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Is There an Islamic Way of War?

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Times have surely changed since that noon of March 10, 1982, when President Ronald Reagan dedicated the March 22nd launch of the Columbia Space Shuttle to the valiant Afghans and termed their struggle (Jihad) against the occupation forces of Soviet Union as a representation of 'man's highest aspirations for freedom'. While I remorsefully recognize any nation's right to change and chop morality in the service of supreme national interest, I refuse to respect those dishonest historians and scare-mongering 'experts' who consider it their right to drag a great faith and its messenger into this ugly fight over heaps of sands that hide a lot of oil.

I profess and practice the same great faith as Osama bin Laden and yet the country that I have pledged my life to has lost more than 2500 soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians in our hot pursuit of Bin Laden's gang over the last ten years. Thousands of Muslims across the world have died in the bloodshed caused by large armies of proud nations and small bands of determined fanatics resolved to bomb themselves into paradise. To say that any religion, let alone Islam, can condone or approve killing of innocent bystanders is not only ridiculous but also a lie that has already had catastrophic consequences for humanity. This wholesale branding and stereotyping of a faith, that essentially is a literal extension of Judeo-Christian religious tradition, has pitched two sister civilizations against each other. Evil arguments and wicked debates nurtured in the dark hatcheries of criminal minds have engendered seemingly insurmountable levels of misunderstanding, distrust and animosity.

Fear mongering has become the fastest growing industry over the last ten years in the global fight against terrorism. Thousands of books and articles written by self-proclaimed terror experts, war correspondents and regional gurus have perpetrated intellectual sabotage on the unsuspecting minds of readers and viewers. No limits seem to have been respected in the exercise of intelligence and intellect in defining the 'enemy'. With dehumanization of faceless terrorists, many a legitimate freedom struggle and a whole faith professed by no less than 1.5 billion people have been condemned. Unfortunately, countless sane minds have fallen prey to the vagaries of dishonest words and perverted pictures.

Argument constructed around fallacies to prove that different insurgencies and alleged Al Qaeda activities are inspired directly by, and modeled on, the teachings of Islam and the message of Prophet Muhammad, is both preposterous as well as historically and intellectually untenable. Such monstrous works of imagination have absolutely no connection with the reality.

This article is aimed at responding to just some of these arguments that attempt to prove that people practicing Islam have some common way of fighting that involves acts as desperate as suicide bombings and indiscriminate violence. ***I sincerely believe, and my belief is borne by historical facts, that just as there is no Christian Chemistry or Jewish Physics or Hindu Ballistics, there is no such thing as Islamic Warfare.*** There are some sublime principles set out in the Quran (and earlier scriptures) and the examples set by Prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad) that should guide all of us in resolution of conflicts as peacefully as possible. Moreover, all civilized citizens of our world are expected to follow well known conventions and established principles of war to win with as little bloodshed as possible.

In this article I will attempt to explain why it is historically and factually wrong to attribute terror tactics to teachings of Islam and declare it as some kind of an Islamic Way of Warfare. This piece will attempt to explain some of the various movements across the world of Islam before going on to dissect some of the recent works aimed at proving the absolutely fictional connection between terror and Islam.

Who are ‘Fighting’ and ‘Why’?

Decades Old Freedom Movements: The world may have changed its attitudes towards these movements, but people’s yearning for their right to freedom and self-determination in regions like Kashmir, Chechnya and Occupied Palestine has been documented in the annals of organizations like UNO and others as a legitimate aspiration. Their efforts have been both peaceful as well as violent. But that trend is no different from legendary American militias fighting for their independence against the colonial British or, more recently, people of Northern Ireland fighting against the English. Coincidentally, since in all these places, Muslim subjects are up against Hindu (Kashmir/India), Orthodox Christian (Chechnya/Russia) and Jewish (Palestine/Israel) occupiers, a tinge of religion is bound to appear in the politics surrounding these issues. Is it then fair to call subjects’ struggle as a religious war but stop short of attaching religion to the guilt of occupation? It hurts to even imagine that Jesus Christ inspired Sinn Fein to bomb Belfast and London or Lord Krishna taught Hindu Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka to commit hundreds of suicide bombings or some God in the shining sky inspired Japanese Kamikazes to hurl themselves into allied ships sailing into their coasts to seal their independence. Why apply different terms of debate to different places and people?

