Jihad and the Qur’an:
The Case for a Non-Violent Interpretation of the Qur’an

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We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people; and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.

Qur’an 5:32

The issue of violence in the Qur’an remains one of the hot topics in the field of Islamic studies. The following essay explores the three most prevalent methods of interpreting the “violent” verses of the Qur’an. First, I begin with an examination of authors such as Sam Harris, Robert Spencer, and Osama bin Laden who argue that the Qur'an inculcates violence in any form and in any time. Second, I continue with the writings of John Kelsey and Majid Khadduri, who argue that the Qur’an allows for some forms of violence, albeit with certain qualifications. Third, I conclude with an analysis of the works of Mohammad Abu-Nimer, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Nathan C. Funk, and Abdul Aziz Said who argue for a non-violent interpretation of the Qur’an. I intend to show that although any religion’s scripture is prone to violent interpretations, the non-violent interpretation of scripture presents believers with the best possible option for transforming public opinions and promoting change from within a tradition.

The Qur’an as License to Kill:

On the first page of his New York Times bestselling book, The End of Faith, Sam Harris describes the actions of a suicide bomber. This young man straps explosives to his chest and hides them under his overcoat. He takes a seat next to a middle-aged couple on a crowded bus, and after a few stops, when the bus is full, “The young man smiles. With the press of a button he destroys himself, the couple at his side, and twenty others on the bus. The nails, ball bearings, and rat poison ensure further casualties on the street and in the surrounding cars. All has gone according to plan.” 2 This leads Harris to ask if there is anything we can determine about this young man on the basis of his actions. Can we determine how popular he was in school, how
intelligent he was, or his socio-economic background? Harris thinks not, and concludes by asking, “Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy – you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy – to guess the young man’s religion?”

This, of course, is the issue that must be addressed. Why is it that Westerners presume the young man is Muslim, even though research has shown that of the 188 suicide attacks that took place between 1980-2001 ninety-five percent were perpetrated by the non-religious Marxist-Leninist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka? Many find the answer to this question within the pages of the Muslim Holy Scripture, the Qur’an.

Harris definitely belongs to this group, and informs readers that, “We are at war with Islam… It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran.” While I agree with Harris’s assertion that the Qur’an – just like any other scripture or ideology – can be used to justify violence, I disagree with his claim that this is “the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims.”

An interpretation of the Qur’an similar to the one Harris is arguing for, relies heavily on an evolutionary view of revelation and theories of abrogation (naskh). The medieval jurist Shamseddin al-Sarakhsi (1010-1090 C.E.) proposed an evolutionary view of revelation, which held that Muhammad was commanded to engage in jihad in four developing stages:

1.) To spread the Islamic message and faith peacefully (early Meccan period);

2.) To confront and argue with unbelievers in a wise and fair manner (mainly pre-Hijra and early Medinan period);

3.) To fight the umma’s enemies if Muslims were unjustly wronged, and such fighting was not to be undertaken in the sacred months; and
4.) To wage war against unbelievers unconditionally and constantly to bring about the victory of Islam.\(^7\)

As Walter Wagner makes explicit, “The evolutionary view, as does the abrogationist position, concludes with Islam as a religion hostile to the point of war with other religious, social, and political systems.”\(^8\)

It is, thus, rather pertinent to give a brief overview of the Prophet’s career and revelatory experiences before moving forward. Muhammad’s prophetic career spanned 23 years, from 610 C.E. to his death in 632 C.E. He spent the majority of this time in Mecca (610-622 C.E.) before emigrating to Medina. Noted historian and religious scholar, Richard Bonney states, “The Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet in two distinct periods of his mission, the first part (85 chapters), which emanated from Mecca, being mainly concerned with matters of belief… while the second part (29 chapters) comprised legal rules and regulated various aspects of life in the new environment of Medina.”\(^9\)

The reactions to Muhammad’s initial proclamations progressed from mockery to malicious hostility and finally to murderous plots on his life.\(^10\) During this period, it was revealed to Muhammad that he ought to be patient and avoid direct confrontation with the nonbelievers:

\[
\text{Bear, then, with patience, all that they say, and celebrate the praises of thy Lord, before the rising of the sun and before (its) setting. (Qur’an 50:39)}
\]

\[
\text{We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, but for just ends. And the Hour is surely coming (when this will be manifest). So overlook (any human faults) with gracious forgiveness. (Qur’an 15:85)}
\]

With the increased opposition of the Qurayshi oligarchy, some of Muhammad’s followers desired to strike back against those who opposed them.\(^11\) God enjoined Muhammad to remain patient, but allowed the Prophet to confront the non-believers by means of argumentation:

\[
\text{Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance. (Qur’an 16:125)}
\]
And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, “We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)” (Qur’an 29:46)

