

Challenging ISIS on its Own Turf

Written by Saleem Ahmed

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SALEEM AHMED, MAR 22 2016

While a mesmerized Muslim minority looks forward to being rewarded with “vestal virgins” in Paradise for killing “infidels” and spreading Islam violently or dying in this *jihad*, a perplexed and silent Muslim majority bemoans this helplessly. An unfortunate consequence of the illiterate prophet Muhammad (570-632 CE) dying without leaving a consolidated written record of the Divine guidance he reportedly received (Ahmed, 3), the scant information in the Muslim holy book Quran on the context and chronology of revelations empowers Muslim hawks and doves to follow opposite signals with equal conviction. Thus, e.g., while doves follow Qur’anic verses 5.3 and 5.5 permitting them to eat and intermarry with Jews and Christians (“People of the Book”) (Ahmed, 43), hawks follow verse 5.51 commanding Muslims to *not* trust Jews and Christians (Ahmed, 45).[1] A third option — befriending Christians but not Jews (verse 5.82) — only exacerbates the problem. And, although verse 2.106 clarifies that later guidance superseded earlier guidance, trying to identify the “later guidance” on many issues remains elusive as the Qur’an’s 6,200+ verses are not arranged chronologically. Verse 2.106 also runs counter to verses 85.21-22 affirming that the Qur’an is “a Tablet preserved”.

Reasons for These “Mixed Signals”

With reportedly 20+ followers transcribing incoming revelations for the illiterate Muhammad, and in the absence of any coordinated “verse collecting” mechanism in place, each transcriber retained his own transcriptions. After Muhammad died, these transcriptions were collected by Zaid,[2] and consolidated to produce the Qur’an. While we do not know the strategy Zaid followed to decide the order of verse placement in the Qur’an, the book is not arranged chronologically. For example, the first call to Muhammad (610 CE) to “proclaim God’s message”, is in the book’s 96th division (*surah*) (out of 114), and the last, “completing and perfecting the religion” (632 CE), in its 5th. Also, the Qur’an, wonderful in its discourse on spiritual topics such as God’s attributes and the wonders of creation and in its poetic rendition, does not explain the milieu in which various verses were revealed. While inconsequential for spiritual matters, the absence of this information on temporal matters leads to opposing actions, triggering, for example, the deplorable atrocities being committed by hawks “in Allah’s name” (Mirror, 2016) and the resulting heart-wrenching dismay among doves.

Unraveling the Puzzle

Based on the earliest extant books on Muhammad (by Ibn Ishaq, Al-Waqidi, and Al-Tabari)[3], written within 100-250 years of his death, I divide Muhammad’s ministry into the following Phases:

Phase I. Spirituality and Invitation (~ 610-619 CE)

When Muhammad started inviting people to follow God, he was ridiculed and persecuted by his kinsmen, the Quraysh, who profited from the Pagans visiting the Ka’ba (in Mecca) to worship idols.[4] About 1,500 Qur’anic verses (25% of the total) were probably revealed in this Phase, with Divine guidance focusing on spiritual matters and inviting people to follow God, exemplified by the following verse, probably revealed around 615 CE:

Invite all to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and discuss with them in ways that are best and most gracious (verse 16.125).

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Such verses can be aptly described as “preserved”. Phase I lasted about a decade.

Phase II. Hostility and Confrontation (~ 619-630 CE)

Shortly before Muhammad moved to Medina, Divine guidance permitted him to retaliate against persecution. Thus, Phase II witnessed 100 armed encounters over 12 years, ranging from small raids involving about a dozen fighters to fully-fledged battles. While the ensuing 4-5 battles were fought for ideological reasons (Lings), other encounters were aimed at plunder or conversion (Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, and al-Tabari), with Muslims often being the aggressors. About 75% of the Qur’an was probably revealed then, with verses such as the following extolling Muslims to violence:

Fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them. Seize them, beleague them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war). But if they repent and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, open the way for them (verse 9.5).

