

# MUSLIMS AND THE CONCEPT OF ARMED STRUGGLE

In the beginning, and during the thirteen years which the Prophet (pbuh)<sup>(1)</sup> spent in Mecca proselytizing people to the new religion of Islam<sup>(2)</sup>, the Prophet (pbuh) never indicated that it was one of his objectives to establish an Islamic State. Establishing an Islamic State was neither a corner stone of the religion nor a religious issue that was raised in the divine revelation<sup>(3)</sup> which the Prophet (pbuh) received. The concept of establishing an Islamic State arose after the Prophet (pbuh) and his companions exhausted all peaceful means to call the pagans of Mecca to accept the Religion of Islam as a new way of life. The pagans of Mecca did not merely refuse Islam but went further to persecute and torture the converts to the new religion. Muslims were denied the right to proselytize to the new religion peacefully. This phase of the Muslims history is labeled by Islamic scholars

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(1) Muslims invoke the salutation: Peace be upon him, whenever the name of the prophet is mentioned.

(2) Between the years 610-622 C.E.

(3) The Quran is the Holy Book for Muslims. It was revealed to Prophet over a period of 23 years.

the “enfeebled phase.” The Prophet (pbuh) responded creatively to the situation by commanding his followers to move to Abyssinia<sup>(1)</sup>, by concentrating his efforts in neighboring cities (like Taieef) and by calling onto pagans journeying to Mecca to perform a pagan pilgrimage.

A turning point in the history of Muslims and Islam happened when God opened the hearts of Arabs from the tribes of Aws and Khazraj living in Yathrib<sup>(2)</sup> and they embraced Islam. They pledged their allegiance to the Prophet (pbuh) at a place called “A’qaba.” By virtue of that pledge, the Muslims of Mecca were allowed to migrate to Yathrib and the Prophet (pbuh) was invited to establish an Islamic state which could protect the rights of Muslims to practice their religion. This pledge marked the end of the thirteen-year-long “enfeebled phase” and the establishment of the first Islamic state.

Physical combat with the nonbelievers in self-defense was not an option during the “enfeebled phase.” Therefore, Muslims were not commanded to take up arms to defend themselves. Several verses from the Quran suggest peaceful means for self-defense.

*“Repel evil with that which is best: We are well aware with what they attribute to Us.” [23:96]*

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(1) Present day Ethiopia.

(2) Yathrib acquired a new name after the migration of the Prophet: Medinat AlNabi or Medina in short, literally meaning the city of the Prophet

*"Who speaks better than someone who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those devoted to God'? 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." [41:33-35]*

*"So [Prophet] warn them: your only task is to give warning, you are not there to control them." [88:21-22]*

This state continued for sometime after the migration of the Prophet (pbuh) and his followers to Medina and the establishment of the Islamic State. Verses of the Quran revealed during this period emphasized the non-fighting aspects of Jihad to win the struggle between the believers and the pagans. Islam became a well-defined movement whose followers were able to practice freely and actively in Medina. Muslims were able to proselytize peacefully and freely to the new religion. In spite of the end of the "enfeebled phase," verses urging the Prophet (pbuh) to follow peaceful means continued to be revealed.

*"Patiently endure what they say, ignore them politely, and leave to Me those who deny the truth and live in luxury. Bear with them for a little while;" [73:10-11].*

And even when a Jewish tribe broke its treaty with the Prophet (pbuh), the response was: *"But they broke their pledge, so We distanced them [from Us] and hardened their hearts. They distort the meaning of [revealed] words and*

*have forgotten some of what they were told to remember: you [Prophet] will always find treachery in all but a few of them. Overlook this and pardon them: God loves those who do good.*” [5:13]

With the migration to Medina the “enfeebled phase” ended and a new phase started. This phase saw a change in the strategy in dealing with the enemies of Muslims. New types of tools for the struggle against the enemy were allowed. It was time to replace the strategy of meeting persecution by forgiveness, tolerance and forbearance with a new strategy where they were able to use more aggressive tools to defend themselves. Verses that were revealed to the Prophet (pbuh) while he was traveling from Mecca to Medina talked about the struggle between truth and falsehood and the right of those who were wronged to use aggressive means to avenge themselves. The verses read: *“God will defend the believers; God does not love the unfaithful or the ungrateful. 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.”* [22:38-40]

Some Islamic scholars are of the opinion that these verses gave the believers the permission to engage in military struggle to defend themselves. However, if one

contemplates deeply the language of the verses, one can only conclude that the verses provided a permission to use whatever means available for self-defense. This may include taking up arms against the enemy.

Several conflicts between the Muslims and the pagans took place during the seven years which followed the migration to Medina; some of these conflicts involved armed struggle. However, during all this time Muslims were permitted to take up arms according to the principle that *“Those who were wronged are allowed to use all tools available to them to defend themselves against those who persecuted them and expelled them from their homes.”* During the seventh year after migration<sup>(1)</sup> to Medina, Muslims headed to Mecca to perform Umrah<sup>(2)</sup> according to the agreement that was signed the previous year between the Muslims and the Pagans of Mecca and which is called the “Agreement of Hudiabiyah”. This agreement was reached on the sixth year after the migration to Medina (6 H), after Muslims headed to Mecca to perform Umrah were denied access by the pagans of Mecca. The agreement stipulated that Muslims would not perform Umrah this year but they could come back the following year to perform

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(1) The Islamic calendar begins with the year of the migration (Hijra) to Medina and is called the Hijri calendar. We will denote the Hijri dates by the letter “H”.

