VIOLENCE IN ISLAM

Paul Hahn, Professor Emeritus

Theology Department

University of St Thomas, Houston TX

2022-11-24

As one who taught world religions for decades, I would like to weigh in on the topic of violence in Islam.

☪

The two major groups in Islam are Sunni Muslims (85%) and Shi’a Muslims (13%). (The remaining 2% are tiny groups, like the Ibadi and the Ahmadiyya.) There are subsects of Shi’a—the Fivers (Zaidiyyah), Twelvers (Imamiyyah), Ismaili, etc.

Islam lacks a central authority similar to the papacy (though most Sunni Muslims respect the decisions of Al-Azhar University in Cairo). But most Muslims agree on the sources of authority in Islam.

(1) A dispute is decided first of all by the Qur’an. (For Muslims, every word in the Arabic original of the Qur’an is a word “send down” by God himself. Hence, all Muslims are “fundamentalists” in the sense of believing in the absolute, verbal inerrancy of the Qur’an.)

(2) If the Qur’an does not settle the dispute, then the *hadith* are consulted. (The *hadith* are traditions of Muhammad’s sayings and doings; there are thousands of them.)

(3) If the *hadith* do not settle the dispute, then reason, con­sul­ta­tion, and consensus decide it.

Most disputes have been settled in the 14 centuries since the founding of Islam. Consequently, most Muslim groups agree on most matters. Differences mostly show up among the schools of shari`a law. (The major Sunni schools of shari`a are the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi`i, and Hanbali. The major Shi’a schools are the Ja`fari and the Zaidi. Other schools include the Ibadi and the Zahiri.)

☪

Sometimes people say that the word “Islam” means “peace.” Though “Islam” and the Arabic word for “peace” (*salaam*, cognate with the Hebrew word *shalom*) share the same root (*slm*), “Islam” does not mean “peace” but “submission.” Submission to what? To Allah and to his revelation through Muhammad. The fundamental creed of Islam is the *shahadah*, recited in each of the 5 daily prayers: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.”

☪

Though “jihad” means “struggle” and can refer to a Muslim’s inner struggle to live according to Islam, the word is most often translated “holy war” and usually refers to armed struggle.

In the Qur’an, God says various things about how Muslims should treat unbelievers. But, of course, the words of the Qur’an, all sent by God, cannot contradict. So Muslim scholars explained the contradictions by proposing a “theory of abrogation” (*naskh*). According to this theory, statements in the Qur’an change because God only intended earlier statements to be temporary: later statements abrogate earlier ones. The theory of abrogation is applied to the Qur’an’s statements about unbelievers. First, God instructed Muhammad to avoid unbelievers. Later, he ordered Muhammad to discuss Islam with unbelievers. Third, he allowed Muslims to fight unbelievers, but only when attacked by them. Fourth, God commanded Muslims to fight unbelievers.

Here are injunctions in the Qur’an for each of these prescriptions. (Quotations are from: Abdel Haleem, Muhammad A.S., trans. *The Qur*’*an*. Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford: OUP, 2004.)

(1) Avoid unbelievers.

Q 15.94, “So proclaim openly what you have been commanded [to say], and ignore the idolaters.”

(2) Discuss with unbelievers.

Q 16.125, “call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching. Argue with them in the most courteous way, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His way and who is rightly guided.”

(3) Fight unbelievers, but only defensively.

Q 2.190, “Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits; God does not love those who overstep the limits.”

Q 22.39, “Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged—God has the power to help them . . .”

(4) Fight unbelievers, even offensively.

Q 2.216, “Fighting is ordained for you, though you dislike it.”

Q 9.5, “When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful.”

Q 9.29, “Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax and agree to submit.”

Q 9.73, “Prophet, strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be tough with them. Hell is their final home—an evil destination!”

(Adbul Haleem notes [*The Qur*’*an* 116] that in Q 9.5, “the idolaters” “definitely refers to the ones who broke the treaty [of Hudaybiyyah, in 630]. The article here is *ahdiya* (specific) referring to what has already been stated.” Later Islamic jurisprudence, however, interpreted the verse to refer also to unbelievers outside that specific context.)

