

A CRITIQUE OF THE USE OF SUICIDE BOMBINGS IN ISLAMIC JIHAD

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1.0. Introduction

In recent times, there has been a rise in insurgent activities by some Muslims in various parts of the world such acts being justified as part of an Islamic jihad. Muslims living in crisis ridden areas such as Palestine and Iraq refer to their fight as jihad and have taken to employing tactics not previously known to Islam in their fights. One of such is the use of suicide bombings. As a phenomenon which is becoming frighteningly synonymous with Islam, an attempt will be made to analyze the legality or otherwise of suicide bombing as a tactic in Islamic jihad and its place in the future of Islam.

1.1. What is jihad?

The Arabic word “jihad” literally means “utmost exertion”. Islamically, the word or concept of jihad refers to exertion towards the cause of Allah. It implies striving towards the cause of Allah or striving towards advancing the cause of Islam². A number of verses of the Quran and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad SAW prescribe jihad as a principle of faith³. The Prophet calls upon Muslims to perform jihad by their hearts. These are acts of worship which would make a Muslim stronger in his faith and is referred to by the prophet as the “greater jihad”⁴. Jihad may also be done using words. That is calling unbelievers towards the religion of truth by extolling its virtues and persuading them of the falsity of their path. This was the method preferred and mostly used by the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) himself. Where a Muslim perceives a wrong being done, either by unbelievers or even amongst the believers against Islam, a Muslim may perform jihad by using physical means to correct those wrongs. This would, however, not entail using violence to effect the corrections.

In all these forms of jihad, violence is not an element nor is it advocated. The Prophet was ordered by Allah SWT, and he so ordered his companions and followers to call the unbelievers towards the religion of Allah through righteous acts and words⁵. Where, however, Muslims are faced with oppression or aggression which challenges their faith, Allah SWT says “...permission (for warfare) is given to those who are attacked and definitely wronged”⁶

The Quran also says

“fight those who have not faith in God and in the hereafter
and who forbid not what God and his Prophet have forbidden
and who are not committed to the religion of truth...”⁷

These verses and more in the Quran legalize outright war as form of jihad. It must be noted, that war as prescribed by these verses, is to be fought as a defense and not to be used as a form of aggression. Where the need for war arises, however, Islam is not a religion of cowards. The Prophet Muhammad SAW said “whenever you are called for jihad, go immediately”⁸. Allah has prepared great reward for the Muslim who upon being called comes out unconditionally without thought for worldly gain or advancement. Those who give all their properties and even their lives towards the cause of Islam enjoy an elevated position before Allah⁹. At the same time, whosoever backs away from jihad for fear of losing his life or worldly possessions, the Qur’an says “such are men whom Allah has cursed for he has made them deaf and blinded their sight”¹⁰

Jihad, manifested as war, is fought for either one of, or the sum of, three reasons. Jihad may be fought to defend and protect the Muslim *umma*¹¹ and the religion against persecution and oppression as was fought by the Prophet in the first days of the establishment of Islam in Makka and Madina. It may also be fought to ensure the liberation of mankind on earth so that they may serve Allah SWT alone. This does not imply that Muslims must fight to compel non-Muslims to accept the religion of Islam as one of the main principles of Islam is “there shall be no compulsion in religion”¹². Finally jihad is fought to remove obstacles which prevent the call of Islam from

being spread. All three reasons may point to the same conclusion; Muslims have been ordered to fight jihad to free mankind from regimes which impede them from recognizing that all submission is owed to Allah alone¹³.

In all situations however, peace, when offered, must be accepted. Allah SWT says;

“If they incline towards peace, incline also to it and trust in Allah. He is the Hearer and the Knower”¹⁴

“If they hold aloof *from* you and wage no war against you and offer peace, Allah allows you no way against them”¹⁵

“O you who believe! When you go forth to fight in the way of Allah say not unto those who offer you peace ‘thou are not a believer’ seeking the chance to profit of his life so that you may despoil him”¹⁶

Where war is to be waged, Islam has laid down set rules and guidelines for conducting the war. Neither women, children nor the infirm, the weak or the old may be attacked or killed. The war is taken to and fought with only those combatant men who come out to fight¹⁷. Prisoners of war, if taken, may either be enslaved or released on ransom¹⁸. The killing of prisoners is only allowed where it is established, without a doubt, that leaving them alive will be dangerous to the Muslim *umma*.