(In Paradise) they (Muslims dying in Jihad) will recline on thrones (of dignity) arranged in ranks; and We shall join them to Companions with beautiful big lustrous eyes (verse 52.20).

The first guided Muhammad on how to deal with those Pagans who had created anarchy in Medina in 630 CE while he went to Tabuk, 500+ miles away on the Syrian border to face the Byzantine emperor Heraclius.[5] Interestingly Muhammad probably followed this verse’s second sentence as no record suggests he “punished” the guilty on his return from Tabuk. And the “Companions” referred to in the second verse would be similar to Biblical angels.

During Phase II, Muhammad also reportedly signed a Peace Accord with monks at St. Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai (627 CE) and married women from three Jewish tribes (Ahmed, 79).

Phase III. Amity and Conciliation; Naming the “Religion Islam” (631-632 CE)

With some hostile Jewish tribes being expelled; Muhammad signing the Peace Accord with Christians; and Paganism fading away, revelations adopted a significantly changed – and conciliatory — attitude toward non-Muslims, culminating with this final injunction only months before Muhammad died (632 CE):

This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion... (verse 5.3). This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. (Lawful unto you in marriage) are (not only) chaste women who are believers but chaste women among the People of the Book revealed before your time when you give them their due dowers and desire chastity not lewdness nor secret intrigues (verse 5.5).

And, to reinforce this change, Divine guidance gave the title *Islam* (“peace”) to this revamped religion. I suggest that Verse 2.106 must have been revealed shortly before this revelation to alert Muhammad to the upcoming change. We can empathize with Muhammad’s dilemma on learning that Jews and Christians, previously considered enemies, were now to be treated fraternally.[6] Muhammad accepted this change obediently, as reflected in the following clarification he sent to the Christian kings of Himyar in 632 CE:

A Jew or Christian, who becomes a sincere Muslim of his own accord and obeys the religion of Islam is a believer with the same rights and obligations. If one of them holds fast to his religion, he is not to be turned away from it (Ibn Ishaq, 643 and 647; Tabari 9/75).

This war-to-peace transition is reminiscent of the similar transition in the life of the prophet David, as 20,000 people reportedly died in his battle against Israel (2 Samuels 18:6-8, The Holy Bible) before he turned to peace. Because Phase III lasted only about a year, less than 100 verses may have been revealed then.

Consequences of Following the Qur’an Selectively

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The following comparison between the divergent thinking of two Muslim scholars is highly illuminating – and disturbing. It compares the thoughts of Sheikh Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Humaid, Saudi Arabia’s former chief justice and a leader guiding Muslim thinking in Arabia, with those of Maulana Wahiduddin, who was bestowed with India’s civilian award for his peace efforts and is a leader guiding Muslim thinking in India.

Sheikh Abdullah

He cites 50+ Phase II verses and hadith[7] urging Muslims to continue their jihad against “infidels” till they are either converted or wiped out. In this essay, I could not find even one verse or hadith promoting peace. He states (on page 847, last paragraph):

As it is now obvious, at first the “fighting” was forbidden, then it was permitted, and after that it was made obligatory — (1) against them who start “the fighting” against you (Muslims)... (2) and against all those who worship others along with Allah...

Thus, Islam emerges as religion of rabid violence; a religion that should put the United Nations on alert for its highly discriminatory posture setting the stage for battle between Islam and the rest of the world. The Sheikh’s discourse probably serves as a *mantra* for Muslim hawks. And while the Sheikh unwittingly acknowledges the concept of progressive revelation and superseding verses, he ignores the ultimate revelation (verses 5.3 and 5.5) establishing fraternal relations with *all* “People of the Book”. It would enhance the article’s credibility if the Sheikh would also include a discussion of the Qur’an’s peace-inspiring guidance.

