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WILL THE REAL ISLAM PLEASE STAND UP?

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SYNOPSIS

Jihadists fighting for the Islamic State (ISIS) have been committing a range of systematic abuses, including mass executions, the rape of female captives, forced conversions, seizing of property, and the destruction of churches and mosques (of opposing Islamic sects). While these jihadists claim that they are simply obeying the commands of Allah and Muhammad, many Western leaders, reporters, and Muslim groups maintain that the atrocities committed by ISIS (e.g., killing “innocents” and fellow Muslims) are strictly forbidden in Islam. Who is right? Since Islamic doctrine and practice are defined by Allah and Muhammad, this question can be answered only by examining Islam’s most trusted sources. The Qur’an and the Hadith are filled with clear commands to subjugate or kill unbelievers, hypocrites, and apostates. Muhammad said that he was ordered to “strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be unyielding to them” (Qur’an 9:73). Although modern reinterpretations of violent passages are common, the Qur’an claims to be perfectly clear in its commands, and Allah repeatedly warns Muslims that anything but complete obedience (both to Allah and to Muhammad) is a sign of unbelief. Reinterpretation of Allah’s commands is thus extremely difficult to reconcile with Islamic principles of exegesis, and “innovation” (abandoning an Islamic doctrine or practice for something one thinks is better) is regarded as a heinous sin. Hence, given an honest reading of the Qur’an and Hadith, a brutal theocracy is exactly what we would expect, as even some liberal Muslim leaders are beginning to acknowledge.

On September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama declared that the Islamic State (also called “ISIL” or “ISIS”¹) is neither Islamic nor a state. He said, “Now let’s make two things clear: ISIL is not ‘Islamic.’ No religion condones the killing of innocents, and the vast majority of ISIL’s victims have been Muslim. And ISIL is certainly not a state....ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple. And it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way.”²

A few days later, British Muslim politician Maajid Nawaz presented a different view:

We Muslims must admit there are challenging Koranic passages that require reinterpretation today. Let us use existing tools of exegeses, such as specificity, restriction, abrogation and metaphor. Vacuous literalism as an interpretive method must be abandoned. It is bankrupt. Only by rejecting vacuous literalism are we able to condemn, in principle, ISIS-style slavery, beheading, lashing, amputation and other medieval practices forever (all of which are in the Quran). This is a struggle within Islam. Reformers either win, and get religion-neutral politics, or lose, and get ISIL-style theocracy.³

These are strikingly conflicting assessments. Whereas President Obama maintains that the Islamic State is *violating* the teachings of Islam (the commands of Allah in the Qur'an and the teachings of Muhammad in the Hadith), Nawaz suggests that the Islamic State is taking the teachings of Islam *too seriously*. Nawaz acknowledges that "ISIS-style" beheadings and lashings are precisely what we find when we read the Qur'an, and that, in the absence of reinterpretation and reformation, an "ISIL-style theocracy" will prevail.

Which appraisal is correct? Is the Islamic State *un-Islamic*, or is it *too Islamic*? A careful examination of Islam's most trusted sources will show that the actions of the Islamic State are (as Nawaz claims) exactly what we would expect from a group that strives for complete obedience to Allah's commands. While liberal Muslims like Nawaz (along with millions of Muslims who don't insist on a strict reading of the Qur'an) will continue to live peacefully with their non-Muslim neighbors, the jihadist threat will endure, because the threat emerges directly from the Qur'an.

THE CLARITY OF ALLAH'S COMMANDS

Christians are no strangers to interpreting passages of Scripture in light of their cultural, historical, or literary contexts. Indeed, seeking the various contexts of a passage is one of the most basic principles of biblical exegesis. Some biblical commands are directed toward particular individuals, not to believers in general (e.g., as we see in Titus 3:12: "When I send Artemas or Tychicus to you, make every effort to come to me at Nicopolis" [all Bible quotations NASB]). Other commands are tied to specific covenants (e.g., Old Testament principles for fighting the tribes of Canaan are associated with the Mosaic Covenant, rather than with the New Covenant). Still other commands are open to reinterpretation in light of cultural differences (e.g., I have never obeyed Paul's command in Romans 16:16 to "greet one another with a holy kiss," because a kiss has a different meaning in contemporary America than it did in the first-century Greco-Roman world).

So it's perfectly reasonable and appropriate to consider the various contexts of a passage when interpreting scriptures, and this holds for Christians, Muslims, Jews, and anyone else who is attempting to understand an ancient text. But can Muslims employ such a straightforward principle of exegesis to show that groups like the Islamic State

are somehow violating Allah's commands? Not at all, for the Qur'an claims to be clear and perfect as is.