Recent Anti-Occupation Struggles: Iraq happens to be the most secular of all Arab states. Most men that wore uniforms of Saddam’s forces were die-hard Ba’athists. After American tanks ripped through their ranks, most of the same men formed the resistance movement. They were also joined by Shia groups who wanted to enlarge the size of their own piece of Post-Saddam cake. Sunni’s became the hardcore of resistance because they had lost the throne of Baghdad. Occupiers of their land, regardless of the right or wrong nature of that war, happened to be non-Muslims and former colonial powers. Same story was repeated in the mountains of Afghanistan. God did not angel-lift Osama and thousands of other Arabs, then the darling ‘Mujs’ fighting the godless Soviets, to the Hindukush? A narrative written by the same class of experts and intellectuals for a war in the name of God for the liberation of Afghanistan has endured decades of neglect and treachery. If teachings of Islam were twisted and name of God misused to settle great power games in 80s, they refuse to go away in 21st century. So what’s the big deal about it?

Why blame a religion for the evil handiwork of human imagination and why wound the love of Muslims for their Prophets (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and thousand others) to explain away a struggle that is purely political in nature and aims at redeeming the perceived loss of freedom of a people. If it is a struggle in the name of God and Prophet, how many Indonesians and Pakistanis have been seen fighting in Iraq? If these isolated insurgencies are parts of one big Pan-Islamic movement to herd 1.5 billion Muslims under a Caliphate, why are they restricted to occupied lands only?

Anti-Regime Struggles: The next big group of Islamic people leading a life of unrest punctuated by occasional violence comprises people fighting for their democratic rights within their own countries. What is expected out of Algerians? Fester under an illegitimate, unelected government for all times to come? What should the Saudis and Egyptians and Libyans do? Continue to die under the shadow of rulers who lie in bed with powerful allies in the west and refuse to go away? Where is religion in all this? Aren't these absolutely legitimate struggles of different people who want to be free like the rest of us? Why have one set of standards to analyze things in Balkans and Eastern Europe and another set of standards to look at what happens in lands where people believe in Islam? Notwithstanding their crimes elsewhere, both Osama Bin Laden and Dr Aiman Al Zawahiri have spent big and long years vowing to bring down regimes that are clearly undemocratic if not oppressive pervers.

Colonial Baggage and Cultural Movements: Part of the reason for inter-state and intra-state unrest within the Muslim majority countries is a hangover of acts of omission and commission of former colonial powers. In addition to this, there are countless other movements that basically assert cultural independence of respective societies and sometimes go overboard. A sincere reader as well as honest historian would appreciate that such trends are not unique to peoples professing Islam.

The anarchists on the Fringe: This is where our enemy Osama and his likes fit. As per the latest intelligence estimates, not many of them are left alive. It's a shame if we even believe their nonsense rhetoric about conquering the world (something they talk about very rarely). Most Muslims laugh at them and pour scorn on their agenda. Militaries across most of the Muslim World, from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia and Turkey are hotly pursuing them and our world is united in its resolve to eliminate such forces. However, it is gravely unjust to color 1.5 billion Muslims in the shades of Al Qaida and term their call as a content of Islam.

Some Facts Often Ignored and Twisted

Here are some facts often ignored in the debate about the world of Islam and the so-called 'Islamic way of War':

- Most Arabs are Muslims but five of the largest Muslim countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Iran and perhaps 150 plus Muslims of India) are not Arabs. Like adherents of all other great religions, people calling themselves Muslims have fought, conquered and ruled not just on the Arabian peninsula but across most of what is Central Asia, Persia and South Asia. The 20th and 21st century Muslims are otherwise a poor copy of their predecessors. Like all other believers of this or that god, Muslims have also

fought some great conventional wars and battles. However, a dispassionate chronicle of human history would throw up some shocking revelations about the war-like tendencies of people adhering to different religions. Unfortunately, all of us human beings have displayed a horrible propensity to shed blood and do that in the name of our stars and kings and gods and prophets. We were bad whenever and wherever and whoever did that.

- More recently, tactics being used in asymmetric or so-called hybrid wars are exactly similar to what most weak sides have done against the stronger enemy throughout all ages and all lands. David was not being ‘cheeky’ or ‘deceitful’ in his fight against Goliath. He was just doing what the weaker side would do against a monstrous enemy. One most sincerely wishes for peace in those lands, but what Iraqi or Afghan insurgents are doing has got nothing to do with any Mosaic stratagem or Muhammedan tactics. They are doing exactly what North Vietnamese did against the US or Mao did against Chiang Kai Shek. As mentioned earlier, committing suicide to inflict damage on the perceived enemy is an art originally perfected by Japanese and Hindu Tamil Tigers.
- Suicide in and of itself is condemned in the strongest possible terms in Islam and Prophet of Islam has prohibited the honor of funeral prayer for someone who kills himself. Quran has explicitly declared killing of a single innocent non-combatant (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) as murder of entire humanity. There is not a single occasion in Quran (when read and quoted honestly and with the complete contextual group of verses) where God directs or condones violence except in self defense. And by the way, God of Quran and Muhammad happens to be the same God that exists in the Gospels of Moses and Jesus. One God can’t say two things and if someone suggests that, he/she is lying flat and blatant.
- Another dangerous lie often told with lot of evil passion is about how deeply and intensely Muslims hate Christians and Jews. Nothing could be farther from facts. One need not mention the historical relationship between Jews and Muslims and how Jews thrived in Muslim lands exactly when they were being persecuted almost everywhere else. Insofar as the conflict or wars between supposedly Muslim and Christian worlds are concerned, it is a historical reality that soon after the death of Jesus and Muhammad, Emperors and Kings and Caliphs paid only a lip service to the message of Prophets in their campaigns to expand their empires. Name of God was invoked only to fool the subjects and raise the spirits of the most foolish of all citizens, the soldiers. While the drunkard Mughals of India pledged their allegiance to the caliph in Baghdad, countless European Kings did their evil business with the blessing of the Pope, supposedly the vicerent of Jesus Christ. Therefore, it’s a zero-sum game to dig up historical bogeys and brandish them to justify bloody realpolitik of our times.

