so for the good of their own souls; those who stray, do so to their own loss: and I am not (set) over you to arrange your affairs." (Yusuf Ali)

When Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers made the Hijrah to Medina in 622, Muslims grew in number, with many people of Medina converting to Islam (Saeed, 2014). The peaceful nature of Islam was maintained in the multireligious and multi-tribal society which included the Jews. The 'Freedom of Religion' approach was maintained in Medina as it is reflected in the 'Constitution of Medina' (Saeed, 2014). The constitution accepts Medina as a multireligious society with each society managing its own religious affairs. As the Muslim community continue to grow, the Quranic conception of 'Freedom of Religion' became complicated (Saeed, 2018). We could see the development of aggression in the verses revealed in Medina. The mainstream classical interpretation of these final revelation held that Quran's attitude towards people of other religions beginning to change to hostility. It proposed war against people of other faith and Arab pagans in particular. Surah Al-Maidah (5) verse 57-58

O ye who believe! take not for friends and protectors those who take your religion for a mockery or sport,- whether among those who received the Scripture before you, or among those who reject Faith; but fear ye Allah, if ye have faith (indeed). When ye proclaim your call to prayer they take it (but) as mockery and sport; that is because they are a people without understanding. (Yusuf Ali)

And, Surah Al-Baqarah (2) verse 190-194 says:

Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have Turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the reward of those who suppress faith. And fight them on until there is no more Tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, Let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression. The prohibited month for the prohibited month,- and so for all things prohibited,- there is the law of equality. If then any one transgresses the prohibition against you, Transgress ye likewise against him. But fear Allah, and know that Allah is with those who restrain themselves. (Yusuf Ali)

These two verses seem to contrast the earlier peaceful verses of Surah Al-Kahfirun and Surah Yunus, verse 108. The two verses of Surah al-Maidah and Surah al-Baqarah, above, show that although their stance towards those who insult Islam getting hostile but they end with the call to end hostility whenever the situation permits. However, the culmination of the aggressive verses can be seen in the last Surah revealed by Allah to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in Surah al-Tawbah verse 5,

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, an seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. (Yusuf Ali)

And in Surah Al-Tawbah verse 29 says:

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (Yusuf Ali)

Objectives

- To analyze violent verses in the Quran contextually
- To examine how extremist interpret these verses
- To conclude if the Quran teaches violence

Research Methodology

Qualitative, secondary source, research methodology is employed by doing Library research in terms of Literature review of the topic. Qualitative researches are very interpretative. Willis expresses that, facts derived mainly from secondary sources, and which are qualitative in nature (Willis, 2007) and are governed by a variety of factors are non-tangible and difficult to measure (Willis, 2007). Data is collected via the Quran, the Bible and published articles written by Muslims and non-Muslim scholars on this subject. The data is analysed by comparing the similarities and the differences in the materials and coming to a conclusion. This is to avoid biasness as Muslim who write can be accused of being bias. According to Muhammad Shukri (Salle, 2011), Islamic Research methodology explains a research methodology fixed on Islamic

sciences with three criteria. The final aim of the study is to solve the problems faced by the community. Foremost is that, it relates to Islamic matters of research via Islamic philosophy. Then, it combines what is necessary, al-daruri, and the knowledge which results from an inquiry, *al-nazari*. Finally, it has to be based on the Quran dan the Hadith. This methodology defines a research method that combines theology, evidence of 'aqli and naqli (Alias, 2014).

Findings on Violence in Islam

The media has always portrayed the Quran as being so violent while closing an eye to the genocidal content of the Bible (Jenkins, 2011). The atrocities in the Bible was not the atrocities on man but it was commanded by God to carry these evil act as in 1 Samuel, Chapter 15 verse 3, where it says:

³Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.'

And in the Chapter Joshua, God commanded Joshua to blow the trumpet and go round the fort for 7 days and on the last day, the He gave instructions to Joshua's men to give a loud shout till the thick wall of the fort collapsed and Joshua's men to charge in and take the city. We read in Joshua, Chapter 16 verse 21:

²¹They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

It is complete annihilation in the Bible, whereas the Quran teaches how to conduct oneself in war. Surah Al-Fath (48) verse 17:

No blame is there on the blind, nor is there blame on the lame, nor on one ill (if he joins not the war): But he that obeys Allah and his Messenger, (Allah) will admit him to Gardens beneath which rivers flow; and he who turns back, (Allah) will punish him with a grievous Penalty. (Yusuf Ali)

And in Surah Anfal (8) verse 61, Allah advices Muslims to offer peace if the enemy shows signs of reconciliation.