Interpreting the Qur'an

Here it is important to distinguish what Christians believe about the Bible from what Muslims believe about the Qur'an. The Bible was written over a period of fourteen centuries by a variety of authors who were inspired by God. As such, it makes sense to discuss the motives of these authors, their historical settings, their intended audience, and so on. The Qur'an, by contrast, is (according to Islamic theology) the direct Word of Allah himself. There are no human authors associated with the Qur'an. Allah's Word is eternal and was *revealed* to a single individual (Muhammad) over a period of twenty-three years. Hence, in discussing the meaning of Qur'anic passages, it makes no sense to address human motivations or concerns. The historical background may be relevant, because certain passages were revealed in response to specific questions or were directed to a particular individual or group (as opposed to Muslims in general). Nevertheless, when a Qur'anic command is directed towards Muslims in general and isn't overruled by a later command, the only interpretation involved should be reading the command off the page.

Consider a few verses dealing with the clarity of the Qur'an (emphasis mine throughout):

Shall I seek a judge other than Allah while it is He Who has sent down unto you the Book, explained in detail? (6:114, Hilali-Khan⁴)

(This is) a Book, the Verses whereof are perfected, and are explained in detail. (11:1, Hilali-Khan)

These are the Verses of the clear Book. (12:1, Hilali-Khan)

And We have revealed the Book to you explaining clearly everything. (16:89)

These are the Verses of the Qur'an, and (it is) a Book (that makes things) clear. (27:1, Hilali-Khan)

A Book whereof the Verses are explained in detail. (41:3, Hilali-Khan)

He it is who sends down clear communications upon His servant, that he may bring you forth from utter darkness into light. (57:9)

These verses (and many others), claiming that the Qur'an is clear, fully explained, and expounded in detail, have given rise to the doctrine that the Qur'an is *mubeen* ("clear"). Since the Qur'an also asserts that some passages are "allegorical" and are only understood by Allah (see 3:7), Muslim commentators have harmonized what the

Qur'an says about itself by stressing that, while some Qur'anic passages may be beyond our comprehension, Allah's *commands* are perfectly clear. That is, when Allah orders his followers to do something, he means exactly what he says.

Of course, Allah's commands frequently conflict with one another. But the Qur'an lays down a method for dealing with conflicting commands:

Whatever communications We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or like it. Do you not know that Allah has power over all things? (2:106)

And when We change (one) communication for (another) communication, and Allah knows best what He reveals, they say: You are only a forger. Nay, most of them do not know. (16:101)

These verses provide the Qur'anic basis for the doctrine of *abrogation* (roughly, the doctrine that, when Qur'anic commands conflict, the more recent commands cancel the earlier commands). Hence, Muslims who are familiar with the chronology of the Qur'an have everything they need in order to determine which passages are applicable to the Muslim community in general. Once the relevant commands are established, there can be no reinterpretation.

COMPLETE SUBMISSION

The word *Islam* means "submission," and, in its religious context, refers to submitting oneself to the will of Allah. The Qur'an declares that true *Muslims* ("those who submit") have no option except complete obedience to the commands of Allah and Muhammad: "It is not for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter, that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he has indeed strayed in a plain error" (33:36, Hilali-Khan).

The Qur'an also states that Muslims can have *no real faith* unless they submit to all of Muhammad's judgments: "But no, by your Lord, they can have no Faith, until they make you (O Muhammad) judge in all disputes between them, and find in themselves no resistance against your decisions, and accept (them) with full submission" (4:65, Hilali-Khan).

Because the Qur'an demands complete obedience to the decisions and commands of Allah and Muhammad, and because Allah's commands are perfectly clear, many Muslims have no inclination to reinterpret the Qur'an to bring it in line with modern Western values.

ISLAM AND THE KILLING OF "INNOCENTS"

Reading the daily news about the atrocities committed by the Islamic State (including rape,⁵ forced conversion,⁶ and so on) is about as close as one can get to reading the history of Muhammad's battles. But since the two main arguments against the Islamic State's adherence to Islamic teachings are (1) that it advocates killing people that most of us would regard as innocent, and (2) that many victims of the Islamic State are Muslims, let's take a closer look at these criticisms.

President Obama (along with countless other politicians) insists that Islam condemns the killing of innocents. The only support he has given for this claim is found in his 2009 Cairo speech, where he says:

The Holy Koran teaches that whoever kills an innocent is as — it is as if he has killed all mankind. And the Holy Koran also says whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind. The enduring faith of over a billion people is so much bigger than the narrow hatred of a few. Islam is not part of the problem in combating violent extremism — it is an important part of promoting peace.⁷

Where is this teaching found in the Qur'an? Here is the passage:

For this reason did We prescribe to the children of Israel that whoever slays a soul, unless it be for manslaughter or for mischief in the land, it is as though he slew all men; and whoever keeps it alive, it is as though he kept alive all men; and certainly Our apostles came to them with clear arguments, but even after that many of them certainly act extravagantly in the land.