Since God cannot contradict, when God says “avoid unbelievers” and then says “argue against them,” the first prescription must have been temporary: it must be that God intended to replace (abrogate) the first by the second. In the same way, the third replaces the second, and the fourth replaces the third.

This means that the only injunction that remains, permanent for all time thereafter, is the fourth: fight unbelievers. (Muslims refer to Q 9.5 and 9.29, especially, as the “sword verses.”)

☪

When Islam first confronted Western colonialism (c. 1500-1950), most Muslims accepted the traditional understanding of jihad. Then, from circa 1800-1950, some Muslims in Muslim lands attempted to reconcile jihad with principles such as freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, etc. Nowadays Muslim “modernists” are mostly to be found in the West (Europe and the Americas). In Muslim lands, by contrast, most still accept the traditional understanding of jihad.

Another traditional doctrine that is largely accepted in Muslim lands is the division of the world into two parts. Rudolph Peters, in a doctoral dissertation on jihad, explains: “Closely connected with the concept of jihad is the division of the surface of the world into two parts: the Territory of Islam (*dār al-Islām*) and the Territory of War (*dār al-ḥārb*). . . . Territory of Islam is that part of the world where there is Moslem rule and the *sharī`ah* is applied; the rest of the world is called Territory of War.” (Peters, Rudolph. *Islam and Colonialism*: *The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History*. Religion and Society 20. The Hague: Mouton, 1979. 11.)

☪

In 2019, Daniel Philpott, of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, published *Religious Freedom in Islam*: *The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today* (Oxford).

Philpott summarizes the present situation concerning violence in Islam.

. . . in 2007, 91% of all religious terrorist groups in the world proclaimed a radical Islamic message. . . . about three-quarters of the world’s 20 civil wars that are fought over religious issues involve at least one Muslim combatant . . . whereas half of the world’s countries are electoral democracies, only a fifth of Muslim-majority countries are electoral democracies. . . . 78% of Muslim-majority countries contain high levels of government restrictions on religion, in comparison with 43% of all other countries and 10% of Christian countries. . . . Taken as a whole, at the present moment, the Muslim-majority world is less free and more violent than the rest of the world.

☪

In 2015, the Pew Research Center reported the results of a survey. The Center had conducted over “38,000 face-to-face interviews in 80-plus languages [of] Muslims in 39 countries . . .” (Lipka, Michael. “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and Around the World.” *Pewresearch*.*org*. 7 Dec. 2015. 6 July 2016. Web.)

The 38,000 were asked if violence against civilians (such as suicide bombings) in the name of Islam was justified. A couple of countries were mostly against it: Indonesia (92%) and Iraq (91%). But only 86% of US Muslims said “no.” And look at the percentages in these Middle-Eastern Muslim-majority countries who say “Violence against civilians is sometimes justified”:

Palestinians: 40%

Afghanistan: 39%

Egypt:           29%

Bangladesh: 26%

In 36 Muslim countries, questions were asked about Christian and Muslim extremists:

In only 1 country, over 20% of Muslims were worried about Christian extremists.

In 28 countries, over 20% of Muslims were worried about Islamic extremists.

There are Buddhist terrorists; just ask the Rohingya who had to flee Myanmar. There are Hindu terrorists; just ask the individual Muslims being lynched in Uttar Pradesh. There are Christian terrorists; anti-abortion extremists committed a dozen and a half murders and attempted murders between 1993 and the present. (Plus arsons and bombings; not to mention white Christian nationalists, à la January 6th.) But the adherents of these religions, if each group is taken as a whole, are not as violence-prone as Muslims, taken as a whole. (Which is not to say that most Muslims are violence-prone: it is only to say that the *proportion* of violent to non-violent Muslims is higher.)

☪

There are 1.6 billion Muslims; Islam is the second-largest religion, after Christianity. Since it is the fastest growing religion (Muslim countries tend to have higher birth rates), Muslims will probably exceed Christians by 2100. Let us hope that peaceful Muslims can convince violent Muslims that, “wherever you encounter the idolaters, [do not] kill them . . .”