

**Islam And Jihad :
The Quest For Peace And Tolerance**

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Abstract;

The topic of the writing is Islam and Jihad. The main focuses of this writing is how the concept of “Jihad” understood by the West, which is labeled as “Radical Islamist” on the base of the action of the radical Islamic groups, while Islam undermines tolerance and peace? The methodology of this writing is descriptive analyzes of the concept of Islam and jihad. It found that the idea of *jihad* has multiple meanings in Islam which is not confined to holy war. It is lesser *jihad* which is considered as holy war. However, holy war in Islam does not refer to military aggression as understood within the Christian tradition. The values of peace and tolerance are emphasized as Islam is very concerned with the sanctity of human life, justice and humanity. In addition, the history of Islam has shown that in the classical era Muslims could coexist with non-Muslims in harmony and peace. It is clear that Islam is deeply concerned with peace and tolerance such as *Silm*, *assalamu alaikum* etc. Jihad has been misunderstood and distorted in the west and among Muslim radicals as it tends to be associated with Muslim aggression, holy war, violence, and terrorism.

Keywords; *Jihad – Terrorisme - Fitna – Radical – Justice*

Introduction

The terrorist attacks and suicide bombings perpetrated under the banner of *jihad* have destroyed the image of Islam particularly in the West. This is especially evident after the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, followed by suicide bombings in Bali and Jakarta, Madrid, and Britain, committed by the alleged Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda's network. As the consequence, Islam appears to be misunderstood and even stigmatized in Western media, films, and publications. To the extreme point, Islam is described as a religion which promotes violence, terrorism, and discrimination to other religions. Of the current example is the anti-Qur'an movie entitled *Fitna* made by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders. The movie depicts the Qur'an as a source of justification for killing and rape. Showing the distorted image of Islam, the movie has sparked many criticisms and reactions from Muslims in many parts of the world, condemning the West as being hostile to Islam.

Islam is not only misunderstood by the West but also by certain Muslim groups who are often labeled as "radical Islamist" and "Muslim extremists". This is largely due to their puritan and rigid understanding of Islam as well as their violent actions. According to Fadhl, the radical Islamic groups such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda, have been influenced by Wahhabism which "rejected any attempt to interpret the Divine law from a historical, contextual perspective, and in fact, treated the vast majority of Islamic history as a corruption or aberration from the true and authentic Islam".¹ Furthermore, Wahhabism is not only intolerant to various schools of thought within Islam but also hostile towards non-Muslims by insisting that a Muslim should adopt none of the customs on non-Muslims and should

¹ Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam," in *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (UK: Oneworld Oxford, 2003) 50.

not befriend them either.² The actions of the radical Islamic groups tend to confirm the negative portrayal of Islam in the West. In this regard, the actions of the minority of the *jihadi* groups have defined the religion of Islam to non-Muslims in the West. The misconception and misunderstanding of Islam in the West on the one side, and the exclusive understanding of Islam with anti-West posture on the other side have potentials to justify Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations.

Attempting to bridge the gap between the Western and Islamist conception of Islam, this artikel provides a holistic understanding of Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance by exploring what the basic resources of Islam say about the issue of tolerance, pluralism, and peace. Secondly, this artikel will trace the historical experience of Islam in developing peaceful co-existence with Christians and Jews. Lastly, as Islam endorses self-defence under special circumstances, the artikel will discuss the idea of *jihad*, its meanings and abuses by radical Islamists and examine whether it undermines the nature of Islam as a religion of tolerance and peace.

Peace and Tolerance in the Qur'an

Like other major religions, Islam is deeply concerned with and devoted to peace. The etymological root of the word Islam is *Silm*, which means peace.³ The normal greeting of a Muslim to everyone is *Assalam-u-'alaykum*: peace be upon you. According to Seyyed Hossen Nasr, the Muslim greeting "*Salam*" could be compared with "*Shalom*" in Jew and the phrase "*Shanti, shanty, shanty*" in Hinduism which all of them contain divine message to emphasize and spread peace.⁴ To consult the issue

² *Ibid.*

³ Siyidan, *Islam, The Religion of Peace* (New Delhi: Islam and the Modern Age Society, 1976) 157

⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002) 215.

of peace and tolerance in Islam, one should read the basic resources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition (*hadith*). In such sources there are numerous references to peace and tolerance. In what follows I will discuss several verses related to Islamic principles that lead to peace and tolerance.