Correcting Some Recent Fallacies

Andrew J. Bacevich¹: In his 2006 article titled “The Islamic Way of War”, Mr Bacevich, declares that “well before Saddam’s final defeat, others, less stupid, began to develop alternative

¹ Bacevich, Andrew J. “The Islamic Way of War.” The American Conservative (11 September 2006) <http://www.amconmag.com/article/2006/sep/11/00007/> (accessed 2 March 2010)

means of what they called ‘resistance’. This new *Islamic Way of War* (italics hereon are mine) evolved over a period of decades not only in the Arab world but *beyond*.” This ‘beyond’ where Mr Bacevich’s Islamic Way of War was developed is, in his view, anti-Soviet Afghanistan and anti-Israel Gaza. While there is nothing less than chivalrous about Afghan resistance against Soviets or nothing illegitimate (short of acts / tactics decidedly un-Islamic) about Palestinians’ struggle, their mode and method have been used by countless other guerilla movements over thousands of years. Therefore, the argument about this being something peculiar to or derived from Islam is historically untenable. He goes on to write that “*Muslims* now realize that fighting effectively requires that they do so on *their own terms* rather than mimicking the West.” Clearly, he chooses to ignore how Turkish or Indonesian or Pakistani militaries are fashioned and trained along Western lines and even Egyptian (Arabs) love to fight western style when given the wherewithal to do so (case in point: 1973 Egyptian-Israel War). Mr Bacevich misses out on two facts. One, over the last several hundred years warfare has a habit of growing and evolving simultaneously across most of the world and the best practices get adopted by almost all the relevant militaries. American militias learning from Western European drills and India’s *Muslim* Tipu Sultan hiring French advisors are just some recent examples. The under-dog nature of guerilla warfare is therefore not anything particularly *Islamic*. It is instead a function of resources and relative power.

Mary R. Habeck²: In her lecture at the Heritage Foundation on 12 August 2004, Ms Habeck apparently made an effort to transplant traditional stages of a guerilla movement onto the life of Prophet Muhammad. This effort was clearly built on some major historical inaccuracies. Before moving on to her ‘*stages*’ of what she unfortunately terms as ‘*Method of Muhammad*’, let us examine some of the dangerous assumptions she bases her whole thesis on.

- Talking of the grand strategy being followed by resistance groups across the Muslim world, she believes all these disparate movements are part of an ominous *whole* and together “they want to restore the greatness of their vision of *Islam* by defeating every *rival to its power*.” She just cannot be serious when she says that. Let alone a single group of guerillas or even a Muslim State, all the Muslim militaries together do not have the means to defeat one US aircraft carrier with all its compliments. Let alone the actual capacity to do so, has any Iraqi, Afghan or Chechen insurgent ever even talked about any plans to fight anybody beyond the forces they see as the occupiers of their land? We all know what Iraqis, Afghans and Palestinians are fighting for and there is no, absolutely no, historical or horizontal or vertical, connection between these disparate movements ongoing in disparate places with an aim to achieve a certain end state within their respective countries. The guys in Yemen are Shia’s fighting for their political rights and the ones in Somalia are non-issue type thugs that abound all over the world.
- She moves on to talk about her belief that all these Muslim groups “want to defeat all of their rivals through military means – that is through violence of some sort.” The fact is this much and more. While military means *are* one of the main arrows in a guerilla’s quiver, insurgents do use a lot of information operations and in fact, to paraphrase Mao,

² Habeck, Mary R. “Jihad Strategies in the War on Terrorism.” Heritage Lecture#855 (delivered 12 August 2004). The Heritage Foundation, Washington DC (8 November 2004). www.heritage.org/research/national_security/hl855.cfm (as reproduced in CGSC H300 advance book)

‘they (guerillas) are among their people like a fish is in water.’ Just as Mujahedeen were encouraged to use all kinds of US supplied weapons, including Stingers, against Soviets, today’s insurgencies also use *all* means available.

