

Introduction

In the midst of a lively televised exchange between journalist Fareed Zakaria and author Sam Harris on the topic of jihad, Zakaria declared, “The problem is you and Osama bin Laden agree ... after all, you’re saying ... his interpretation of Islam is correct.”

“Well,” Harris responded, “his interpretation ... this is the problem. His interpretation of Islam is very straightforward and honest and you really have to split hairs and do some interpretive acrobatics in order to get it ... to look non-canonical.”¹

This exchange took place a little more than thirteen years after bin Laden and his associates masterminded the deadliest terrorist operation on American soil. In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001, tragedy, the notion that such violence was representative of the world’s second-largest religion was widespread enough to prompt then American president George W. Bush to counter that Islam “is a religion of peace.” Numerous skeptics have since dismissed this claim, some viewing it as nothing more than a politically correct token. Among the skeptics are individuals known as “New Atheists,” a label given to popular figures such as Harris who have produced influential anti-theistic and anti-religious works in the years following the September 11 attacks and who focus much of their attention on “the problem with Islam.”²

¹ CNN, “Zakaria, Harris Debate Extremism in Islam.” See the widely viewed video clip, “Sam Harris: Islam Is Not a Religion of Peace,” in which Harris is shown at a 2010 event in Berkeley, California, making a nearly identical statement.

² See, for example, chapter 4 of Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith*. The term “New Atheists,” as used in the present book, was coined by journalist Gary Wolf in a 2006 *Wired* article entitled “The Church of the Non-Believers” (see “New Atheism”).

Some New Atheist writers were themselves profoundly transformed by 9/11. In the case of the prominent ex-Muslim writer Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for instance, her doubts about Islam were supplanted by nonbelief when she found it “impossible” to discount bin Laden’s “claims that the murderous destruction of innocent (if infidel) lives is consistent with the Quran.”³ As for Harris, he reportedly began writing his landmark book *The End of Faith* on September 12, 2001.⁴ In this best seller, Harris writes that the feature of Islam “most troubling to non-Muslims” is the very principle bin Laden invoked to justify 9/11: jihad.⁵

As Islamic studies scholar Michael Bonner observes, in contemporary debates on Islam, “no principle is invoked more often than jihad.”⁶ Muslims generally understand *jihad* to be a noble “struggle” or “striving” for the sake of God. It comprises various actions, from fighting on the battlefield to endeavoring to attain inner peace in the prayer hall. It is, therefore, simplistic to define it – as many writers do – as “holy war.” It is also problematic to insist – as many apologists do – that it has nothing to do with warfare. In fact, in the specific context of Islamic law, *jihad* typically denotes an armed struggle against outsiders.

The purpose of this book is to offer a succinct, accessible examination of the ways in which bellicose Muslim radicals such as bin Laden and New Atheists such as Harris and Ali have conceptualized the purpose and boundaries of *armed* jihad. As one might deduce, here I use the term “radicals” to denote those seeking extreme changes, and my focus is strictly *violent* radicals, specifically those who sponsor or engage in terrorism in the name of Islam. My intention is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of jihad, violent radicalism, or the New Atheism; rather, I am interested in the intersection of the three. Nor is it my intention to explore (at least not thoroughly) other contentious aspects of Islamic law that often appear in the writings of radicals and New Atheists, including gender norms and punishments for adultery, apostasy, blasphemy, and treason – topics nonetheless worthy of scholarly consideration and engagement.

I have chosen to focus on the New Atheists largely because of their unique and ostensibly significant influence on Western – and to some

³ Ali, *Nomad*, xii.

⁴ Segal, “Atheist Evangelist.”

⁵ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 111.

⁶ Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History*, 1.

extent non-Western – intellectual discourse. Notwithstanding their numerous detractors,⁷ what they say about jihad and Islam more broadly has ramifications within academia, to say nothing of the political and cultural spheres. Having taught in the humanities at two public research universities in the American Midwest, I have found that many of my own colleagues and students have been more profoundly impacted by the writings of New Atheists than, say, polemical works by far-right religiously affiliated critics of Islam (whose impact is more obvious in other contexts).⁸ And for those working to combat the very real problem of Muslim terrorism, it is critical to scrutinize influential discourses on the root causes of and potential solutions to this problem.