1.2. The Modern Conception

With some Muslims and almost all non-Muslims jihad is now viewed as nothing more than a “holy war”. Numerous Muslim authors have written books on jihad without any reference to jihad exclusive of fighting¹⁹ and a number of Muslims believe that to carry out jihad means to fight and fight only. Other scholars believe that though jihad means struggle at all levels, the highest of those levels is the cuffing of necks²⁰.

On the one hand, the western nations view Muslims, Islam and jihad as solely a philosophy of aggression sanctioned by the holy books of Islam. Different scholars, both secular and of other religions have advanced views about what, in their estimation, Islamic jihad is and use some verses of the Qur’an which prescribe fighting and some hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad SAW to justify their views. They extol that Islam has been and continues to be a religion that recommends and commends aggression for does Allah SWT not command “fight those who have not faith in God and in the hereafter and who forbid not what God and his Prophet have forbidden and who are not committed to the religion of truth”²¹ and the Prophet SAW is also reported to have said “the doors of heaven are under the shade of swords”. To contradict this erroneous supposition, some contemporary Muslim writers have taken on the opposite end of the spectrum and seek to ascribe to jihad a defensive nature only. That war is fought only in defense against aggression. There is no doubt that the defense of a home land populated by Muslims may mean the defense of the Islamic faith as only when the homeland is secure can Muslims in it ensure the full implementation of the Islamic way of life. But is obvious that they have forgotten -or are not even aware- that the ultimate aim of jihad is the establishment and implementation of an Islamic way of life.

There is failure, both among the Muslims who hold these views and the non-Muslims to understand that warfare as jihad is only a minor component of the broader concept of jihad. It is no surprise, therefore, that the United States Department of defense defines jihad as a “holy war” and “refers to the use of violence including against persons, property, and governments deemed to be enemies of a fundamentalist version of Islam”. The modern non-Muslim world sees jihad as nothing more than a terrorist agenda with religious backing. Jihad is seen as an ideology of hatred and subversion. Only a few scholars, one of whom is Daniel Pipes, a renowned critic of “Islamic jihad” understand the dissension that has occurred between jihad as prescribed by Islamic law and the jihad that is propagated and practiced by some Muslims today. He says;

“militant Islam derives from Islam but is a misanthropic, misogynist, millenarian, anti-modern, anti-christian, anti-semitic, terrorist, jihadist and suicidal version of it”

The misconception that Muslims fight jihad in order to force all those they have conquered into accepting the religion of Islam is just that, a misconception. Islam is not just a religion but a way of life. Jihad is not “war” but a struggle to establish societies where the people are governed by an Islamic way of life which ensures freedom from oppression and establishing the collective well-being of such peoples.

2.1 The Position of Suicide in Islam

Suicide is defined as the act of killing oneself intentionally. Under secular law, suicide is not a crime though aiding and abetting a person to commit suicide may be actionable²².

Under Islamic law, suicide is regarded as one of the major sins. Allah SWT provides in suratul An'am;

“and do not kill yourselves indeed Allah is ever merciful to you and the one who does so in enmity and injustice, we shall cast him into the Fire and that is easy for Allah”

A number of scholars interpreted this verse to mean that Muslims should not kill one another. But it was reported by Abu Mansoor Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Mansoori that Amr bin al-'As narrated thus:

I had a wet dream during a cold night On the battlefield of Dhat al-Salasil. I was afraid that if I did ghusl I would die. I therefore did tayyammum and prayed the morning prayers with others. I mentioned this to the Prophet SAW who remarked 'O Amr! You prayed with others while in a major state of defilement. I informed him about what had prevented me from doing the Ghusl and recited the verse 'and do not kill yourselves. Indeed Allah is ever merciful to you' the Prophet then laughed and did not say anything”

In another hadith, Junaid bin Abdullah reported the Prophet SAW as saying;

“a man who had been wounded in the battlefield became impatient with his pain and killed himself and Allah SWT said 'my servant has hastened his own death himself, and I forbid him the Garden'.