In the holy Qur'an, there are many verses that emphasize the unity of humankind. It is therefore no surprising if one would find verses declaring that Islam is a religion of peace, harmony, hope, justice and tolerance, not only for Muslims but also for the whole of mankind. The Qur'an further declares that the Prophet Muhammad was sent but as a mercy to the whole universe.⁵ According to Syed Othman and Nik Mustafa, such declaration lucidly suppresses any difference given to race or nation; to a "chosen people"; to the "seed of Abraham" or the "seed of David"; to Hindu *Arya-varta*; to Jew or Gentile; to Arab or '*Ajam* (Persian), Turk or *Tajik*, European or Asian, White or coloured, Aryan, Semitic, Mongolian, or African; to American, Australian or Polynesian.⁶ It implies that Islam advocates tolerance on the basis of universal principles and values to reflect the existence of mercy that God has promised for all men irrespective of their religion, race, culture, value, norms, languages and traditions.

There are several verses related to unity of humankind as follow:

"Mankind was one single nation, and God sent messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with

⁵ Qur'an 21: 107.

⁶ Syed Othman Alhabshi and Nik Mustapha Hj. Nik Hassan, "Introduction", in *Islam and Tolerance*, eds. Othman Alhabshi and Nik Mustapha Hj. Nik Hassan (Malaysia: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 1996) 1.

them He sent the book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed..."⁷

"Mankind was but one nation, but differed (later). Had it not been for a world that went forth before from thy Lord, their differences would have been settled between them."⁸

"O humankind, God has created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous."⁹

"If thy Lord had willed, He would have made humankind into a single nation, but they will not cease to be diverse... And, for this God created them (humankind)"¹⁰

The above verses clearly testify that mankind is originally made up of a single nation or a single people but had later differed essentially due to differences in religious faiths. Differences in those aspects other than religious are not significant at all. In fact, the differences are assets to be preserved in order to build communication with each other. This leads us to the most crucial dimension of Islamic universality, namely the acceptance of religious diversity.

⁷ Qur'an 2: 213.

⁸ Qur'an 10: 19.

⁹ Qur'an 49: 13.

¹⁰ Qur'an 11: 118-119.

Islam is the youngest of the Abrahamic traditions after Christianity and Jew. According to Sachedina, Islam's self-understanding since its inception in the seventh century has included a critical element of pluralism and tolerance, namely its relation to other religions.¹¹ The Qur'an says "there shall be no compulsion in religion".¹² Instead of denying the validity of other human experiences and transcendence, Islam recognizes and even confirms its salvific efficacy within the wider boundaries of monotheism:

"Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabaens, whoso believes in God and the Last Day, and works righteousness—their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow."¹³

The Qur'an clearly sees itself as a critical link in the revelatory experience of humankind, a universal path intended for all. In particular, it regards Jews and Christians as "People of the Book," people who have also received a revelation and scripture from God (the Torah for Jews and the Gospels from Christians).¹⁴ In this respect, Qur'an and Islam recognize that followers of the three great Abrahamic religions, the children of Abraham, share a common belief in the one God, in biblical prophets such as Moses and Jesus, in human accountability, and in a final judgment followed by eternal reward or punishment.¹⁵

¹¹ Abdul Aziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 27.

¹² Qur'an 2: 256.

¹³ Qur'an 2: 62.

¹⁴ John L. Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

According to Saikal, the three monotheistic faiths not only "embrace a common concept of God and His attributes, but also give equal weight to the sanctity of life as a precious gift from God".¹⁶ In this context, the above verse shows the unique characteristic of Islam in that belief in the oneness of God unites the Muslim community with all humanity because God is the creator of all humans, irrespective of their religious traditions. For Sachedina, the verse declares that on the Day of Judgment all human beings will be judged, irrespective of sectarian affiliation, on their moral performance as citizens of the world community.¹⁷

Peace and Tolerance in Islamic History

The sources of peace and tolerance in Islam are not only represented by Al-Qur'an, but also by the exemplary acts and behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad. In Islam, the prophet Muhammad has been the ideal model for Muslims to follow as he is considered as a perfect human being.¹⁸ In fact, his utterances and acts (*hadith*) which were recorded by his companions are considered as the second source of Islam after Al Qur'an.

