

Shahid or Suicide – Martyr or Murderer? The Muslims’ Rules of Engagement

“Some are born to sweet delight. Some are born to endless night.”

William Blake, *Proverbs of Heaven and Hell*

Both the *Qur’an*¹ and the *hadith*² make it clear that it is *haram* (forbidden) either to murder someone or to commit suicide, both of which will take you to the Fire:

And do not kill yourselves,
Allah is Most Merciful to you.
As for anyone who does that out of enmity and wrongdoing,
We will roast him in a Fire.
That is an easy matter for Allah.

(*Qur’an* : 4. 29-30)

And :

As for anyone who kills a *mumin*³ deliberately,
his repayment is Hell,
remaining in it timelessly, for ever.
Allah is angry with him and has cursed him,
and has prepared for him a terrible punishment.

(*Qur’an* : 4. 92)

And :

So We decreed for the tribe of Israel
that if someone kills another person –
unless it is in retaliation for someone else
or for causing corruption in the earth –
it is as if he had murdered all mankind.
And if anyone gives life to another person,
it is as if he had given life to all mankind.
Our Messengers came to them with Clear Signs
but even after that many of them
committed outrages in the earth.

(*Qur’an* : 5. 32)

Ibn Mas‘ud related that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, “The blood of a Muslim may not be legally spilt other than in one of three situations: the married person who commits adultery; a life for a life; and one who forsakes his *deen*⁴ and abandons the community.” (Al-Bukhari).

As in the case of most legal systems, the *Shari‘a*⁵ of Islam permits Muslims to fight in self-defence if they are attacked – but even in times of war, it is forbidden to kill non-combatants, especially women and children and old men:

Yahya related to me from Malik from Nafi from Ibn Umar that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, saw the corpse of a woman who had been slain in one of the raids, and he disapproved of it and forbade the killing of women and children.

Yahya related to me from Malik from Yahya ibn Sa'id that Abu Bakr as-Siddiq was sending armies to ash-Sham. He went for a walk with Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan who was the commander of one of the battalions. It is claimed that Yazid said to Abu Bakr, "Will you ride or shall I get down?" Abu Bakr said, "I will not ride and you will not get down. I intend these steps of mine to be in the way of Allah."

Then Abu Bakr advised Yazid, "You will find a people who claim to have totally given themselves to Allah. Leave them to what they claim to have given themselves. You will find a people who have shaved the middle of their heads; strike what they have shaved with the sword."

"I advise you ten things: Do not kill women or children or an aged, infirm person. Do not cut down fruit-bearing trees. Do not destroy an inhabited place. Do not slaughter sheep or camels except for food. Do not burn bees and do not scatter them. Do not steal from the booty, and do not be cowardly."

Yahya related to me from Malik that he had heard that Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz wrote to one of his governors, "It has been passed down to us that when the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, sent out a raiding party, he would say to them, 'Make your raids in the name of Allah in the way of Allah. Fight whoever denies Allah. Do not steal from the booty, and do not act treacherously. Do not mutilate and do not kill children.' Say the same to your armies and raiding parties, Allah willing. Peace be upon you." (*Al-Muwatta* of Imam Malik: 21.3.9-11)

As regards suicide, the *hadith* not only confirm that it is *haram* to commit suicide and that the punishment for it is to repeatedly commit the same act in the Fire without ever dying, forever – but also clearly confirm that it is forbidden to commit suicide even in war:

Narrated Sahl bin Sad As-Sa'idi: "The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and the *kafirun*⁶ faced each other and started fighting. When the Messenger of Allah returned to his camp and when the *kafirun* returned to their camp, someone talked about a man amongst the companions of the Messenger of Allah who had been pursuing and killing with his sword any *kafir* fleeing alone. He said, 'No-one fought as hard today as that man.' The Messenger of Allah said, 'Truly, he is one of the people of the Fire.' A man among the people said, 'I shall follow him (to see what he does).' So he followed him, and wherever he stood, he would stand with him, and wherever he ran, he would run with him.