But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah: for He is One that heareth and knoweth (all things). (Yusuf Ali)

Then, there is an argument of '*Jihad*' by enemies of Islam. They claim that Islam is so violent because of the call to *Jihad*. The word *Jihad*, literally means striving or struggling in the Arabic language especially with a praiseworthy aim (Jackson, 2014). The Quranic meaning of *jihad* refers to the struggle incumbent on all Muslims to lead a virtuous life, to fight injustice and oppression, if necessary, engage in armed struggle to defend one's community and religion, defensively, against aggression, and offensively, a more general command to fight against all unbelievers and spread the message and public order (Bowering, Crone, 2013). Muslims throughout the ages have discussed, debated and disagreed about the meaning of *jihad*, its

defensive and expansionist, legitimate and illegitimate forms (Asfaruddin, 2013). The Quran does not condone illegitimate violence and terrorism, as per Surah al-Hajj verse 39–40:

Permission is given to those who fight because they were wronged. Surely Allah is capable of giving them victory. Those who were driven out of their homes unjustly, merely for saying 'Our Lord is Allah'.

However, it is said that, in the by late 8th and early 9th century religious scholars annulled earlier Meccan Quranic verses in favour of the more militant verses revealed in Medina to legitimate their military jihads of conquest and imperial expansion in the name of defending and spreading Islam (Esposito, 2015) as mentioned in Surah al-Taubah (9) verse 5 Allah:

When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush].

Esposito says that the verse above was referring to Meccan non-Muslims, the pagans or polytheists of Arabia, not to Jews and Christians whom the Qur'an always refers to as the "People of the Book" ("Ahl al-Kitāb"). But later medieval commentators reinterpreted this verse and expanded its meaning to justify wars of imperial expansion, a jihad against all non-Muslims (Esposito, 2015). He further says that the meaning and intent of the above verse is distorted by both polemical critics of Islam and Muslim terrorists alike. Critics cite this verse to demonstrate that the religion of Islam is a violent religion that commands the killing of Jews and Christians. Muslim extremists and terrorist groups, past and present, like Al Qaeda, ISIS and Boko Haram, have used this verse to justify unconditional warfare against all unbelievers, non-Muslims as well as Muslims who do not accept their militant beliefs.

Both conveniently overlook or reinterpret, the verse at the end of Surah al-Tawbah verse 5, which clearly states that, while Muhammad's followers had permission to fight and to defend themselves, they were to stop fighting if the enemies stopped their aggression: *But if they repent, perform the prayer and pay the zakat, then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind.* A pertinent question that needs to be asked now is, whether the peaceful verses of the Quran were invalidated by the 'verse of the sword,' since Allah says in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 106:

We do not abrogate a verse and allow it to be forgotten but that We bring what is better than it or like it. Do you not know that Allah has power over all things?

Islamic scholars are not unanimous in their opinion on abrogation. Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni says that the verses remain intact but the ruling on the verse is abrogated (Haramayn, 1999). The early Muslims say that a verse is considered 'abrogated' even if the change was partial. These types of partial abrogation came to be known as 'specification' (takhsis), 'restriction' (taqyid), 'explanation' (tafsir), 'clarification' (tabyin), 'exceptional' (istithna'), and 'conditional' (shart). The previous rule was changed or 'abrogated' to account for a new situation, but it was not nullified, invalidated, or cancelled entirely (Parrott, 2018). While some later scholars understood abrogation as, a later verse completely cancelling the earlier

verse (Haramayn, 1999). Al-Tabari records in his commentary on Surah An-Nur verse 27, which according to Ibn Abbas, one is not to enter the house of another, was abrogated by Surah An-Nur verse 29 which says,

'There is no blame upon you for entering houses not inhabited in which there is convenience for you'