The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His apostle and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement. (5:32–33, emphasis added)

The first verse (which is actually a quotation from the Jewish *Talmud*) gives a teaching of the “children of Israel.” The verse forbids killing except in cases of “manslaughter” or “mischief in the land.” The next verse (which is specifically for Muslims) lays down penalties for those who “wage war against Allah” by making “mischief.” The punishments include crucifixion and dismemberment (depending on the severity of the “mischief”).

So the only “innocents” in the passage partially quoted by President Obama are people who haven’t somehow “made mischief” in the land. What does “making mischief” include? It includes anything for which Islam assigns a punishment. Consider the commentary of Ibn Kathir (thought by many Muslims to be the greatest Qur’anic commentator in history), who says concerning 5:33, “‘Wage war’ mentioned here means ‘oppose and contradict,’ and it includes disbelief, blocking roads and spreading fear in the fairways. Mischief in the land refers to various types of evil.”⁸ Why does Ibn Kathir say that mere disbelief qualifies as “waging war” against Allah? Since the Qur’an commands Muslims to fight people for not believing in Allah, and 5:33 lays out penalties for the vague crimes of “waging war against Allah” and “making mischief,” these crimes must include disbelief. Consider a few of Allah’s commands concerning non-Muslims in the Qur’an:

O you who believe! fight those of the unbelievers who are near to you and let them find in you hardness. (9:123)

Surely Allah has bought of the believers their persons and their property for this, that they shall have the garden; they fight in Allah's way, so they slay and are slain. (9:111)

Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection. (9:29)

Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those who are with him are severe against disbelievers, and merciful among themselves. (48:29, Hilali-Khan)

Here Muslims are commanded to fight, kill, or violently subjugate non-Muslims simply for being non-Muslims.

Christians Are Not Innocent

When the Islamic State obeys these commands, however, Western politicians and the media assure us that Islam condemns such violence because Islam condemns the killing of innocents. The obvious problem with this response is that people who reject Islam, according to the Qur'an, *are not innocent*. Indeed, by claiming that Jesus is the divine Son of God, Christians are guilty of the worst possible sin: "Surely Allah does not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, and forgives what is besides that to whomsoever He pleases; and whoever associates anything with Allah, he devises indeed a great sin" (4:48).

Thus, the claim that the Islamic State is disobeying the commands of Islam because it promotes the killing of innocents is based on an equivocation. One may rightly assert that Islam forbids the killing of people who are innocent *according to the teachings of Islam*, but the people being brutally murdered by the Islamic State are not in this category.

ISLAM AND THE KILLING OF MUSLIMS

The other common objection from Western leaders and the media is that, because the Islamic State is killing Muslims, it can't possibly represent Islam. The assumption here is that Islam forbids the killing of Muslims in all circumstances, and this assumption is false. The Qur'an goes so far as to command Muhammad to wage jihad against "hypocrites" (i.e., people who claim to be Muslim but aren't sincere): "O Prophet! strive hard against the unbelievers and the hypocrites and be unyielding to them" (9:73). The Arabic word translated here as "strive hard" (*jahidi*) is a form of the word *jihad*.

According to Muhammad, there are three reasons to kill someone who has become a Muslim. "The Messenger of Allah said: 'It is not permissible to shed the blood of a Muslim except in three cases: A man who commits adultery after having married;

or one who kills intentionally, in which case he deserves retaliation; or one who apostatizes after having become Muslim, in which case he deserves to be killed” (Sunan an-Nasa’i 4062).⁹

In the West, we tend to think of apostasy as an official renunciation of a religious commitment. But Islam has a much broader view of apostasy. The Qur’an is filled with warnings that disobedience is a sign of apostasy. For example, the Qur’an tells Muslims that becoming friends with non-Muslims is a form of apostasy:

Let not the believers take the unbelievers for friends rather than believers; and whoever does this, he shall have nothing of (the guardianship of) Allah, but you should guard yourselves against them, guarding carefully. (3:28)

O you who believe! do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other; and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people. (5:51)

What does becoming friends with non-Muslims have to do with apostasy? As we have seen, the Qur’an claims that Muslims can have “no faith” unless they fully submit to the decisions of Allah and Muhammad. If Allah commands Muslims not to be friends with non-Muslims, friendship with non-Muslims entails unbelief and even idolatry.