So what is so ‘Muhammeden’ about it all? One can’t imagine ascribing the idea behind blitzkrieg or more recent ‘shock-and-awe’ to any prophet of God because, as a Muslim, one believes in the goodness of the message of all of them.

Let’s now consider her view that three stages of Muslim insurgencies or plans of terror outfits are modeled along the stages of Muhammad’s life as a Prophet. It is a ridiculous if not venomous to try to fit the story of Muhammad’s life (start in Mecca, migration to Medina and successful return to Mecca after a few years) onto a template for present day insurgent or terrorist movements. Life of Moses followed a similar pattern and so did the life of countless other Prophets of God. Several Hindu Gods and Sikh Gurus led lives that involved similar stages. Followers of all the above mentioned did things both villainous as well as heroic. We don’t call them Mosaic Methods or Gregorian Method or Guru Gobindi Method. We call them what they are: guerilla warfare.

Let me also correct some historical fiction churned out by Ms Habeck:

- Tradition of appointing an Amir (leader / elder) is part of the culture of desert and most other agrarian societies since ages and exists even to this day. There is nothing *Mohammedan* about it. Al Qaeda’s organizational structure is what they think is fit for them. Same applies to Taliban or Palestinians. By the way, Ho Chi Minh was the Amir (leader) of North Vietnamese.
- *Hijrah* or Migration: Just as Moses and Israelis were forced to leave Pharaoh’s Egypt, Muhammad left Mecca moments before a horde of killers descended on his quarters. Dozens of Muhammad’s followers were forced to take refuge in the court of Negus, the King of Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia). Like many other Prophets before him, *hijrah* was not a choice made by him. It is ludicrous to call, as Ms Habeck does, Osama and his ilk as *Muhajors* following the ‘*Muhammad Method*’. Lot of ‘honorable’ people tenderly transported Osama and hundreds of others of the famous Arab legion to those dark mountains of Afghanistan. Let’s get real and honest.
- As for Muhammad’s return, most of Mecca had already converted to Islam. It is a historical reality that Muhammad and his followers maintained a conduct that befits a Prophet of God and modern day Osama’s and others are a shame for the name of the man they profess to follow.

Raymond Ibrahim³: Writing in National Review Online, Mr Ibrahim quotes unfortunate lies about how most schools of Islamic jurisprudence consider legitimate the “*indiscriminate* use of missile weaponry *even if women and children are present* (catapults in Muhammad’s seventh

³ Ibrahim, Raymond. “Studying the Islamic Way of War.” National Review Online (September 2008). <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NmElZTRmMDQxMDQ0ZmNWVkOTk5MmM5YTQ4NmFhZjg=> (accessed 3 March 2010)

century context; hijacked planes or WMD today); the need to always deceive the enemy and even break formal treaties whenever possible (see Sahih Muslim 15:4057); and that the only function of the peace treaty , or “hudna”, is to give the Islamic Armies time to regroup for a renewed offensive and should, in theory, last no more than ten years.” All concoctions!

Prophet’s saying in Sahih Muslim (15:4057) says nothing about treaties and pacts. It is instead a direction about individual vows on issues like length and frequency of fasting and praying. It is also meant to discourage several other bad pre-Islamic Arab habits attached with swearing and making vows. He chooses to ignore tens of other sayings and hundreds of verses of Quran where God and Prophet curse those who break their promises. Quran and Prophet like all other prophets before him, directed on hundreds of occasions not only to take care of the non combatants but also escort them to safety.

One does not understand how and why Mr Ibrahim reads deceit into verse 16:106 and 3:28 of Quran. While 3:28 directs believers to repose their faith in God and his followers instead of looking for support from the ungodly, 16:106 condemns those who revert to unbelief after accepting the refuge of one God. Even though Muhammad’s life is best kept out of it, deception and surprise are a part of warfare. There’s nothing Islamic or Jewish or Christian about principles of war.

Let’s Come to Common Terms

For the sake of God, let’s keep God out of our games. No religion condones, let alone approves, bloodshed. Despite all the sublime words written in scriptures and said by Prophets, the so-called adherents of all ‘faiths’ have consistently done and said things that deserve the wrath of our Lord. Let’s admit that war is a necessary evil and there are weak sides just as there are strong ones. The tactics adopted is a function of relative power. Each side does a sprinkling of God to lift the spirits of stupid men and women about to die.

Views expressed in this article are author’s own and do not represent his parent organization, Pakistan Army, or his current establishment, Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth. The author is thankful for an overwhelmingly positive response to his earlier article published in Small Wars Journal.

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