(2) Umrah is a ritual very similar to pilgrimage. The Ka’ba is held to be the site of the first place of worship of God on earth, and is believed to have been rebuilt by Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmael. The rituals venerating the Ka’ba pre-date Islam.

Umrah provided that they come unarmed. When Muslims came back to Mecca the following year to perform Umrah according to the articles of this agreement, they were concerned that the pagans might breach the agreement and attack them while performing the rites of Umrah. Muslims were not allowed to carry any weapons, as the time was during the “Sacred Months<sup>(1)</sup>” during which fighting was not allowed, and the place was the “Sacred Grounds<sup>(2)</sup>” in which no fighting is allowed. What guarantees did the Muslims have that the pagans of Mecca would not renege on their agreement? The following verses were revealed on this occasion to give Muslims the permission to fight back if the pagans reneged on their agreement, in spite of the sanctity of the time and the place.

*“Fight in God’s cause those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits; God does not love those who transgress 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 unless they fight you there. If they do fight you, kill them- this is what*

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- (1) Prior to Islam, Arabs recognized sacred months during which fighting was forbidden, but there were disagreements over which months were involved. Islam accepted the tradition and fixed the time of the months: the first, ninth, tenth, and eleventh months of the Arabic (H) Calendar.
  - (2) The grounds around the Ka’ba is called the “Sacred Grounds.” Ka’ba is a cubical structure in Mecca which Muslims believe be the site of the first house of worship of God on earth. It was rebuilt by Prophet Abraham and his son Ishmaeel.

*such disbelievers deserve- but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful. Fight them until there is no more persecution, and worship is devoted to God. If they cease hostilities, there can be no [further] hostility, except towards aggressors. A sacred month for a sacred month: violation of sanctity [calls for] fair retribution. So if anyone commits aggression against you, attack him as he attacked you, but be conscious of God, and know that He is with those who are conscious of Him.” [2:190-194]*

Thus, Muslims should return the fight to the enemies who reneged on their agreement with the Muslims and who attempt to persecute them, expel them from their homes, or try hard to sway them away from their newly adopted religion. Moreover when we contemplate the verses in Chapter 9, that command Muslims to fight, and which the enemies of Islam brand as a legislation for spreading Islam by the sword, we see that the verses only command fighting against those who renege on their peace agreements with Muslims. The verses do no command fighting the pagans who did not breach their peace agreements with the Muslims. These verses are in fact legislation for redressing the oppression and persecution that the Muslims suffered at the hands of the pagans of Mecca. The verses read as follows:

*“A release by God and His Messenger from the treaty you [believers] made with the idolaters [is announced]-you [idolaters] may move freely about the land for four months, but you should bear in*

*mind that you cannot elude God, and that God will disgrace those who refuse to acknowledge the truth. On the Day of the Great Pilgrimage [there will be] a proclamation from God and His Messenger to all people: 'God and His Messenger are released from [treaty] obligations to idolaters. It will be better for you [idolaters] if you repent; but if you turn away, then know that you cannot elude God.' [Prophet], warn those who deny the truth that they will have a painful punishment. As for those who have honored the treaty you made with them and who have not supported anyone against you: fulfill your agreement with them to the end of their term. God loves those who are conscious of Him. When the [four] sacred months are over, wherever you encounter the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, wait for them at every lookout post; but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful. If any one of the idolaters should seek your protection [Prophet], grant it to him so that he may hear the word of God, then escort him to a place where he can be safe, for they are people with no knowledge [of it]. How could there be a treaty with God and His Messenger for such idolaters? But as for those with whom you made a treaty at the Sacred Mosque, so long as they remain true to you, be true to them; God loves those who are conscious of Him.' [9:1-7]*

*"But if they violate their solemn pledges after*

*having concluded an agreement with you, and revile your religion, then fight against the archetypes of faithlessness who have no regard for their own pledges, so that they may desist. How could you not fight a people who have broken their oaths, who tried to drive the Messenger out, and who attacked you first? Do you fear them? It is God you should fear if you are true believers. Fight them: God will punish them at your hands, He will disgrace them, He will help you to conquer them, He will heal the believers' feelings and remove the rage from their hearts. God turns to whoever He will in His mercy; God is all knowing all wise." [9:12-15]*

Although the political conditions at that time created a ripe opportunity for the Muslims to invade and conquer Mecca- an invasion which could have been justified on the basis that Muslims were forced to flee Mecca, leaving behind their homes, wealth, and families- the command to fight was still restricted to fighting only those who reneged on their accords and fought Muslims first. War was only a tool for self-defense and removing injustice not a tool for expansion.

*"Let those of you who are willing to trade the life of this world for the life to come, fight in God's cause. To anyone who fights in God's cause, whether killed or victorious, We shall give a great reward. 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!?'  
The believers fight for God's cause, while those who  
reject faith fight for an unjust cause. Fight the allies  
of Satan: Verily, Satan's guile is weak. [4:74-76]***

To fight in the way of God is to free the enfeebled, the oppressed, and the persecuted. It is a fight against the transgressors and not a fight to force people to convert to Islam. Belief cannot be forced on people and thus, it is futile to use force to convert people. The wars that the Prophet (pbuh) and the Muslims engaged in were not "religious wars" nor were they "holy wars."