It becomes obvious from these hadiths that to interpret the verse in Suratul Nisa' to mean that Muslims must not kill one another will be an erroneous interpretation.

He who commits suicide is considered to have died a *kafir* (as an unbeliever) and will not be entitled to the rites performed on a deceased Muslim. The body of a man who had committed suicide was brought to the Prophet Muhammad SAW and he turned away from him refusing to perform the funeral prayer for him²⁴.

There is no doubt that the Muslim who kills himself will have, as his reward, punishment with Hellfire. The Prophet Muhammad SAW goes further to provide

“anyone who kills himself with steel, then in Hellfire the same steel will be in his hands with which he will keep stabbing himself in the stomach forever, if anyone kills himself by ingesting poison, then in Hellfire he will keep ingesting the same poison forever, and if anyone commits suicide by throwing himself off a cliff, he will keep throwing himself off a cliff in Hellfire forever”²⁵

2.2. The Islamic Position on Suicide Bombing

A suicide attack is an attack in which the attacker or attackers expect to die. The usual method employed in modern times involves the use of bombs either strapped upon the body of the attacker or in a vehicle which he is driving or anywhere else close to his person which, upon detonation or impact, kills the attacker and any person or persons around him/her. This a method used to cause maximum damage to the enemy with minimal loss to the instigators of the suicide attack. This is because the targets for suicide attacks are usually either heavily populated areas or important military bases.

Suicide bombings or attacks are considered as a form of tactic in warfare. Though it first emerged during World War II and became a favorite of terrorist groups and guerillas such as the Tamil Tigers. It has now, since the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11 2001, become largely recognized as a strategy used by Islamic militants such as Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Muslims involved in the Iraqi insurgency. In support of the use of suicide bombing as a tactic by Muslims fighting an oppressive situation, despite the outright prohibition of suicide by both the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, several scholars — such as Yusuf al Qardawi, Sheikh Ahmad Qubeisi of Iraq, Sayyed Moahmmmed Musawi²⁶ - have equated suicide bombing with martyrdom operations. In their view, a martyr who goes into a fight with a view to destroying the enemy not knowing whether he would live or die is no different from a suicide bomber who also fights with the intention of destroying the enemy and does not care whether he lives or dies.

To legitimize suicide bombings, verses of the Qur'an and hadiths of the Prophet are used as evidences in issue. One of the foremost verses of the Quran referred to is that in Suratul Tauba where Allah SWT says;

“Verily, Allah has purchased from the believers their selves and their wealth, in return for Heaven being theirs. They fight in the path of Allah and they kill and are killed” [Quran, 9:111]

Reliance is placed also, on a hadith of the Prophet SAW narrated by Muslim. The Prophet narrated the story of a young boy who was sought to be killed by his king because of his faith in the religion of Islam. All attempts to kill him proved futile until the boy himself gave the king instructions to call the people of the town to a particular location, use the boy's arrow and while invoking the name of Allah, shoot the boy. The boy was killed but the onlookers acknowledging the power of Allah accepted the religion of Islam declaring “we believe in the lord of the boy” He then ordered a ditch of fire to be built and whoever refused to denounce the religion was thrown onto the ditch. A mother holding her baby hesitated when it came to her turn but the baby spoke to her giving her courage to stay on the right path and she jumped.

In their view, the Muslims who died in this narration died in the interest of their religion and their death is not considered a suicide but they died as martyrs. They narrate various hadiths where companions of the Prophet went into battle knowing that they would probably be killed and the Prophet declared that they had died as martyrs. For example, in a hadith narrated by

Ibn Abi Shaybah a companion of the Prophet, Muadh ibn Afra asked the messenger of Allah “what makes Allah laugh upon his slave and the Prophet replied “the servant immersing himself into the enemy without armor” Muadh then took off his armor and fought until he was killed. These and other hadiths and verses of the Quran have been interpreted by such scholars to justify their view that though suicide has been prohibited, jihad has some special rules which permit that which is normally prohibited. In their view, suicide bombing has become necessary as the Muslims in these oppressed nations are outclassed militarily. They don’t have the superior weaponry needed to retaliate in kind to attacks and therefore have no option but to attack with their hands or sacrifice themselves. Hence the resort to suicide attacks.