After Muhammad and his followers fled prosecution in Mecca and emigrated to Medina, things changed dramatically. Muhammad took on the roles of judge, civic leader, general, soldier, and diplomat. Several of the refugees wanted restitution for the goods they had to leave behind. Having only a few resources at their disposal, and wanting to regain some of the goods that had been lost, God allowed the Muslims to raid caravans destined for Mecca: “To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged; and verily, Allah is most powerful for their aid.” (Qur’an 22:39)

In March of 624 C.E., events started to unfold that would eventually lead to the Battle of Badr. The Medinans learned that a rich Qurayshi caravan was on its way from Syria to Mecca. Muhammad began planning his attack. The Meccans, aware of Muhammad’s plan, sent a thousand-man army to annihilate the Muslim contingent. Muhammad, inspired by a God-given dream, announced that the Medinans would engage the much larger Meccan army. Several members of Muhammad’s army saw his mission as futile and decided to desert their leader.12

According to some Muslim traditions, Muhammad wrote to the Qurayshi elites informing them that although he was prepared to do battle, he would prefer it if the armies would disengage. The Qurayshi, having the upper hand, and seeing this as the perfect opportunity to eradicate the Muslim nuisance, declined.13

As Wagner highlights, “Some able-bodied and wiling men were delegated to remain in Medina to keep order and maintain worship. The Muslim army consisted of some 70 emigrants and approximately 230 Medinan converts against a thousand.”14 If victory were to come, it would be a miracle granted by God.
It was during this time that Surah 8 was revealed. In it are several verses that pertain to the waging of jihad. One of which speaks directly to the discrepancy in numbers between the two warring factions, “O Messenger, rouse the Believers to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred: if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the Unbelievers: for these are a people without understanding.” (Qur’an 8:65)

Further, Surah 8 provides believers with the proper way to go about waging war:

Say to the Unbelievers, if (now) they desist (from Unbelief), their past would be forgiven them; but if they persist, the punishment of those before them is already (a matter of warning for them). And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah altogether and everywhere; but if they cease, verily Allah doth see all that they do. If they refuse, be sure that Allah is your Protector - the best to protect and the best to help. And know that out of all the booty that ye may acquire (in war), a fifth share is assigned to Allah,- and to the Messenger, and to near relatives, orphans, the needy, and the wayfarer,- if ye do believe in Allah and in the revelation We sent down to Our servant on the Day of Testing,- the Day of the meeting of the two forces. For Allah hath power over all things. (Qur’an 8:37-41)

But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace, and trust in Allah. for He is One that heareth and knoweth (all things). (Qur’an 8:61)

The Battle of Badr established at least four important precepts pertaining to jihad. First, it is God who commands a jihad. The waging of war must occur under the direction of an authorized leader. Second, God is responsible for ensuring victory. Even when the odds are stacked against believers, they can still have hope that God will provide. Third, jihad is limited in its scope and must cease once the enemy inclines toward peace. Fourth, prisoners of war were not to be slaughtered or abused. Having surveyed material from the first three stages of the evolutionary model above, let us turn to the fourth and final stage, which deals with constant and unconditional warfare.

The Battle of the Trench and its aftermath, exemplify the final stage in the evolutionary theory of revelation concerning the subject of jihad. It is in this context that Surah 9 and Surah 2:190-193 were revealed. The Battle of the Trench pitted an army of confederates against
Muhammad, Medina, and Islam. In March of 627 C.E., confederate forces laid siege to Medina. The battle was quite lengthy and resulted in the treaty of Hudaybiyyah in 628 C.E. The end result of the treaty was the surrender and conversion of the Meccans, the crushing of the Jewish communities who had sided with the confederate forces, and the patronage of the bedouin tribes to Muhammad.\textsuperscript{18}

Wagner explains events after the signing of the treaty, “After a series of incidents Muhammad received the revelation to scrap the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah. Surah 9 opens with that repudiation and the forecast of what would happen if the Meccans decided to defend the city. In that context the sternest words about jihad-qitaal were revealed.”\textsuperscript{19}

Surah 9 begins with a pronouncement that the treaty would be void in four months time. It continues by stating that anyone who had not violated the treaty, and had not given aid to those who were against the Muslims, would still have protected status. Muhammad promises there will not be any ambushes or surprise attacks during the sacred months and that there would be no hostilities toward converts:

\begin{quote}
And an announcement from Allah and His Messenger, to the people (assembled) on the day of the Great Pilgrimage, that Allah and His Messenger dissolve (treaty) obligations with the Pagans. If then, ye repent, it were best for you; but if ye turn away, know ye that ye cannot frustrate Allah. And proclaim a grievous penalty to those who reject Faith. (But the treaties are) not dissolved with those Pagans with whom ye have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in aught, nor aided any one against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term: for Allah loveth the righteous. But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, an seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem (of war); but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them: for Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. If one amongst the Pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of Allah. And then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge. How can there be a league, before Allah and His Messenger, with the Pagans, except those with whom ye made a treaty near the sacred Mosque? As long as these stand true to you, stand ye true to them: for Allah doth love the righteous. (Qur’an 9:3-7)
\end{quote}