In Part I of this book, I introduce the themes of war and peace in the foundational texts of Islam (Chapter 1) and discuss pertinent medieval and modern Muslim scholarly rules of armed jihad (Chapter 2). In Part II, I examine the phenomenon of contemporary Muslim radicalism, specifically the discourse of the man behind 9/11, bin Laden, and his justifications for the attacks (Chapter 3); interrogate these justifications and survey the reactions and responses of prominent Muslim scholars, clerics, and leaders (Chapter 4); and proffer some observations on the contemporary radical organization ISIS and its conceptions of armed jihad (Chapter 5). In Part III, I discuss and evaluate the portrayals of jihad and radicalism that appear in the popular works of notable New Atheists, particularly Harris (Chapter 6) and Ali (Chapter 7), and offer additional reflections on the writings of other well-known New Atheists, namely Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett (Chapter 8). Readers will notice that I quote extensively from the individuals I examine, be they Muslim radicals or New Atheists. These extensive quotations are not intended to privilege their particular claims but rather to convey each individual's manner of thinking and tone (in some cases, through the filter of translation).

As we shall see, although many of the concerns expressed by the New Atheists regarding terrorism are shared by many Muslims, the

⁷ Some examples include writer Glenn Greenwald (see his article “Sam Harris, the New Atheists, and Anti-Muslim Animus”), philosopher Michael Ruse (see his article “Why I Think the New Atheists Are a Bloody Disaster”), author Reza Aslan (see his article “Reza Aslan: Sam Harris and ‘New Atheists’ Aren’t New, Aren’t Even Atheists”), and writer Chris Hedges (see his book *When Atheism Becomes Religion*).

⁸ Yet as sociologist Stephen LeDrew (an avowed atheist critical of the New Atheists) observes, “these atheists and right-wing Christians have much in common. Moving from metaphysics to politics, the line between the groups begins to blur” (LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 187).

New Atheists featured in this book tend to portray the interpretations of Islam promoted by radicals such as bin Laden as literalistic and especially faithful to Islamic scripture. The central argument of this book is twofold: (1) among the most distinctive features of radicals such as bin Laden are not their alleged literal readings of the foundational texts of Islam – in some cases, they go to great lengths to circumvent such readings – but rather their aberrant, expansive conceptions of justifiable combat and retaliation and their particular, often crude assessments of geopolitical reality; and (2) on account of the New Atheists' overreliance on a limited array of sources and their apparent unfamiliarity with some of the prevailing currents of Islamic thought, they ultimately privilege anomalous interpretations of scripture. Yet not only do the New Atheists' conceptions of armed jihad conflict with those of the majority of Muslim scholars and laypeople, they even overstep what we find in the discourse of radicals.

PART I

JIHAD

Although the term *jihad* (literally, a “struggle” or “striving”) conveys a myriad of meanings in Islamic religious culture, in Islamic law it typically signifies an armed struggle against outsiders, primarily non-Muslims. It is this understanding of jihad that concerns us here. But before examining the Islamic legal dimensions of jihad, we shall first consider how the primary sources of Islamic thought – the Qur’an and early Muslim accounts of the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers – portray war and peace.

I

War and Peace in the Foundational Texts of Islam

Muslims generally take the Qur'an (Koran) to be the "word of God," a scripture that was revealed piecemeal to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) over the last twenty-three years of his life. It contains passages that promote restraint and reconciliation and others that call for war. This parallels what we find in the popular biographies of Muhammad:¹ When he began his prophetic mission in the city of Mecca as a monotheistic preacher to mostly polytheistic tribespeople, he adopted a pacifistic approach – and adhered to it despite the persecution and even murder of some of his followers. It was only after he emigrated in 622 to the city of Medina (then called Yathrib), established a community of believers, and assumed direct responsibility for the well-being of his followers that he took up arms.

THE CONTEXT

By all accounts, seventh-century Arabia was a world in which tribes regularly clashed. "In this society," historian Fred Donner writes, "war (*harb*, used in the senses of both an activity and a condition) was in one sense a normal way of life." Indeed, "a 'state of war' was assumed to exist

¹ Examples of relatively early works that offer biographical accounts of Muhammad include the *Sira* ("Biography") of ibn Ishaq (d. 767) and ibn Hisham (d. 833), the *Maghazi* ("Expeditions") of al-Waqidi (d. 823), the *Tabaqat* ("Generations") of ibn Sa'd (d. 845), and the *Tarikh* ("History") of al-Tabari (d. 923). My concern here is not the extent to which these sources are authentic or historically accurate. For our purposes, all that matters is that most of the major episodes reported therein are widely accepted as true among Muslim scholars.

between one's tribe and all others, unless a particular treaty or agreement had been reached with another tribe establishing amicable relations."² In the absence of such treaties or agreements, the clans of Mecca and the surrounding region could only find reprieve from war in the Ka'ba sanctuary (throughout the year) and everywhere else during four "forbidden months" – the first, seventh, eleventh, and twelfth months of the Arabian lunar calendar. These forbidden months, recognized throughout Arabia, facilitated an annual pilgrimage to Mecca in the twelfth month and a "lesser pilgrimage" in the seventh, not to mention commercial trade. Beyond these restrictions, however, the pre-Islamic Meccans seem to have condoned and often engaged in tribal warfare and caravan raids.

