

In other words, if a country is perceived to be hindering the spread of Islam, Muslims are obliged to wage war against it. This would, of course, be a defensive conflict, since the hindrances came first. Here then is another illustration of how elastic and essentially meaningless the concept of fighting only in self-defense has become. What constitutes a sufficient provocation? Must the defending side wait until the enemy strikes the first military blow? These questions have no clear or definitive answers in Islamic law, making it possible for anyone to portray virtually any struggle as defensive without violating the strict canons of that law. But this also renders meaningless the oft-repeated claims that jihad warfare can only be defensive.

### The Qur'an's tolerant verses: "canceled"

What's more, the Qur'an's last word on jihad is not defensive, but offensive. The suras of the Qur'an are not arranged chronologically, but according to length. However, Islamic theology divides the Qur'an into "Meccan" and "Medinan" suras. The Meccan ones come from the first segment of Muhammad's career as a prophet, when he simply called the Meccans to Islam. Later, after he had fled to Medina, his positions hardened. The Medinan suras are less poetic and generally much longer than those from Mecca; they're also filled with matters of law and ritual—and exhortations to jihad warfare against unbelievers. The relatively tolerant verses quoted above and others like them generally date from the Meccan period, while those with a more violent and intolerant edge are mostly from Medina.

Why does this distinction matter? Because of the Islamic doctrine of abrogation (*naskh*). This is the idea that Allah can change or cancel what he tells Muslims: "None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things?" (Qur'an 2:106). According to this

idea, the violent verses of the ninth sura, including the Verse of the Sword (9:5), **abrogate the peaceful verses**, because they were revealed later in Muhammad's prophetic career: In fact, most Muslim authorities agree that the ninth sura was the very last section of the Qur'an to be revealed.

**In line with this, some Islamic theologians have asserted that the Verse of the Sword abrogates no fewer than 124 more peaceful and tolerant verses of the Qur'an.**<sup>3</sup> *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, a commentary on the Qur'an by the respected imams Jalal al-Din Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Mahalli (1389–1459) and Jalal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Abi Bakr al-Suyuti (1445–1505), asserts that the ninth sura "was sent down when security was removed by the sword."<sup>4</sup> Another main-stream and respected Qur'an commentator, Isma'il bin 'Amr bin Kathir al Dimashqi (1301–1372), **known popularly as Ibn Kathir, declares that sura 9:5 "abrogated every agreement of peace between the Prophet and any idolater, every treaty, and every term. . . . No idolater had any more treaty or promise of safety ever since Surah Bara'ah [the ninth sura] was revealed."**<sup>5</sup> Ibn Juzayy (d. 1340), yet another Qur'an commentator whose works are still read in the Islamic world, agrees: The Verse of the Sword's purpose is "abrogating every peace treaty in the Qur'an."<sup>6</sup>

Ibn Kathir makes this clear in his commentary on another "tolerance verse": "And he [Muhammad] saith: O my Lord! Lo! these are a folk who believe not. Then bear with them, O Muhammad, and say: Peace. But they will come to know" (Qur'an 43:88–89). Ibn Kathir explains: "*Say Salam* (peace!) means, 'do not

### Alexis de Tocqueville on Islam:



"I studied the Quran a great deal. I came away from that study with the conviction that by and large there have been few religions in the world as deadly to men as that of Muhammad. So far as I can see, it is the principal cause of the decadence so visible today in the Muslim world and, though less absurd than the polytheism of old, its social and political tendencies are in my opinion more to be feared, and I therefore regard it as a form of decadence rather than a form of progress in relation to paganism itself."

respond to them in the same evil manner in which they address you; but try to soften their hearts and forgive them in word and deed.” However, that is not the end of the passage. Ibn Kathir then takes up the last part: “But they will come to know. This is a warning from Allah for them. His punishment, which cannot be warded off, struck them, and His religion and His word was supreme. Subsequently Jihad and striving were prescribed until the people entered the religion of Allah in crowds, and Islam spread throughout the east and the west.”