The period of Medina in which Muslims were the majority provide historical experience of how Muslims co-existed with non-Muslims. After migration (*hijra*) to Medina, Muhammad had implemented the Qur'anic ideals by encouraging cooperation and solidarity among all inhabitants of Medina which comprised Muslims, Jews, Christians and others, through the famous Medina Constitution. The constitution

¹⁶ Amin Saikal, *Islam and the West: Conflict or Cooperation* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 24.

¹⁷ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 28.

¹⁸ G.P. Markis, *Islam in the Middle East: A Living Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 39.

which was put in writing ensured complete freedom (including freedom of worship), equality and justice for all groups.¹⁹

Although Islam became the predominantly religious-political power in Medina, Muhammad never asked or imposed Jews and Christians to accept Islam, unless they particularly wished to do so, because they had received perfectly valid revelations of their own.²⁰ As already mentioned above, the Qur'an insists that there shall be no coercion in matters of faith, and commands Muslims to respect the beliefs of Jews and Christians, whom the Qur'an calls *ahl kitab*, a phrase usually translated "People of an earlier revelation:"

"Do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner—unless it be such of them as are bent on evil—and say: "we believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you; for our God and your God is one and the same, and it is unto Him that we (all) surrender ourselves." ²¹

According to Rahman, the Medina constitution promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad "guaranteed religious freedom of the Jews as a community, emphasizing the closest possible cooperation among the Muslims (*Muhajirin* and *Ansar*), calling on the Jews and the Muslims to cooperate for peace and,

¹⁹ Syed Othman Alhabshi and Faisal Haji Othman, "Principles of Tolerance in Islam and the Historical Practices", in *Islam and Tolerance*, eds. Syed Othman Alhabshi and Nik Mustapha (Malaysia: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, 1996) 58-59.

²⁰ Karen Amstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 10.

²¹ Qur'an 29: 46.

so far as general law and order was concerned, ensuring the absolute authority of the Prophet to decide and settle disputes".²² The Medina constitution has impressed modern scholars because it is the first official political document that put forward the principles of religious and economic freedoms.²³ The constitution appeared to reconcile a variety of conflicting interests among the groups. The highlights of the documents go thus:

The Muslims are declared as one community (*ummah*) to the exclusion of all men. The bond which unites them is their common faith. Their friendship and their enmity is governed not by considerations of common ties of blood or economy, tribe or family, but it is the ideology which unites them in their willingness to suffer and live together and pursue a common way of life which lends them the consciousness of a community. And yet the Jews in Madinah are accorded equality—the word equality occurs time and again in the treaty. They are not to be wronged nor their enemies to be aided. The Muslims have their faith, the Jews have theirs. The freedom of religion is recognized and the Jew of Banu Auf are declared as one community with the believers.

Moreover, the document lays down general rules of conduct, namely:

The Muslims and the Jews are jointly responsible for the maintenance of peace and stability of Madinah, except whoever does wrong and acts treacherously will be

²² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 18-19.

²³ Nurcholish Madjid, *The True Face of Islam: Essays on Islam and Modernity in Indonesia* (Jakarta: Voice Center Indonesia, 2003) 140.

punished accordingly. No 'neighbourly protection' is given to the Quraish and those who help them. All disputes are to be referred to God and to Muhammad.²⁴

The discussion on the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the past should include the *Ahl dhimma*. The status of Christians and Jews who submitted under Muslim rule since the Prophet Muhammad's era was called "*dhimmi*".²⁵ According to the *dhimmi* status system, non-Muslims must pay a poll tax in return for Muslim protection and the privilege of living in Muslim territory. In this system, non-Muslims are exempt from military service, but they are excluded from occupying high positions that involve dealing with high state interests, like being the president or prime minister of the country.²⁶ Many Western scholars criticize this system as a discrimination rather than toleration to non-Muslims. However, this is not really the case if one considers the socio-historical context of such *dhimmi* system. Fadhl rightly argues that when the Qur'an was revealed, it was common inside and outside of Arabia to levy poll taxes against alien groups.²⁷ The poll tax from non-Muslims was meant in return for the protection of the Muslim state at that time.