Many Muslims today, especially in the West, will simply reinterpret such commands. Abandoning a clear teaching of Islam in favor of something one believes is better, however, is the sin of *bid’ah* (innovation):

Allah’s Messenger said, “The best of the speech is embodied in the Book of Allah, and the best of the guidance is the guidance given by Muhammad. And the most evil affairs are their innovations; and every innovation is error.”¹⁰

Allah’s Apostle said: “If anyone makes an innovation or accommodates an innovator, the curse of Allah, the angels, and all persons will fall upon him.”¹¹

In other words, Muslims can’t escape Allah’s commands by inserting their personal views or Western tolerance into verses that demand violence and oppression. Reinterpretation simply brings more condemnation from Allah.

A Return to Pure Islam

These warnings were taken quite seriously by Muhammad and his followers. Indeed, when Muhammad died, his closest companion (and the first “rightly-guided caliph” of Islam), Abu Bakr, carried out a series of wars against apostates. Some of these apostates had renounced Islam when they heard that Muhammad was dead. Others, however, while still maintaining their belief in Islam, simply refused to pay *zakat* (a kind of alms or tax) to the administration of Abu Bakr. Interestingly, Abu Bakr put the people who refused to pay *zakat* in the same category with those who renounced Islam. Rejecting a

core Islamic practice was no different than rejecting Islam, so Abu Bakr declared war on all of them.¹²

Abu Bakr, leader of the original Islamic caliphate, thus proceeded to cleanse Muslim lands of disobedience, hypocrisy, and apostasy. He fought against people who believed they were Muslims, but who weren't completely obedient to Allah. Nearly fourteen centuries later, a Muslim scholar named Ibrahim ibn Awwad ibn Ibrahim ibn Ali ibn Muhammad al-Badri al-Samarrai was declared leader of a renewed Islamic caliphate. He chose the war name "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi" ("Abu Bakr of Baghdad"). He is the new Abu Bakr, doing for the renewed caliphate what the original Abu Bakr did for the original caliphate.

Since Muhammad declared that the greatest generation of Muslims was the first generation, and that Muslims must follow the example of the rightly guided caliphs, it isn't clear how the Islamic State is violating the teachings of Islam by attempting to cleanse Muslim lands of disobedience, hypocrisy, and apostasy. As Maajid Nawaz has noted, the actions of the Islamic State are exactly what we would expect from a careful, literal reading of the Qur'an.

Why, then, are there so many peaceful Muslims in the world (including Muslims who are fighting *against* the Islamic State)? Fortunately, despite the efforts of jihadists, Muslims are usually influenced by more than the Qur'an. A person's genetics, parents, culture, friends, education, and so forth, all play a role in how that person will live, act, and interpret a text. Many Western Muslims have even been significantly influenced by Christian values. Hence, millions of Muslims will continue to live far better lives than the Qur'an commands. We must protect these Muslims, because groups like ISIS regard them as hypocrites.

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NOTES

- 1 "ISIS" stands for "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," whereas "ISIL" stands for "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant." The Levant is a region that includes Syria but also encompasses Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Cyprus, the Palestinian territories, and a portion of Turkey. The change to the more general "Islamic State" suggests that the leaders of the caliphate have set their eyes on more than their immediate surroundings.
- 2 http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/10/politics/transcript-obama-syria-isis-speech/index.html?hpt=po_c1.
- 3 <https://www.facebook.com/MaajidNawazFanPage/photos/a.551104524956817.1073741829.135775283156412/736044739796127/?type=1&theater>.
- 4 Qur'an passages marked "Hilali-Khan" are taken from the Hilali-Khan translation, by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Unless otherwise noted, all Qur'an quotations are from the M. H. Shakir translation.
- 5 For numerous narrations granting Muslims the right to have sex with their captives, see "Muhammad and the Female Captives" by Silas, available at <http://answering->

islam.org/Silas/femalecaptives.htm.

- 6 Concerning forced conversion, Muhammad declared, "I have been commanded to fight against people till they testify that there is no god but Allah, that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, and they establish prayer, and pay Zakat and if they do it, their blood and property are guaranteed protection on my behalf except when justified by law, and their affairs rest with Allah" (*Sahih Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi [no other publication data included in text], Number 33).
- 7 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.
- 8 Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Volume III* (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 2000), 161. The entire Darussalam edition is also available online at www.qtafsir.com.
- 9 *Sunan an-Nasa'i*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers, 2008), Number 4062.
- 10 *Sahih Muslim*, Number 1885.
- 11 *Ibid.*, Number 3163.
- 12 See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers, 1997), Number 7284.