Surah An-Nur verse 27 originally laid down a general rule not to enter other people's houses without their permission and later an exception was made to the general rule, i.e., that one may enter houses if no one is living there. He gives an example of a Muslim traveller who might look for an abandoned house to spend the night. In such a case permission is not needed. Although Ibn Abbas said the first verse was 'abrogated,' but he did not mean complete abrogation of the rule. A Muslim traveller needs to get the permission of the house owner if the house is habituated. There is a danger that the uninformed Muslims and critics might use the doctrine of abrogation and the authority of Ibn Abbas to claim that all the 'peaceful verses' of the Qur'an have been invalidated. Scholars such as Abu Ja'far al-Nahhas, Ibn al-Jawzi, and Al-Suyuti only accepted about twenty cases of genuine abrogation in the Qur'an, none of which involved the verses of the sword (Parrott). Although proponents of sword-verse abrogation disagree over which verse is actually the verse of the sword, it is often cited as verse 9:5:

When the sacred months have passed, then kill the idolaters wherever you find them, besiege them and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush. But if they repent, establish prayer, and give charity, then let them go on their way. Verily, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.

The clause 'kill the idolaters wherever you find them' is usually singled out by as the final command to kill all non-Muslims everywhere. Nonetheless, Surah al-Tawbah verse 10 through verse 13 clearly state that the 'idolaters' in Surah al-Tawbah verse 5 are those who broke their peace treaties.

They do not observe for a believer any kinship or covenant. It is they who have transgressed. If they repent, establish prayer, and give charity, then they are your brothers in religion. We make clear the signs for people who know. If they break their oaths after their treaty and defame your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief. Verily, nothing is sacred to them, that they might cease. Will you not fight people who violated their oaths and determined to expel the Messenger and yourselves and they attacked you first?

The purpose of fighting is to put a stop their aggression while at the same time a chance is given to them for repentance. The clause 'that they might cease' denotes the opportunity for a truce and 'they attacked you first' denotes the initiator of the aggression.

And most importantly in the very next verse to Surah al-Tawbah verse 5, i.e., verse 6, says:

If one of the idolaters seeks your protection, then grant him protection that he may hear the word of Allah, then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are people who do not know.

Surah al-Tawbah verse 6 provides protection to any idolater who stops fighting and under those circumstance, Muslims may deliver the message of Allah and after that, even if they do not accept Islam the idolater are supposed to be escorted out to a safe place (Dagli, 2013). Based on these reasoning, the Researcher is convinced of the peaceful nature of Islam. Fight if they fight against Allah but if they stop, you stop. But, Al-Qaeda and ISIS do not think so.

The Jihadists Violent Doctrine

Groups such as Al-Qaeda, and ISIS are quite adamant in upholding the doctrine of abrogation. Garry Wills thinks that al-Qaeda and ISIS seem to be unaware of their own traditions. According to him, Islam is certainly not a violent religion (Wills, 2017). But, aggressive minorities have stronger voices. Al-Qaeda and ISIS claim that the 'sword verses' have abrogated all the peaceful verses. They claim that the political climate in the world is such that, Muslims are taken advantage of by the west and we Muslims have to 'jihad' or 'struggle' to fight against any oppressions. In 1988, Osama bin Laden and others wrote, in 'The World Islamic Front's Declaration of Jihad' (Laden et al., 2005), by saying that, for seven years, America has occupied Islamic land, plundering its wealth, dictating to its leaders and humiliating its people. Then, despite the millions of people death, the Americans are trying to annihilate what is left of the Muslims and humiliate them further. The Americans are waging war in order to divert our attention away from the Jewish occupation of Muslim land. All these are crimes against Allah. Islamic scholars throughout history have agreed that jihad is an individual duty when an enemy attacks Muslims. On this basis he calls upon all Muslims to kill Americans and their allies, civilians and military as per Surah al-Tawbah verse 5.

Similarly, ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, an offshoot of al-Qaeda, claimed that the deplorable situation in Syria and Iraq is the result of the failures of the U.S. and international community. Bashar al-Assad, threatened by the Islamic Brotherhood of Arab Spring became brutal and slaughtered moderate Syrian opposition groups, paving the way for ISIS to take control of the region by establishing an Islamic Caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its Caliph. He wanted to restore the Golden age of Islam. Baghdadi's Islam is religiously and organizationally monolithic, authoritarian and exclusivist: One leader, One authority, One mosque: submit to them, or be killed (Crooke, 2014).