With regards to *Ahl dhimma*, it is historical fact that the Prophet condemned oppression of them as a sinful deviation,

²⁴ For the full text of the constitution, see W.M. Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 22ff.

²⁵ Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985) 44.

²⁶ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 204.

²⁷ Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Place of Tolerance in Islam", Bostonreview.net <<http://bostonreview.net/BR26.6/elfadl.html>> Accessed 6 May 6 2008.

declaring in no uncertain terms, "On the Day judgment I myself will act as the accuser of any person who oppresses a person under the protection (*dhimma*) of Islam, and lays excessive [financial or other social] burdens on him".²⁸ There is also a *hadith* compiled in the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari that reads: "One should fight for the protection of the *ahl al-dhimma* and they should not be enslaved".²⁹ This all indicates how the Prophet Muhammad emphasizes the attitude of justice, tolerance and peace to Christians and Jews in order to bring harmony among different believers.

It is also interesting to see the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab's toleration to non-Muslims. When the Romans conquered Jerusalem, the Jews were expelled, reducing them to exiles across the world, in what is known as the Jewish diasporas. The Roman Christians imposed a complete ban on the Jews. However when Caliph Umar conquered Jerusalem in 633 A.D. the Christians and Jews were allowed to stay.³⁰ The point is that it was Muslim ruler who allowed them to return and ended their suffering.

The same case was shown in Spain where Muslims ruled for 800 years. During that time, the Jews and Christians stayed within their faiths and lived together with Muslims. However, when Ferdinand and Isabella regained control of Spain, Muslims and Jews, who failed to escape to Africa, were killed or severely tortured until they accepted Christianity.³¹ It should be underlined that it was under 800 years of Muslim rule, the Jews and Christians were free to live and practice their religions. This is not to justify the superiority of Islam over

²⁸ Baladhuri, *Futub al-buldan*, p. 162. Quoted from Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, p. 66.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Alhabshi and Othman, "Principles of Tolerance", 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*

other religions in terms of the idea of tolerance, yet only to argue that Islam also had historical experiences of peaceful co-existence with Christians and Jews.

Jihad and Self-Defence

Although Islam is very concerned with peace and tolerance, it allows and even endorses Muslims to fight for self-defence under special circumstances. The notion of self-defence cannot be isolated from *jihad* in Islam. The word "*jihad*" has been misunderstood and distorted in the West and among Muslim radicals as it tends to be associated with Muslim aggression, holy war, violence and terrorism. This is not surprising as *jihad*, a concept with multiple meanings, has been used and abused throughout Islamic history.³² Historically, *jihad* is used by resistance, liberation, and terrorist movements alike to legitimate their cause and motivate their followers.³³ Therefore, we should make clear the meaning of *jihad* according to Islam and its relationship with the idea of self-defence.

Semantically, the meaning of the Arabic term *jihad* has no relation to holy war or even war in general. The word is derived from the root *j.h.d*, the meaning of which is to strive, exert, oneself, or take extraordinary pains. *Jihad* is a verbal noun of the third Arabic form of the root *jahada*, which is defined classically as "exerting one's utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation."³⁴ According to Firestone, such an object is often categorized in the literature as deriving from one of three sources: a visible enemy, the devil, and aspects of one's own self.³⁵ This definition

³² John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: University Press, 2002) 27.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 16-17.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

also should be related to the idea of lesser and greater *jihad* from the Prophet's saying. It is said that when Muhammad returned from battle he told his followers, "we return from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*". The Prophet's saying implies that the greater *jihad* is the more difficult and more important struggle against one's ego, selfishness, greed, and evil.³⁶ Based on this definition, it is clear that there are many kinds of *jihad*, and almost have nothing to do with warfare except the idea of lesser *jihad*. However, the lesser *jihad* has gained more popularity in Muslim vocabulary throughout history rather than the greater *jihad*. There are long debates among Muslim jurists and scholars whether *jihad* only applies to self-defence or includes both defensive and offensive one. Both groups find their justifications from the Qur'an. However, if one read the Qur'an within the social and political contexts in which they were revealed, it is apparent that the group who defines lesser *jihad* as self-defence, not aggression, has a stronger position.