Maulana Wahiduddin

On the flip side, the Maulana cites about 50 *other* verses and hadith from Phases I and III. I could not find even one incident the Maulana cites in which Muhammad acted with violence. He states (pp xi-xiii):

Any attempt to bracket violence with Islam amounts to casting doubt upon the very eternity of the Islamic religion... The terrorists have concocted a wrong interpretation of the Qur’an; this interpretation is that the killing of non-Muslims, whom they refer to as “kafirs”, is an act of worship and a guarantee of entry into Paradise...

Following the Maulana, Islam emerges as a religion of unmitigated peace in harmony with the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. It probably also serves as *mantra* for Muslim doves, who currently make up a majority of Muslims. However, it might enhance the book’s credibility if the Maulana could also include a discussion of the Qur’an’s “violence-inciting” passages.

Consequence of These Divergent Views

These contrarian views leave many Muslims in a quandary regarding which guidance to follow. And while the doves are a significant majority in most countries, their passive and unobtrusive ways belie their large numbers. On the other hand, hawks probably dominate in Arabia and the Pashtun-speaking area of Afghanistan-Pakistan with their destructive ways belying their small numbers.[8] However, these numbers might be growing, thanks to generous financing by petro-dollars, their dedicated presence on the Internet, and the virtual absence of any coordinated and active challenge from doves, save for periodic writings such as those of Maulana Wahiduddin. Also, since “the only good news is bad news”, peace-oriented activities hardly generate media attention. And, while organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America propagate a “peaceful” Islam, they have, as far as I know, yet to challenge the extremists directly.

Looking ahead

To help reinforce peaceful Islam, Muslims might consider the following courses of action:

1. Understand the context and chronology of revelations to differentiate between superseded and superseding

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verses. For example: (a) Verse 5.31, commanding Muslims to *not* trust Jews and Christians, was probably revealed in 624 CE after Muhammad defeated the Jewish Banu Qaynuqa tribe and withheld punishing them on the insistence of another Muslim who claimed this tribe saved him from being killed – but who later severed relations with that tribe (Ahmed, 75-6); (b) Verse 5.82 encouraging befriending Christians but not Jews was probably revealed after Muhammad reportedly signed the Peace Accord with monks at St. Catherine's monastery in 627 CE (Ahmed, 79); and (c) Verses 5.3 and 5.5, as suggested above, after Muhammad had neutralized opposition (632 CE). Following the concept of superseding verses, therefore, (c) superseded (a) and (b). Such an *ijtihad* (introspection) has never been undertaken probably because of a fear of incurring the wrath of conservative Muslims who consider the Qur'an to be "perfect and immutable". Even the current suggestion might be tantamount to blasphemy in their eyes – a serious charge incurring the death penalty in some Muslim countries. The difficulty in finding relevant hadith discussing the chronology of relevant verses also poses a serious challenge. Interestingly, the contemporary Muslim scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali suggests the following innovative strategy which by-passes any blasphemy charge:

We recite (in the Qur'an) the abrogated (superseded) (Phase II) verses but only follow the "abrogatee" (superseding) (Phases I and III) verses.

However, the issue of deciding which are the superseded and superseding verses remains unresolved.

To reassure the extremists, however, the proposed action will not alter the Qur'anic text; it will simply identify verses falling into either category. Even success with 10% of verses might help establish that peace superseded war, inclusiveness superseded exclusiveness, forgiveness superseded punishment, philogeny superseded misogyny, and modest dressing superseded veiling.

2. Understand the many other peace-inspiring and broad-minded Qur'anic verses and hadith, such as the following, which remain surprisingly ignored:

- To every people was sent a messenger (verse 10.47);
- Those who believe in all messengers shall have their reward (verse 2.62);
- God sent 124,000 messengers from the beginning of time (hadith); and
- Avert the infliction of prescribed penalties on Muslims as much as you can, and if there is any way out let a man go, for it is better for a leader to make a mistake in forgiving than to make a mistake in punishing (hadith).