Both al-Qaeda and ISIS are of the Salafi school of thought, i.e., Muslims who desire to return to the original Islam during the time and as taught by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Esposito, 2015). Salafis reject any form of innovation or *bidah* within Islam. They feel that the present Muslim community has to be purified (Kassim, 2015). And when it comes to the concept of abrogation in the Quran, they literally believe that older verses are cancelled by newer verses (Leaman, 2006). In recently years, salafi-jihadists have said that Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) was first told to 'turn away' from the infidels in Surah al-Hijr verse (15) verse 94) in 621 AD; then to "debate" with them, then to fight if attacked in Surah al-Hajj (22) verse 39) in 622 AD; then fight offensively after then "sacred months" had passed in Surah at-Tawbah verse (9) verse 5 in 630 AD; and finally until all non-believers convert or pay Jizya in Surah at-tawbah verse (9) verse 29 (Gilliam, 2017).

Al-Tawbah is believed to be the last Quranic revelation (630 CE) and it sums up the lessons learnt from the pagans who had broken treaties with the Muslims during the Tabuk expeditions (Ali, 2002). Because of this, it became necessary for Muslim to get to the offensive

position against the idolaters in Arabia. It calls for a fight not only of the Jews and Christian but also the Muslim hypocrites who refused to fight. When Allah says, 'fight and slay the idolaters wherever you find them.' The 12th Century legal scholar, Averroes, said that this verse serves "as a general rule that every polytheist must be slain (Bostom, 2005). And the view of Al-Jalalyan was that 'they have no choice except being put to death or Islam (Jalal, 2007). In view of such interpretations, it is possible for ISIS to enforce its strict offences against the pagan countries of the world. Various verses in Surah at-Tawbah call for believers to go to war. No one is excused. If they are too weak to fight, they could at least give money. Allah even rebukes Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in verse 44-45 for allowing some of them to turn back. In Surah at-Tawbah verses 44-45 Allah rebukes Muhammad for allowing some to turn back from fighting:

Those who believe in Allah and the Last Day would not ask permission of you to be excused from striving [i.e., fighting] with their wealth and their lives. And Allah is Knowing of those who fear Him. Only those would ask permission of you who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day and whose hearts have doubted, and they, in their doubt, are hesitating.

In essence what all these verses are saying is the believers have become unbelievers by not supporting Allah's cause. An analysis of Surah at-Tawbah suggests that the main reason to call a believer an unbeliever is his refusal to engage in war for the sake of Allah. Under such a situation, Surah at-Tawbah verse 6, according to ISIS standards is deemed abrogated. Garry Willis thinks that Al-Qaeda and ISIS rely on the Quran to defend Islam.¹ Who are we to say that they are wrong. There is no unanimous decision by Islamic scholars on this subject. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are sincere in their goals to liberate Muslim lands. Their scholars rely on the Quran for their goals. They have so many supporters all over the world who volunteer to fight with them. Al-Qaeda and ISIS in their zeal to establish God's law on earth have been unrelenting in their offensive. To the questions of whether Islam is a peaceful religion, the answer is it is willing to be peaceful as long as it is not oppressed.

Conclusion

It is true that the early development of Islam saw the concept of Freedom of religion practised by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The call for patience was put aside and the call for defence took over as the Muslim population grew and the power to defend themselves and assert their independence grew bigger. When the pagans, Jew and Christian waged war against the Muslims, Allah instructed them to take an offensive position by ending all forms of oppression. Muslims were a bit bold in doing their dakwah activities. Surah at-Tawbah testifies the relentless attack and the dangers of Muslims turning their back on Islam, warranting believing Muslims to defend Islam at any costs. The Quran, while calling Muslims to defend Islam by taking an offensive position still provided non-Muslims a safe way out via Surah at-Tawbah verse 6. Then came organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS who wanted to teach the West a lesson on the consequences of taking advantage of Muslims. The voices and actions of Al-Qaeda and ISIS became too loud and they drowned Surah at-Tawbah verse 6. Today Islam is seen as a violent religion despite not being so.

¹ Willis, G. (2017). *What The Qur'an Meant: And Why It Matters*. New York. Penguin Putnam, Inc.

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