The Qur'an attests to this reality:³

Can [the unbelievers] not see that [God has] made [them] a secure sanctuary [in Mecca] though all around them people are snatched away? (29:67)

Remember when you were few, victimized in the land, afraid that people might catch you, but God sheltered you and strengthened you with His help, and provided you with good things so that you might be grateful. (8:26)

For the security of Quraysh [the dominant tribe of Mecca] – security in their winter and summer journeys – let them worship the Lord of this House [the Ka'ba], who provides them with food to ward off hunger, safety to ward off fear. (106:1–4)

In such an environment, the withdrawal of tribal support could render persons "fair game" for all aggressors.⁴ This explains why some individuals were reluctant to follow Muhammad during his early pacifistic years: "They say, 'If we were to follow guidance with you, we would be swept from our land'" (Qur'an 28:57).

THE QUR'AN, FROM MECCA TO MEDINA

Despite (or perhaps due to) the precarious environment of seventh-century Arabia, Meccan passages of the Qur'an – so called because they were revealed before the emigration (*hijra*) to Medina – generally promote restraint when dealing with adversaries. Consider the following examples:

The servants of the Lord of Mercy are those who walk humbly on the earth, and who, when aggressive people address them, reply with words of peace. (25:63)

² Donner, "Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War," 34.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, my translation of the Qur'an, here and throughout the present book, loosely follows M. A. S. Abdel Haleem's *The Qur'an*.

⁴ Jackson, "Jihad and the Modern World," 12.

Patiently endure what they say, ignore them politely. (73:10)

Good and evil cannot be equal. [Prophet], repel evil with what is better and your enemy will become as close as an old and valued friend, but only those who are steadfast in patience, only those who are blessed with great righteousness, will attain to such goodness. (41:34–35)

As such, the jihad of the Meccan passages entails “striving” through nonviolent means:

So [Muhammad] do not give in to the unbelievers: ardently *strive* [or do jihad] against them with [this Qur’an].⁵ (25:52)

In Medinan passages – passages revealed after the emigration, when Muhammad had become the de facto chief and overseer of Medina – we encounter a call to armed self-defense:

Those who have been attacked are permitted to take up arms because they have been wronged – God has the power to help them – those who have been driven unjustly from their homes only for saying, “Our Lord is God.” If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is much invoked, would have been destroyed. God is sure to help those who help His cause – God is strong and mighty.⁶ (22:39–40)

Why should you not fight in God’s cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, “Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By your grace, give us a protector and give us a helper!”? (4:75)

The first of a series of battles against the Meccan polytheists – whom Muslim historians present as manifestly oppressive – took place in the second year after the emigration. A recurring theme in the Medinan passages involves the reluctance of some of Muhammad’s followers to fight – a reluctance stemming not necessarily from concern that such fighting was immoral or gratuitous but from a fear of death and an abhorrence of the prospect of fighting relatives.⁷ Thus we read,

⁵ Emphasis added here and in all other instances where words are italicized in the English translation of the Qur’an. See Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God*, 16–18, where Islamic studies scholar Asma Afsaruddin discusses the general preference among medieval Qur’anic commentators for nonviolent interpretations of Qur’an 25:52.

⁶ There is some debate among Muslim scholars as to whether this passage is Medinan or late Meccan. According to one opinion, this passage was revealed around the time of the Prophet’s emigration (see al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami’ li-ahkam al-Qur’an*, 14:406 [commentary on Qur’an 22:39]; and Nasr [ed.], *The Study Quran*, 830, 839 [commentary on Qur’an 22:39]).