Wagner believes the following verses address the same situation as Surah 9:

\begin{quote}
Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have Turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; but fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they (first) fight you there; but if they fight you, slay them. Such is the
reward of those who suppress faith. But if they cease, Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful. And fight them on until there is no more Tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah, but if they cease, Let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression. (Qur’an 2:190-193)

This leads Wagner to conclude, “Surah 9 and Surah 2:190-193 in their original settings are directed to the specific situation that resulted in the surrender of Mecca with very little bloodshed. To cite the Surah’s view of jihad to justify continual conflict against non-Muslims is an expansion that is arguable at best.” However, this does not stop authors such as Robert Spencer from doing just this.

In his discussion of the Sword Verse (9:5), Spencer draws upon the Islamic doctrine of abrogation. The doctrine of abrogation states that the verses revealed later in the Prophet’s life supersede verses revealed earlier. The qur’anic verse 2:106 is often given as evidence in support of this position: “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?”

The doctrine of abrogation rectifies seemingly contradictory statements in the Qur’an. A classic example of this is the qur’anic position on drinking wine. In Surah 2:219 the reader is told there is some profit in drinking wine, however, the bad outweighs the good, “They ask thee concerning wine and gambling. Say: ‘In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit.’” This verse is later abrogated by verse that states worshipping while intoxicated (a mind befogged) is not allowed, “O ye who believe! Approach not prayers with a mind befogged, until ye can understand all that ye say.” (Qur’an 4:43) Finally, the believer is admonished to forgo intoxicants altogether, “O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination, of Satan's handwork: eschew such (abomination), that ye may prosper.” (Qur’an 5:90)
Spencer wants to argue that according to the doctrine of abrogation, Surah 9 overrides all of the more peaceful and tolerant verses of the Qur’an because it was revealed at a later time, “Suras 16, 29, 52, 73, and 109 – the sources of most of the verses of peace and tolerance above – are all Meccan. That means anything they teach must be considered in light of what was revealed later in Medina… The last Sura revealed, Sura 9, is Medinan. Thus it is in effect the Qur’an’s last word on jihad.”

However, Spencer is not merely spouting off in an echo chamber, he does his best to cite Islamic scholars to substantiate his position.

Spencer references Ad-Dahhak bin Muzahim (d. 723 C.E.), Ibn Juzayy (d. 1340 C.E.), and Ibn Kathir (d.1373 C.E.) amongst others, who all aver that the Sword Verse abrogated every agreement of peace, every treaty, and every term between Muhammad and non-Muslims.

Spencer ends this section by claiming, “In other words, Muhammad gave peace a chance with the pacific suras, and then understood that jihad was the more expedient course.”

While I doubt this is the case, I think if Spencer had updated his reading list a bit, he could have easily found himself approaching the Qur’an much differently. Surely, there is more than one way to approach a text – in the words of Edward Said, “a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization.”

My attempt to be multifaceted in this regard will become more apparent in the sections on just war and non-violence below. Before moving on, I would like to spend a few moments considering one of the driving forces behind violent interpretations, the allure of martyrdom and its rewards.

Near the end of his book, *The Qur’an: A Biography*, Bruce Lawrence analyzes Osama bin Laden’s 1996 fatwa entitled, “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land
of the Two Holy Places.” In the final third of his fatwa, bin Laden addresses the Muslim youth, emphasizing the call to martyrdom and the awards that accompany such as choice:

Before closing my talk, I have a very important message to the youths of Islam, men of the brilliant future of the Ummah of Muhammad… Our youths are the best descendent of the best ancestors... These youths believe in what has been told by Allah and His messenger (Allah's Blessings and Salutations may be on him) about the greatness of the reward for the Mujahideen and Martyrs... These youths know that their rewards in fighting you, the USA, is double than their rewards in fighting someone else not from the people of the book. They have no intention except to enter paradise by killing you. An infidel, and enemy of God like you, cannot be in the same hell with his righteous executioner... Those youths are different from your soldiers. Your problem will be how to convince your troops to fight, while our problem will be how to restrain our youths to wait for their turn in fighting and in operations. These youths are commendation and praiseworthy… These youths know that: if one is not to be killed one will die (any way) and the most honourable death is to be killed in the way of Allah. They are even more determined after the martyrdom of the four heroes who bombed the Americans in Riyadh. Those youths who raised high the head of the Ummah and humiliated the Americans – the occupier – by their operation in Riyadh.