As noted by Esposito, the earliest Qur'anic verses dealing with the right to engage in a "defensive" *jihad* were revealed shortly after the *hijra* (emigration) of Muhammad and his followers to Medina in flight from their persecution in Mecca.³⁷ At a time when they were forced to fight for their lives, Muhammad is told: "Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God'".³⁸ The defensive nature of *jihad* is clearly stressed in the verse: "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors."³⁹ The verses suggest that it is lawful for Muslims to fight provided that they are in defensive position, not in vice versa.

³⁶ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 28.

³⁷ Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 120.

³⁸ Qur'an 22:39-40.

³⁹ Qur'an 2: 190.

In this respect, war can be fought to avoid persecution and oppression or to preserve religious values and protect the weak from oppression.⁴⁰

Apart from the defensive verses, there are verses in the Qur'an which seem to justify offensive *jihad*. One of them is: "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."⁴¹ This verse is one of a number of Qur'anic verses that are cited by critics to demonstrate the inherently violent nature of Islam and its scripture. Besides, these same verses have been selectively used (or abused) by Muslim radicals including Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah to develop a theology of hate and intolerance and to legitimate unconditional warfare against unbelievers.⁴²

The verse is actually not appropriate to be considered as justification for aggression or offensive *jihad*. Seen from political and historical context, the verse was revealed as a response to the attitude of the unbelievers of Mekka who betrayed the peaceful treaty of *Hudaybiyah*. In addition, it was the Makkan unbelievers who initiated attacks against Muslims.⁴³ Therefore, this verse is not relevant to justify war and aggression against the non-Muslims.

In the view of Islamic law, all Shi'ite and most Sunni jurists today believe that *jihad* is legitimate only as defense mechanism and cannot be originated as aggression. They see *jihad* as a religious duty for individuals and the Islamic community to defend life, land, or faith and to prevent invasion

⁴⁰ Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 266.

⁴¹ Qur'an 9:5.

⁴² Esposito, *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*, 121.

⁴³ Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Ansari Al-Qurtuby, *Al-Jami' Li Ahkam Al-Qur'an*, vol. VII (Beirut: Dar Al-Fikr, 1995) 56.

or guarantee the freedom to spread the faith.⁴⁴ In Sunni Islam, historically some jurists have ordered a *jihad* in an offensive mode based on an argument one might call "the best defense is an offense," but it was changed since 1950s when they came to agreement that the only *jihad* permissible is a defensive one.⁴⁵ The implication of this is that the Muslim radicals have no religious basis to initiate attacks and aggressions against those they regard as the enemy of Islam.

Despite Islam justifies war as self-defence mechanism, it still emphasizes the values of justice, peace, and equality toward the enemy. As highlighted by Esposito,⁴⁶ the Qur'an provides detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of war: who is to fight (and who is exempted (48: 17, 9: 91), when hostilities must cease (2: 192), how prisoners should be treated (47: 4). Verses such as Qur'an 2: 294 emphasize proportionality in warfare: "whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind." Other verses provide a strong mandate for making peace: "If your enemy inclines toward peace then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God" (8: 61). Islam also forbids Muslims to kill non-combatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were given the promise of immunity unless they had taken part in the fighting.⁴⁷ Some scholars interpret these guidelines and regulation as the concept of just war in Islamic tradition.⁴⁸ All of these mean that the

⁴⁴ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 38.

⁴⁵ Nasr, *The Heart of Islam*, 262.

⁴⁶ Esposito, *Unholy War*, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ For further discussion on this issue see John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson, *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991).

actions of radical Muslims who carry out violence, terrors against non-Muslims, killing civilians and children, contradict with the soul of Islam.

The idea of self-defence. Indeed, Islam endorses Muslims to defend their lives, land and faith from aggression and oppression. In this respect, war could be carried out if Muslims are attacked or in the defensive position. Further, Islam suggests Muslims to follow guide lines and regulations in conducting war against the enemy. The rationale lies in the primary argument that Islam respects justice, peace, and equality even in war situation.

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