The majority of sunni²⁷ scholars²⁸, on the other hand, view suicide bombing as forbidden and going against all the laws of Allah and the traditions of the Prophet. The verses of the Quran, the hadiths and the various analogies which have been used by the proponents of suicide bombing to legitimize it have been misconstrued and twisted to serve their purposes. For example the verse in Suratul Tauba where Allah SWT states that he has purchased the life of Muslims must be read to the end and not in a vacuum. The verse continues “. . .**they fight in Allah’s cause so they kill (others) and are killed**” sunni scholars say this implies that there are only two states of dying in the battlefield. The Muslim either kills or is killed. It does not include the third option; killing oneself in the purchase of the Muslim’s life by Allah.

A number of fatwa (rulings) pertaining to the legality or otherwise of suicide bombings have been made by these sunni scholars. Attention has been drawn to the distinction, which they believe has been ignored by the proponents of suicide bombing, between the martyr who immerses himself in the enemy and is killed by them and the person who kills himself by his own hands. They have methodically analyzed and broken apart those evidences in the Qur’an and the hadiths used to legitimize suicide bombing. Regarding the story of the boy who was killed by the king and the people thrown into the ditch of fire, they died not fighting the unbelievers but were killed because they refused to apostate and they died not by their own hands but were killed by the king. To use their story to justify suicide will therefore be an erroneous analogy. Moreover, their situation occurred before the time of the Prophet Muhammad SAW and the establishment of shari’a and cannot be used to guide Muslims in present times on matters which have been already dealt with by the shari’a. The man who goes into the enemy without armor and is killed did not die by his own hand but is killed by the enemy.

By its very nature, suicide bombing necessitates the suicide bomber to, in a premeditated fashion, blow himself up with his own hand in order to have a successful mission. The martyr goes to fight the enemy accepting his death but also hoping to survive. The suicide bomber hopes not to live at all. Allah SWT says “*and spend of your substance in the cause of Allah, and make not your own hands contribute to your own destruction*”²⁹

It must be noted that in most situations, the aim of the suicide bomber is to kill as many people as possible, apart from himself. Hence the detonation of the bomb in populated areas, thus constituting it as not only a suicide but also a murder or multiple murders. Even when the war was at its hottest with the unbelievers, the Prophet Muhammad SAW forbade the killing of women, children, the infirm or non-combatants. The suicide bomber has no consideration for this and most of the victims *are* women, children or non-combatants possibly because these are the least protected. The methods used by the suicide bomber include secrecy, sneaking into the enemy camp and taking them unawares. Both stipulations in the Qur'an and traditions of the Prophet prescribe that the enemy may only be attacked after a warning has been sent to them.

The technique of suicide bombing is an “an anathema, anti-ethical and abhorrent to sunni Islam. It is considered legally forbidden, constituting a reprehensible innovation in the Islamic tradition, morally an enormity of sin combining suicide and murder and theologically an act which has consequences of eternal damnation.

3.0. Conclusion

Allah SWT says “Among mankind is one who sells himself seeking the pleasure of Allah. And Allah is most merciful towards his servants” Qur’an 2:207. To seek this pleasure however, The Muslim must act within the dictates of the shari’a of Islam and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

“Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors.”³⁰

In every action of a Muslim, guidance must be sought from the pure legislation- the Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet Muhammad SAW. There is no doubt that both have prohibited the suicide of a Muslim for whatever reason. To justify suicide bombing as something which is necessary due to a change in times is to introduce an innovation into the religion. The alleged “success” which suicide bombing has brought to the fight of the Muslims who embrace it does not legitimize it. In fact the success of the strategy may be contested. This is what is found from the practice of the Jews with the people of Palestine. When a Palestinian blows himself up and kills seven or eight people, then in retaliation they kill sixty or more. This does not produce any benefit for the Muslims but only results in more able bodied Muslims being killed. The practice of suicide bombing has been going on in the fight between the Palestinians and the Israeli but it has not helped in deciding the war in favor of the Palestinians.