Not only are Muslim youth reminded of their duty to protect Islam from the infidel army and the rewards of martyrdom, they are also called the “best descendents of the best ancestors.” Lawrence elucidates this quote in the following way; it “is a phrase that identifies the martyrs who volunteer for al-Qaeda as equivalent not just to the Companions of the Prophet but also to those who were exemplary in fighting for the creation and expansion of the ummah, or Muslim community. Bin Laden reinforces their sacred role with verses from the Qur’an that seem to enshrine this loyalty as binding.”

Let us take a look, then, at the verses that offer rewards to those willing to die for God’s cause:

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); thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: Until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded): but if it had been Allah’s Will, He could certainly have exacted retribution from them (Himself); but (He lets you fight) in order to test you, some with others. But those who are slain in the Way of Allah, He will never let their deeds be lost. Soon will He guide them and improve their condition, And admit them to the Garden which He has announced for them. (Qur’an 47:4-6)

Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: and who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah. Then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme. (Qur’an 9:111)
There are a couple of points that surface when considering the verses above. First, God does not need believers to fight his wars for Him; if He wanted, He could exact retribution Himself. Rather, the believer’s willingness to fight is a test of his belief. Second, God promised all the People of the Book the same reward for martyrdom, this promise is found in the Law (Torah), the Gospel (New Testament), and the Qur’an. Islam is therefore not unique in this regard.

David Bukay, writing on the subject of martyrdom, claims, “The Muslims should not fear any loss, for those who had been killed in the way of Allah, are not dead. They are living with Allah. This is the most important issue for Western policy makers and public opinion: the homicide bombers do not see themselves as dead. They are transported into a parallel and a perfect world, living with Allah, seeing and feeling everything on Earth.”29 First of all, it is unclear why Bukay adds such emphasis to the word Allah, as this is nothing more than the Arabic word for God, it is not as though Christians and Jews and praying to one God while Muslims are praying to another. Second, it should be noted that although any society that embraces a martyrdom mentality is bound to have innumerable problems, I will show below that martyrdom is not the exclusive property of violent Islamists and that it can be conscripted, in a much healthier way, by those who chose to interpret the Qur’an non-violently.

In the previous section, I laid out a timeline for Muhammad’s prophetic career, the tenets of the evolutionary theory of revelation and the doctrine of abrogation, and explored the Qur’anic promise of rewards for martyrs. As we will see in the following section, those that argue for Just War in the Qur’an, use many of the same tools and operate within the same framework. The problems that arise from violent interpretations of scripture remain manifest in our daily
lives; one only needs to pick up a copy of their daily newspaper to see the negative effects of such an interpretation.

To the extent that writers such as Harris and Spencer are arguing against using scripture as a justification for violence, I encourage what they are trying to accomplish. Harris writes, “Islam must undergo a radical transformation. This transformation, to be palatable to Muslims, must also appear to come from Muslims themselves… Unless Muslims can reshape their religion into an ideology that is basically benign – or outgrow it altogether – it is difficult to see how Islam and the West can avoid falling into a continual state of war, and on innumerable fronts.”

However, insofar as they are arguing that violent interpretations of the Qur’an are representative of the religion of Islam as whole, I strongly oppose what they are doing, and see it as unhelpful at best. By the end of the current project I hope to disprove Spencer’s assertion that, “Christianity – with its emphasis on turning the other cheek, redemptive suffering, loving one’s neighbor – other religions have no comparable tradition. Christian martyrs meet their end by being persecuted unto death, while Islamic martyrs are suicide killers. That’s a big difference.”

**Jihad and Just War:**

Let me begin by differentiating between some of the different wars commanded by God in order to determine how one ought to view jihad. First, there is the biblical herem enjoined on the Israelites as they entered Canaan. These were largely war of annihilation, where all native inhabitants – regardless of combat status – their property, livestock, and shrines were destroyed. In this schema, there was no such thing as a prisoner of war. As Wagner states, “The ostensible reason was to eliminate to the extent possible any residue of native customs, gods, and influences that might be absorbed into and corrupt the Israelites’ worship and morals. Given repeated
condemnations of syncretism and blatant Baalism by the prophets, the policy failed to achieve its goal.\textsuperscript{32}

Second, there are the Holy Crusades that started in the late eleventh century C.E. that aimed at reclaiming the Holy Land. Pope Urban II promised the remission of all sins for those who participated in the crusades. The butchering of prisoners of war was not uncommon. The Euro-Christians were known for their brutality, as they would massacre civilians when sacking cities.\textsuperscript{33}

Third, is the Islamic doctrine of jihad. After Islam triumphed over the polytheists of Mecca, they cleansed the Ka’bah and outlawed idolatry and as Wagner explains, “in principle, polytheists as well as the People of the Book who did not fight against Islam were not to be slaughtered. Further, during jihad-qitaal, God ordered that property and natural resources such as trees and wells were not to be destroyed. Captured soldiers and enemy civilians rarely were killed, except for causes such as harming the Prophet.”\textsuperscript{34} To avoid confusion with the doctrines of biblical herem or medieval crusades, many scholars of Islam equate jihad with “just war” rather than with “holy war.”\textsuperscript{35}