That work is not yet complete.

All this means that warfare against unbelievers until they either become Muslim or pay the jizya—the special tax on non-Muslims in Islamic law—“with willing submission” (Qur’an 9:29) is the Qur’an’s last word on jihad. Mainstream Islamic tradition has interpreted this as Allah’s enduring marching orders to the human race: The Islamic *umma* (community) must exist in a state of perpetual war with the non-Muslim world, punctuated only by temporary truces.

Some Islamic theologians today are attempting to construct alternative visions of Islam based on a different understanding of abrogation; however, such efforts have met with little interest and support among Muslims worldwide—not least because they fly in the face of interpretations that have been mainstream for centuries.

### ***PC Myth: The Qur’an and the Bible are equally violent***

All right, so the Qur’an teaches war. But so does the Bible, right? Islamic apologists and their non-Muslim allies frequently try to make a case for moral equivalence between Islam and Christianity: “Muslims have been violent? So have Christians. Muslims are waging jihad? Well, what about the Crusades? The Qur’an teaches warfare? Well, I could cherry-pick violent verses out of the Bible.” You can find that sort of thing in *all* religious traditions we’re told. None of them is more or less likely to incite its followers to violence we’re assured.

## Just Like Today: The peaceful verses *still* abrogated

The doctrine of abrogation is not the province of long-dead muftis whose works no longer carry any weight in the Islamic world. The Saudi Sheikh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid (b. 1962), whose lectures and Islamic rulings (*fatawa*) circulate widely throughout the Islamic world, demonstrates this in a discussion of whether Muslims should force others to accept Islam. In considering Qur'an 2:256 ("There is no compulsion in religion,") the sheikh quotes Qur'an 9:29, 8:39, "And fight them until there is no more Fitnah (disbelief and polytheism, i.e. worshipping others besides Allaah), and the religion (worship) will all be for Allaah Alone [in the whole of the world]", and the Verse of the Sword. Of the latter, Sheikh Muhammad says simply: "This verse is known as Ayat al-Sayf (the Verse of the Sword). These and similar verses abrogate those saying that there is no compulsion to become Muslim."<sup>8</sup>

But is all this really true? Some Islamic apologists and non-Muslim purveyors of moral equivalence claim to find even in the New Testament passages that exhort believers to violence. They most often point to two passages:

- ☸ "I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence" (Luke 19:26–27). Of course, the fallacy here is that these are the words of a king in a parable, not Jesus' instructions to His followers, but such subtleties are often ignored in the modern communications age.
- ☸ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I am sent to set a man

against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law” (Matthew 10:34–35). If this passage were really calling for any literal violence, it would seem to be intra-familial jihad. But to invoke it as the equivalent of the Qur’an’s jihad passages, which number over a hundred, is absurd: Even the Crusaders at their most venal and grasping didn’t invoke passages like these. Also, given the completely peaceful message of Jesus, it is clear that he meant “a sword” in an allegorical and metaphorical way. To interpret this text literally is to misunderstand Jesus, who, unlike Muhammad, did not take part in battles. It fails to recognize the poetry of the Bible, which is everywhere.

Perhaps aware of how absurd such New Testament arguments are, Islamic apologists more often tend to focus on several Old Testament passages.

- ❁ “When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you. And when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them” (Deuteronomy 7:1–2).
- ❁ “When you approach a city to fight against it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it agrees to make peace with you and opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall become your forced labor and shall serve you. However, if it does not make peace with you, but makes war against you,

then you shall besiege it. When the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall strike all the men in it with the edge of the sword. Only the women and the children and the animals and all that is in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourself; and you shall use the spoil of your enemies which the LORD your God has given you. Only in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes" (Deuteronomy 20:10–17).

☸ "Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man intimately. But all the girls who have not known man intimately, spare for yourselves" (Numbers 31:17–18).