Arguably, a critique of suicide bombing cannot be done without looking at the political ramifications of declaring it legal or illegal as far as Muslims who have adopted it as strategy are concerned. From their point of view- being in an oppressive situation- it may look like a last resort to a difficult and hopeless situation and that changes in situation, Islam being a dynamic religion, have resulted in their actions creating a new and contemporary law to suit the situation. They are forgetting that they are not the first Muslims to face oppression and that forbearance in the face of persecution is itself a divine trial. True, Allah SWT commands Muslims to fight oppression but he has laid down rules to guide such fight and there are valid techniques of jihad which exist and have proven to be effective. In fact, as a military tactic, suicide bombing may, in the short term look effective as it involves the loss of fewer lives than a conventional military tactic but war analysts believe it to be a failure in the long term. To win a war, a campaign must progress from guerilla warfare to a systematized operation as utilized by the Western Powers.

It may also be noted that for the fight of these Muslims subjected to oppression, to deserve to be referred to as a jihad, it must follow the rules of jihad. A majority of jurist believe that these fights do not qualify as jihad going by the definition of what the fight of jihad entails vis the justification for, the method of and rules guiding the conduct of it. To qualify as jihad the fight must be established on a solely Islamic banner established upon Islamic regulations³¹.

Suicide bombing is a reprehensible innovation into Islam and jihad and the Prophet Muhammad SAW has said “every reprehensible innovation is a

misguidance and every misguidance is from hell". For those who try to justify it, they must remember:

He who inaugurates a beneficial sunna in Islam earns himself the reward of it and of all who perform it after him without diminishing their own rewards in the slightest and he who introduces a reprehensible sunna is guilty of the sin of it without diminishing their sins in the slightest³².

Moreover, the Prophet has said "*leave that which you are in doubt to that which you are not in doubt*" the existence of different rulings as to the legality or otherwise of suicide bombings casts a shadow of doubt on its legality. The best course that may be taken by a Muslim should be the avoidance of it altogether.

Notes

- 1 Maryam Dikko is a lecturer with the Centre for Islamic Legal Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria
- 2 Qureshi, M.M.(1971) *Landmarks of Jihad*, S.H.Muhammad Ashraf p4
- 3 Malik. *Al -Muwatta*, Hadith no 21.4
- 4 Ibid. Hadith 21.1
- 5 Bukhari. *Sahih*, Hadith no 9.469
- 6 Qur'an 22:39
- 7 Ibid. 9:29
- 8 Bukhari. *Sahih*, Hadith no. 3.60
- 9 Ibid. hadith no. 4.71
- 10 Qur'an 47:23
- 11 Arabic word for society
- 12 Qur'an 2:256
- 13 This is a strong view held by Sayyid Qutb in his book *In the Shade of the Qur'an* particularly in the introduction to Suratul An'am
- 14 Qur'an 6:81
- 15 Ibid 4:90
- 16 Ibid 4:94
- 17 Bukhari. Op.cit, No.4.280
- 18 Muslim, *sahih*, Hadith no. 4345
- 19 Mutahhari, Ayatollah.(1985). *Jihad (The Holy War of Muslims and its Legitimacy in the Qur'an)*, Islamic Propagation Organisation, Tehran, Iran.
- 20 Abdulkadir As-Sufi. (1978), *Jihad, A Groundplan*, Diwan Press England
- 21 Qur'an 9:29
- 22 Oxford Law Dictionary. 6th Edition
- 23 Verse 30
- 2424 Though muslim scholars agree that there is no ban on performing the funeral prayer for a muslim who committed suicide. The Prophet's refusal to do so being a form of reprimand and not creating a prohibition.
- 25 Bukhari, op.cit. Hadith no. 2.445
- 26 Sayed Moammed Musawi is the head of the World Islamic League
- 27 Otherwise referred to as *Ahl-al sunna* (followers of the traditions of the Prophet)
- 28 Such as Sheikh In Uthaymeen Khaled Ibn al Fadl
- 29 Qur'an 2:195
- 30 Ibid 2:190
- 31 This is the view held by Imam Muhammad Nasiruddeen Al- Albane
- 32 At Tirmidhi, Hadith no 168