Those who argue for just war in the Qur’an view verses that speak of violence as providing important qualifications as to when and how violence can be meted out. John Kelsay, whose book Arguing the Just War in Islam provides readers with the most thorough treatment of the current position being studied, writes, “The Qur’an, of course, contains passages justifying military force, as do standard accounts of the Prophet’s life and work. In the context of struggle between the early Muslims and their Qurayshi opponents, these sources suggest a developing sense that fighting is an appropriate means by which Muslims should seek to secure the right to
order life according to divine directives.” In light of this fact, Kelsay concludes, “The notion of a just war is therefore an aspect of the foundational narrative of Islam.”

Muslim scholar, Majid Khadduri, was making a similar argument 50 years prior to Kelsay, “In Islam, as in ancient Rome, both of these of these concepts [jus ad bellum and jus in bello] were included in their doctrine of the bellum justum since a justifiable reason as well as the formalities for prosecuting the war were necessary. In both Islam and ancient Rome, not only was war to be justum, but also to be pium, that is, in accordance with the sanction of religion and the implied commands of gods.”

Not content with merely detecting similarities between Just War and the doctrine of jihad, Khadduri argues that members outside the Christian tradition influenced the founders of Just War theory; “In medieval Christendom, both St. Augustine and Isodore de Seville were influenced in their of just war by Cicero. St. Tomas Aquinas, who was acquainted with Muslim writings, formulated his theory of just war along lines similar to the Islamic doctrine of jihad.”

When confronted with passages from the Qur’an such as 2:190-193 (mentioned above), those who approach jihad from a just war perspective will emphasize the qualifications that are placed on warfare. For example, in Qur’an 2:190, God informs believers that they are only allowed to fight with those who fight them and that they are not to transgress the proper limits to warfare. Further, in Qur’an 2:193, the only legitimate targets in war are those that practice oppression. Several of the tenets of just war theory are spelled out in the analysis of Qur’an 2:190-193 above, with this in mind I would like to turn to a few exemplars of the just war position as they are presented to us in the history of Islam.

The first person I would like to examine is caliph al-Mahdi, who ruled the Abbasid Empire around the year 780 C.E. Al-Mahdi was well aware that the Abbasids were in a position
to silence the voices of other religious leaders if they so wished, therefore, the coexistence with Jews and Christians was a deliberate choice.\textsuperscript{40} Al-Mahdi did not see the need to exterminate all non-believers, as authors such as Harris and Spencer would have you believe.

Instead, al-Mahdi welcomed other religious leaders into to his court to debate a number of topics. For instance, al-Mahdi invited the Nestorian patriarch, Timothy I, to debate theology. The debates themselves were not just exercises in exchanging niceties, as questions about both traditions’ doctrines came under fire, but at the end of the day, both sides readily acknowledged the kinship between Islam and Christianity.\textsuperscript{41}

Although, as Zachary Karabell points out, “The internecine fighting among Christians, and between Christians and the pagans of Rome, stood in stark contrast to the relative comity between Muslims, Christians, and Jews under the first Muslim empires,”\textsuperscript{42} this does not mean that the empires came to power in any form of bloodless revolutions. It is here that the just war aspect of the Abbasid rule becomes the most pronounced.

The Abbasids planned their revolution for years, and had accentuated how those who had ruled before them, the Umayyads, had betrayed the message of the Qur’an. The Abbasids viewed the Umayyads as oppressive rulers who had unjustly seized power.\textsuperscript{43} They saw it as their duty to restore the rightful order. The high level of toleration of other religions was evident in their invitation to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians to serve the state. Per Karabell, “That toleration ran the gamut from cool coexistence to fruitful dialogue and active collaboration.”\textsuperscript{44} As we can see, the Abbasid’s focus lies in establishing an empire that reflected their ideals, not in eradicating all non-Muslims.

The other example I would like to examine is Saladin’s treatment of non-Muslims during his siege of Jerusalem. In his siege of Jerusalem, rather than seeking retribution for the
massacre of its inhabitants by the hands of the Christian Franks, Saladin told a delegation of Jerusalem merchants that, “I believe that Jerusalem is the House of God, as you also believe, and I will not willingly lay siege to the House of God or put it to assault.” Saladin went so far as to permit the Christians to retain their possessions and some of their land in exchange for their peaceful surrender. However, they declined.

As Karabell recounts, “On Friday, October 2, 1187, Saladin’s troops took control of Jerusalem. They were scrupulously fair toward the conquered. Discipline held, and the city changed hands quickly and bloodlessly.” Although several Christians were held for ransom, they were treated honorably. This is quite remarkable considering many of his contemporaries would not have given a second thought to the mass extermination of the religious others.