⁷ To be sure, not everyone was reluctant to fight. And in a well-known prophetic report (or *hadith*) conveyed by (the scholar named) Muslim (d. 875), Muhammad calls for some

Fighting has been ordained for you, though it is hard for you. You may dislike something although it is good for you, or like something although it is bad for you: God knows and you do not. (2:216)

[Prophet], do you not see those who were told, “Restrain yourselves from fighting, perform the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms”? When fighting was ordained for them, some of them feared men as much as, or even more than, they feared God, saying, “Lord, why have You ordained fighting for us? If only You would give us just a little more time.” Say to them, “Little is the enjoyment in this world, the Hereafter is far better for those who are mindful of God: you will not be wronged by as much as the fiber in a date stone.” (4:77)

Accordingly, the Qur’an instructs the believers not to “lose heart and cry out for peace” when dealing with antagonistic unbelievers who “bar others from God’s path” – it is the believers “who have the upper hand” (47:34–35). And as for those “killed in God’s way,” they “are alive with their Lord, well provided for” (3:169).

Yet even in the midst of the Medinan passages, we encounter statements that present peace and reconciliation as the ideal:

Those who remain steadfast ... who repel evil with good – these will have the reward of the [true] home: they will enter perpetual gardens ... (13:22–23)

God may still bring about affection between you and your [present enemies] – God is all powerful, God is most forgiving and merciful – and He does not forbid you to deal kindly and equitably with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: God loves those who act equitably. (60:7–8)

Prepare against [the unbelievers] whatever forces you [believers] can muster, including warhorses, to frighten off [these] enemies of God and of yours⁸ ... But if they incline toward peace, you [Prophet] must also incline toward it, and put your trust in God: He is the All Hearing, the All Knowing. (8:60–61)

In the sixth year after the emigration, Muhammad inclined toward peace when he agreed to what his followers initially regarded as an unfavorable armistice with their Meccan enemies: the truce of Hudaibiyya. Nearly two years later, however, following a Meccan violation of one of the truce’s stipulations, Muhammad led his ever-growing

initial restraint: “Do not desire an encounter with the enemy; but when you encounter them, persevere.”

⁸ As Islamic studies scholar ElSayed Amin notes, some modern Muslims and non-Muslims – including Geert Wilders, the Dutch politician who produced the 2008 anti-Islam film *Fitna* – see in this verse (8:60) a specific call for terrorism. But through his analysis of classical and modern commentaries on the Qur’an, Amin argues that this verse was historically understood as a general call for “Muslims to prepare for defensive purposes sufficient forces to deter their enemies” (Amin, *Reclaiming Jihad*, 53; see chapter 2).

forces to Mecca and, with relative ease, conquered his home city; eventually, he designated it a haven for believers.

Clearly, the Medinan era presented Muhammad with the kinds of thorny decisions he had never had to grapple with during the early years of his mission. Not surprisingly, then, it is the Qur'an's Medinan passages that figure most significantly in contemporary debates on violence in Islam. Consider, for instance, the Medinan commandment that has often appeared in print, online, and on television in the days and years following the September 11 attacks: "Kill them wherever you find them."

Versions of this (variously translated) directive appear in the second (2:191), fourth (4:89, 91), and ninth (9:5) chapters of the Qur'an. Needless to say, it is not a stand-alone commandment. Here is how it appears in the second and fourth chapters:

Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits. *Kill them wherever you encounter them*, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca] unless they fight you there. If they do fight you, kill them – this is what such unbelievers deserve – but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful. Fight them until there is no more persecution, and worship⁹ is devoted to God. If they cease, there can be no [further] hostility, except toward oppressors. (2:190–193)

[The hypocrites] would dearly like you to reject faith, as they themselves have done, to be like them. So do not take them as patrons until they migrate [to Medina] for God's cause. If they turn,¹⁰ then seize and *kill them wherever you encounter them*. Take none of them as a patron or supporter. But as for those who reach people with whom you have a treaty, or who come over to you because their hearts shrink from fighting against you or against their own people, God could have given them power over you, and they would have fought you. So if they withdraw and do not fight you, and offer you peace, then God gives you no way against them. You will find others who wish to be safe from you, and from their own people, but whenever they are back in a situation where they are tempted [to hostility], they succumb to it. So if they neither withdraw, nor offer you peace, nor restrain themselves from fighting you, seize and *kill them wherever you encounter them*: We give you clear authority against such people. (4:89–91)

Here we see violent directives surrounded by critical qualifications: those whom Muhammad's followers are to fight and kill are the very

⁹ Qur'anic studies scholar M. A. S. Abdel Haleem maintains that "worship" here denotes "worship at the sacred mosque by those who were no longer persecuted" (Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 22, note a). See Qur'an 2:217, 8:39; and Chapter 7, note 49 in what follows.

¹⁰ As Abdel Haleem notes, "That 'turn with aggression' is the intended meaning is clear from the context" (Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 59, note a). Abdel Haleem then refers to Qur'an 4:91, which I quote in what follows.