**Strong stuff, right? Just as bad as "slay the unbelievers wherever you find them"** (Qur'an 9:5) and "Therefore, when ye meet the unbelievers in fight, smite at their necks; at length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly on them" (Qur'an 47:4) and all the rest, right?

**Wrong.** Unless you happen to be a Hittite, Gergashite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizzite, Hivite, or Jebusite, **these Biblical passages simply do not apply to you.** The Qur'an exhorts believers to fight unbelievers without specifying anywhere in the text that only certain unbelievers are to be fought, or only for a certain period of time, or some other distinction. Taking the texts at face value, the command to make war against unbelievers is open-ended and universal. The Old Testament, in contrast, records God's commands to the Israelites to make war against particular people

## Muhammad vs. Jesus



"... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also..."

**Jesus (Matthew 5:39)**

"Will ye not fight a folk who broke their solemn pledges, and purposed to drive out the messenger and did attack you first?"

**Qur'an 9:13**

## Just Like Today: Using the Qur'an to justify terrorism

In a sermon broadcast on official Palestinian Authority television in 2000, Dr. Ahmad Abu Halabiya, a member of the Palestinian Authority's Fatwa Council, declared: "Allah the almighty has called upon us not to ally with the Jews or the Christians, not to like them, not to become their partners, not to support them, and not to sign agreements with them. And he who does that is one of them, as Allah said: 'O you who believe, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies, for they are allies of one another. Who from among you takes them as allies will indeed be one of them.'... Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them, wherever you are. Wherever you meet them, kill them."

In this Abu Halabiya was quoting Qur'an 5:51 ("O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors; they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them") and 9:5 ("slay the idolaters wherever ye find them"). He applied these words to the contemporary political situation: "Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them—and those who stand by them—they are all in one trench, against the Arabs and the Muslims—because they established Israel here, in the beating heart of the Arab world, in Palestine. They created it to be the outpost of their civilization—and the vanguard of their army, and to be the sword of the West and the crusaders, hanging over the necks of the monotheists, the Muslims in these lands."<sup>9</sup>

only. This is jarring to modern sensibilities, to be sure, but it does not amount to the same thing. **That's one reason why Jews and Christians haven't formed terror groups around the world that quote these Scriptures to justify killing civilian non-combatants.**

By contrast, Osama bin Laden, who is only the most visible exponent of a terror network that extends from Indonesia to Nigeria and into Western Europe and the Americas, quotes the Qur'an copiously in his communiqués. In his 1996 "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," he quotes suras 3:145; 47:4–6; 2:154; 9:14; 47:19; 8:72; and of course the notorious **"Verse of the Sword," sura 9:5.**<sup>10</sup> In 2003, on the first day of the Muslim holy celebration Eid al-Adha, the Feast of Sacrifice, he began a sermon: "Praise be to Allah who revealed the verse of the Sword to his servant and messenger [the Prophet Muhammad], in order to establish truth and abolish falsehood."<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the devil can quote Scripture for his own purpose, but Osama's use of these and other passages in his messages is consistent (as we shall see) with traditional Islamic understanding of the Qur'an. When modern-day Jews and Christians read their Bibles, they simply don't interpret the passages cited as exhorting them to violent actions against unbelievers. This is due to the influence of centuries of interpretative traditions that have moved away from literalism regarding these passages. But in Islam, there is no comparable interpretative tradition. The jihad passages in the Qur'an are anything but a dead letter. In Saudi Arabia,



## A Book You're Not Supposed to Read

Don't believe what I am saying about the Qur'an? Read it for yourself. The clearest and most accurate English translation is that of N. J. Dawood, *The Koran* (Penguin), but Muslims tend to dislike it because Dawood was not a Muslim. The two most accurate English translations by Muslims are those by Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, both of which are available in multiple editions under various titles. Both are marred by a pseudo-King James Bible English, which makes them irritating to read.