Saladin had spent three years fighting other Muslim rulers before turning his attention to the Christians, whom he engaged for only a little more than a year. This leads Karabell to conclude, “Yet Saladin’s jihad was not the jihad of the twenty-first century. It was not a holy war of hate. It was a war of restoration, a struggle for orthodox Islam rather than against Christians or against Muslims who deviated from the Sunni path” and further, “Today’s image of the jihadist as an individual whose entire identity is subsumed to an ideology bears only passing resemblance to Saladin.”

Mary Habeck is in complete agreement with Karabell’s observations, and writes, “For many Muslims who take their religion seriously, the willingness of the jihadis to selectively ignore a thousand years of interpretive work and traditional exegesis of the people of knowledge is a serious affront to their understanding of Islam.” However, Habeck is hopeful that the criticisms of traditional jurists, “who see the jihadis as heterodox if not outright heretics,” will
help reestablish the more moderate voices of men like al-Ghazzali and Ibn Khaldun as exemplars of the Islamic worldview.51

Furthermore, while I agree with Murad Hofmann’s assertion that the stance of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda “have hurt the image of Islam world-wide more than anything else since the time of the Assassins in the 12th/13th century,”52 I do not believe the just war interpretation of scripture moves Islam beyond the realm of critique. Just war theorists tend to forget that the original intent in setting up these theories was to limit violence, not to give license for it. One area that has been grossly misconstrued is considerations over who qualifies as a legitimate target. Over the centuries, this group has grown exponentially; the only hope to counter this progression is through a reevaluation of just war doctrines. At the heart of this project is the reinterpretation of the sources of conflict, ideally, in the non-violent interpretation of sacred texts.

The Qur’an and Non-Violence:

Westerners are inundated with images of Islam as the religion of violent religious fanatics, hellbent on destroying anyone who opposes them. This often makes it difficult to take into consideration any possibility of a non-violent interpretation of the religion. In the section that follows, I would like to present readers with an image of Islam that coheres with the radical transformation that Harris urges for. I will do so by emphasizing the qur’anic impetus for peace, outlining the tools available to Muslims within their tradition that will bolster a non-violent engagement with the world, and I will conclude with examples of Muslim non-violence that have been effective in bringing about social change. I hope to show that of the three types of qur’anic interpretation covered in the current essay, the non-violent form is the most amenable to living in
a pluralistic, civil society, and beyond this, is the most pragmatic option to embrace for bringing about a just society.

Let us begin with a crucial distinction concerning the term jihad that has yet to be made. As Wagner clarifies, “J-H-D, the triconsonantal root for jihad-related words, occurs forty-one times in the Qur’an. The root connotes striving, endeavoring, being in earnest, power, ability, struggle, and fighting. Most of the references in the Qur’an do not deal with an obvious call to Muslims to wage war or to fight… Of the forty-one references, ten clearly are military in nature and significance. All ten are in Surahs 2, 8, and 9.” Thus, one should not automatically assume that every jihad must therefore entail some form of violence.

Authors Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said do a great job of elucidating this when they write, “Among the most famous of these [sayings that legitimize opposition to arbitrary leaders] is a hadith that states, ‘The most excellent jihad is uttering a word of truth in the face of a tyrant.’ Other sayings have been used by Muslim scholars to identify a number of different categories of jihad (‘striving’) to protect or project Islamic values: jihad by the tongue, jihad by the pen, jihad by one’s money, jihad by the sword, and jihad against one’s own willful desires.”

Moreover, a further distinction is made between a “lesser” jihad, which may involve the use of force to handle actual, or potential, threats to the Islamic community, and a “greater” jihad, which is an internal struggle to live an upright and spiritual life – a jihad against one’s own willful desires.

When it comes to the non-violent interpretation of the Qur’an, Muslim scholar Mohammed Abu-Nimer, in the vein of such predecessors as Sayyid Qutb, Shaykh Mahmud Shaltut, and Fazlur Rahman, takes a holistic approach to the Qur’an and claims that there are several themes that can be utilized in Islamic peacebuilding projects. In the paragraphs below, I
will provide Nimer’s analysis of a few of these qur’anic principles and follow them with a few representative verses.