Muslims will then realize that the "final Islam" is compassionate and promotes interfaith harmony. Indeed, it can serve as a model for others.

3. Organize conferences to: (a) discuss the context and chronology of revelations; (b) distinguish between superseded and superseding verses; and (c) consider actions to disseminate these findings. These should also generate a *da'wah* (invitation) to all Muslims to follow the final path promoted by Islam: of *Islam* (peace).

4. Promote Phase III Islam. The United Nations and individual countries should consider how best to deal with organizations and individuals inciting hatred on religious grounds.

5. Determine the chronology of important hadith. While difficult, any success will be well-worthwhile.

6. Develop a curriculum explaining the implications of the final guidance to Muhammad and mandate this for all schools, including *madrassahs*. Muhammad's actions should also be linked to Qur'anic verses triggering these actions.

7. Educate extremists that killing "infidels" and Muslims disagreeing with their approach and maltreating non-Muslim

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women might not earn them “vestal virgins”; it might generate the opposite action instead.

Role Models

Muslims Sufis such as those who took Islam peacefully to China and Southeast Asia, where no Muslim army has ever set foot, can serve as excellent role models. Because of their broad-mindedness and compassion, they are revered by followers of all religions, as demonstrated by the thousands of devotees of various faiths visiting their mausoleums in several Muslim countries. Their message, devoid of “mixed signals”, is the blueprint that Muslims should cherish, follow, and spread.

Final Thoughts

In 2015, extremist Muslims reportedly killed 1,000+ people in Pakistan and injured another 1,500 (Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies). And while the anguish to the victims' loved ones can only be guessed at, the “elation” to the killers' loved ones is probably great, convinced that their “martyrs” are now being comforted by vestal virgins; indeed, many relatives of these individuals probably await their turn to befriend these heavenly maidens.

While organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America bemoan the *Islamophobia* being generated due to extremist misdeeds, it is equally important that Muslims avoid *Muslimiphilia*, which I define as Muslims supporting other Muslims simply because of their religion, in spite of their possible “un-Islamic” actions.

It might take decades to rectify the damage already done to Islam's name by extremists. Thus, the earlier Muslims launch the proposed *da'wah* the earlier might they reach their destination. And what can be a better way to initiate this *da'wah* than by challenging extremists on their own turf: on the basis of teachings of the religion they claim to follow? But this should be considered a “mutual-learning” exercise in which the only “winner” will be Islam.

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[1] All translations of Qur'anic verses are from Ali (1989).

[2] Muhammad's scribe and trusted follower.

[3] Ibn Ishaq (704-770 CE) and Al-Waqidi (745-822) were Arabs; and Al-Tabari (838-923), Persian. All subsequently moved to Baghdad.

[4] Muslims believe this sanctuary, built centuries earlier by the prophet Abraham, was converted to idol worship subsequently, reverting to its original intent under Muhammad.

[5] No battle took place then as the news that Heraclius was planning to invade Arabia proved false.

[6] It is unclear why Christians were grouped with Jews as no record suggests their becoming hostile toward Muhammad at any time.

[7] Muhammad's purported sayings and actions compiled subsequently. While more than 300,000 reportedly exist, probably less than 5% are commonly known. These are followed by some and looked upon suspiciously by others.

[8] Language of the ethnic Pathans, somewhat similar to Persian.

About the author:

Saleem Ahmed has a Ph.D. in agriculture, but has been researching Islam for four decades and has written the following two books: (1) "Beyond Veil and Holy War: Islamic Teachings and Muslims Practices with Biblical Comparisons" (2002). Honolulu: Moving Pen; and (2) "Islam: Religion of Peace?" (2008). Honolulu: Moving Pen. He has taught classes on Islam under the University of Hawaii's Outreach Program, and speaks frequently in Hawaii and elsewhere on Islam. Earlier, he was involved in Pakistan's "Green Revolution" research and development in the 1960s-70s.