The first theme Nimer discusses is the pursuit of justice. The Qur’an calls believers to bring about social justice whether they are weak or strong. For Nimer, “Peace is the product of order and justice. One must strive for peace with justice. This is the obligation of the believer as well as the ruler.”\textsuperscript{57} The qur’anic focus on justice is compatible with non-violent demonstrations that resist injustice in society. The non-violent approach is not mere quietism, but rather another form of actively addressing injustice.\textsuperscript{58}

\begin{verbatim}
O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do. (Qur’an 5:8)

O ye who believe! stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do. (Qur’an 4:135)

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just. (Qur’an 60:8)
\end{verbatim}

The second theme I would like to touch upon is the concept of human dignity and sacredness of life. Nimer maintains that, “The human is an integral part of an ocean of creation, and is the most dignified and exalted of all creatures. The human has the potential to learn and know, the ability to decide which actions to take, and to bear the consequences of his/her actions… Thus, the protection of human life and respect for human dignity are sacred in Islam.”\textsuperscript{59} In Islam, every life is infused with meaning and purpose.\textsuperscript{60}

\begin{verbatim}
We have indeed created man in the best of moulds. (Qur’an 90:4)

We have honored the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of our creation. (Qur’an 17:70)

Say: "Come, I will rehearse what Allah hath (really) prohibited you from": Join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want; We provide sustenance for you and for them; come not nigh to shameful deeds. Whether open or secret; take
\end{verbatim}
not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom. (Qur’an 6:151)

The last theme I would like to explore is the qur’anic quest for peace. Even the controversial scholar Sayyid Qutb acknowledges the Islamic tradition’s preference for peace, “In the Islamic faith, peace is the rule while war is the exception. Peace emerges as the preamble to the principle of harmony. Peace means harmony in the universe, the laws of life, and the origin of man, while war is the result of violations of harmony as injustice, despotism and corruption.”\(^{61}\) Nimer seconds this idea in his own writings, “Living at peace with God through submission, and living at peace with fellow beings by avoiding mischief on earth, is real Islam. Islam is a religion that preaches and obligates its believers to seek peace in all life’s domains.”\(^{62}\)

Even in situations of conflict or fighting, peace is the preferential option.

Every time they kindle the fire of war, Allah doth extinguish it; but they (ever) strive to do mischief on earth. And Allah loveth not those who do mischief. (Qur’an 5:64)

Repel evil with that which is best: We are well acquainted with the things they say. (Qur’an 23:96)

Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition. (Qur’an 16:90)

Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate! (Qur’an 41:34)

The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive Mercy. (Qur’an 49:10)

Besides giving the qur’anic evidence in support of non-violence, Nimer lists a number of tools inherent to the ritualistic practices of Muslims that will help prepare believers for non-violent demonstrations, sit-ins, and assemblies.\(^{63}\) For example, he believes the weekly prayer service would provide believers with a natural locale for gathering and organizing non-violent protests. The obligatory fasting that occurs during Ramadan is excellent training for hunger strikes. Praying, because Muslims stand in parallel lines, speak and move in unison, might prepare them for engagement in disciplined actions. And, “religious chanting can be a main
channel for peaceful marches, meetings, and principles.” The utilization of an Islamic framework would be appropriate for conflicts with other Muslims and those that involve non-Muslims as well.

Along similar lines, Chaiwat Satha-Anand proposes that each of the classic five pillars of Islam provide a framework for non-violent action:

1.) Witnessing that there is no god other than God (shahada) – provides grounds for disobedience toward unjust authority – toward any power that interferes with the fulfillment of God’s commandments.

2.) Daily prayer (salah) – instills both discipline and a sense of human solidarity, as believers stand shoulder to shoulder during prayers, regardless of wealth or status.

3.) The giving of alms (zakat) – reminds Muslims that they have a responsibility toward others, and that it is their duty to work toward a more humane society.

4.) Fasting (sawm) – provides lessons in self-sacrifice, as well as in empathy for the suffering of others.

5.) The Muslim rite of pilgrimage (hajj) – fosters a sense of unity amongst believers, regardless of race, class, or nationality.

Having addressed non-violence in the Qur’an and the tools for non-violence inherent in the Islamic tradition, I would like to move on to the last goal of the current section, an examination of Islamic non-violence in action. I will proceed with an investigation of three monumental events in the history of the Muslim world; the independence of Muslims in India from British occupation, the Iranian revolution, and the Arab Spring.

From 1930-1947 Abdul Ghaffar Khan led a Muslim non-violent movement, consisting of the Pathans of the Northwest subcontinent of India, against British occupation. The British were
especially cruel in their occupation and exploitation of India. Many of those who joined Khan faced imprisonment, forced labor camps, and, on occasion, were put to death. Anand describes one particularly chilling example of the direct killings of the British, “One example of direct killings was the Amritsar massacre at the order of General Dyer on April 13, 1919 when British troops fired into a nonviolent crowd killing 379 and injuring more than a thousand notwithstanding.” Additionally, a little over a decade later, in 1932, after the arrest of Khan, the British opened fire on protesters, killing more than 300 people and injuring a thousand more. Amazingly, no counter-violence erupted.

While it is a bit morose to think about, Khan provides a healthier outlet for the jihadists fixated on martyrdom mentioned in the opening section of the current essay. Certainly, Khan’s followers are much more deserving of the rewards of paradise than those who butcher innocents. Although many sacrificed their lives, their sacrifice was not in vain, there were also real rewards in the here-and-now. India gained its independence on August 15, 1947.

The Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 is frequently caricatured in the West as a quintessentially violent upheaval, however, as Funk and Said explain, “the seismic shift in Iranian politics that brought about the downfall of Muhammad Reza Shah was predominately nonviolent.” Civilians, being multifaceted in their resistance to the Shah, participated in strikes, boycotts, and protest demonstrations that grew in response to the oppressive force implemented by the Shah.

Theology students in Qom were forcibly removed after a sit-in and the dissidents who commemorated their deaths were also met with brutal force, resulting in the deaths of several hundred unarmed civilians. However, with the increase in viciousness, the Iranian government stripped itself of both its popular and religious legitimacy. The resulting noncooperation of
civilians threatened to paralyze the country. These demonstrations were often met with state violence. Yet, as Funk and Said make explicit, “opponents of the Shah largely avoided efforts to challenge police or military forces through force of arms. On January 16, 1979, the Shah of Iran fled his country, and two weeks later Ayatollah Khomeini returned from abroad. Despite highly combative, anti-Western revolutionary slogans, the defeat of the Shah was accomplished with remarkably little violence on the part of opposition forces.”71

Iran has come full circle and the legitimacy of its rulers is in question once again. It will be interesting to see what role non-violence will play in bringing about political change in the future. Contemporary events in Tunisia and Egypt may provide some valuable insight into this question.

The roots of the Arab Spring can be traced back to the actions of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26 year-old man from Tunisia. On December 17, 2010, after police seized the produce he was selling; Mr. Bouazizi doused himself with petrol and set himself on fire. Mohamed was selling fruit and vegetables because he could not find employment elsewhere. Police confiscated his goods because he was selling them without a permit. In protest to Tunisia’s state of affairs, he lit himself on fire. Mohamed died a few weeks later.72 His actions sparked protests across Tunisia, which ultimately led Tunisia’s president, Ben Ali, to flee to Saudi Arabia. Bouazizi’s non-violent protest is credited with sparking revolutions across the Muslim world. Similar suicide protests occurred in Algeria and in Egypt and non-violent demonstrations were reported in 17 different countries.73

The picture of human solidarity that arose from these protests will not be soon forgotten. This is epitomized in the image of Christians surrounding their Muslims in Tahrir Square,
ensuring that their Muslim brethren would not be attacked while they prayed. Nevertheless, not all revolutions went as smoothly as they did in Tunisia and Egypt.

As Mark Levine points out, the zeitgeist of the Arab Spring may be changing in light of NATO intervention in Libya. He believes NATO’s intervention has sent negative messages to non-violent movements across the region. This leaves us with the question of what one ought to do when non-violent protests do not work. A full explication of this question cannot be handled adequately in the present work, rather it is a point to ponder for the future. No matter what the correct answer may be, it is imperative that non-violence be given preference over any other form of engagement. Only once the non-violent project has completely failed should propositions that are more combative even be considered.

**Conclusion:**

I have divided the previous pages into three main areas, Qur’an as license to kill, jihad as just war, and the Qur’an and non-violence. In each section, I have outlined how the Qur’an is used as a justification for each position and the practical implications for holding each position. When each of these aspects is taken into consideration, it becomes much easier to argue for a non-violent interpretation of scripture. While one should not ignore the fact that the Qur’an allows for violence in certain circumstances, I tend to agree with Nimer who writes, “Islam does not need to be understood and interpreted as an ‘absolute pacifist’ religion for Muslims to justify nonviolent resistance campaigns and activities,” and have argued for the preferential option of non-violence. The only way to counter negative perceptions of Islam, and of religion in general, is to begin changing how believers encounter the text – the one interpretation that presents believers with the best option in this regard is the non-violent interpretation of text.
Notes:

3 Ibid., 12.
6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
10 Wagner, *Opening the Qur’an*, 380.
12 Wagner, *Opening the Qur’an*, 384.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 386.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 388.
18 Ibid. For more information on the events of the Battle of the Trench, refer to Surah 33.
19 Ibid., 389.
20 Ibid., 391.
22 Ibid., 134.
23 Ibid., 136.
27 Ibid.
28 Lawrence, *The Qur’an*, 181.
30 Harris, *End of Faith*, 152.
31 Spencer, *Onward Muslim Soldiers*, 146.
32 Wagner, *Opening the Qur’an*, 371.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 58.
41 Ibid., 42.
42 Ibid., 43.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 45.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 125.
49 Ibid., 134.
50 Mary R. Habeck, Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 54-5.
51 Ibid.
53 Wagner, Opening the Qur’an, 368-9.
54 Nathan C. Funk and Abdul Aziz Said, Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), 185.
55 Ibid., 181.
57 Ibid., 143.
58 Ibid. 144.
59 Ibid., 147.
60 Ibid., 149.
63 Ibid., 164.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 188.
71 Ibid.
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