"Then the (brave) man was wounded seriously and decided to bring about his own death quickly. He slanted the blade of the sword in the ground directing its sharp end towards his chest between his two breasts. Then he leaned on the sword and killed himself. The other man came to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and said, 'I testify that you are the Messenger of Allah.' The Prophet asked, 'What happened?' He replied, '(It is about) the man whom you de-

scribed as being one of the people of the Fire. The people were greatly surprised at what you said, and so I said, "I will find out his reality for you." So, I followed him and watched him. He was severely wounded, and hastened to die by slanting the blade of his sword in the ground and directing its sharp end towards his chest between his two breasts. Then he leant on his sword and killed himself.'

"Then the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'A man may seem to the people as if he were practising the deeds of the people of Paradise while in fact he is from the people of the Fire, and another may seem to the people as if he were practising the deeds of the people of Hell, while in fact he is from the people of the Garden.'" (*Sahih Al-Bukhari* Volume 4, Book 52, Number 147).

And:

Narrated Abu Huraira: "We were in the company of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, in a *ghazwa*,⁷ and he remarked about a man who claimed to be a Muslim, saying, 'This man is one of the people of the Fire.' When the battle started, the man fought fiercely until he was wounded. Somebody said, 'O Messenger of Allah, the man whom you described as being one of the people of the Fire fought fiercely today and died.' The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, replied, 'He will go to the Fire.' Some of the people were on the point of doubting (the truth of what the Prophet had said) and while they were in this state, someone came and said that the man was still alive but severely wounded. When night fell, the man lost patience and committed suicide. The Prophet was informed of this and said, 'Allah is Greater! I testify that I am the Messenger of Allah and His slave.' Then he ordered Bilal to announce to the people: 'No-one will enter Paradise unless he is a Muslim, and Allah can support this *deen* (of Islam) even with a disobedient man.'" (*Sahih Al-Bukhari* Volume 4, Book 52, Number 297).

And:

Narrated Jundub: "The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'Amongst the nations before you there was a man who received a wound, and growing impatient (because of the pain), he took a knife and cut his wrist with it and the blood did not stop flowing until he died. Allah said, "My Slave hurried to bring death upon himself so I have forbidden him the Garden."'"" (*Sahih Al-Bukhari* Volume 4, Book 56, Number 669).

The verses of *Qur'an* and *hadith* quoted above are not the only ones on the subject, but in my opinion they summarise what the *Shari'a* has to say about killing another human being or committing suicide, whether in peace time or during war.

I cannot see, in the light of these verses of *Qur'an* and *hadith*, how any well-informed Muslim can believe that blowing him or her self up and killing and maiming anyone in the vicinity will take him or her to the Garden. Historically only certain members of the Ismaili sect have held this kind of view – and they are not accepted as being Muslims or as representing Islam by the main body of Muslims. These acts have nothing to do with the *Sunna*.⁸

I can understand how someone whose home and family and friends have been annihilated by laser precision bomb or rocket attacks may be driven in anger to carry out such a nihilistic act against civilian targets – using the rationale, “If they are killing our families, we will kill their families,” – but both indiscriminate bombing (whether by land, sea or air) and suicide bombing remain nevertheless unacceptable from a balanced Islamic perspective and neither course of action can be condoned. They have nothing to do with the *Sunna*. They cannot possibly have positive consequences either in this world or in the next.

In the Palestinian conflict, both sides are blowing each other up, each claiming that it is retaliation – and ascertaining at this stage who committed the first act of aggression (possibly the massacre of some 250 civilian inhabitants, mostly women and children, of Deir Yaseen by the Stern Gang and Irgun Zvai Leumi terrorists on the 9th April 1948) will not in itself halt this chain reaction which appears to be out of control and leading ineluctably to fulfilment of the prophecies in chapters 38 and 39 of Ezekiel.

It is true that the *shahid*, the martyr who dies in the way of Allah, is promised many rewards in the next life, both in the *Qur'an* and in the *hadith*, but in my opinion anyone who murders an innocent bystander or non-combatant or commits suicide cannot die as a *shahid*. It is also true that there is more than one kind of martyr:

Yahya related to me from Malik from Sumayy, the *mawla* of Abu Bakr ibn 'Abd ar-Rahman from Abu Salih from Abu Hurayra that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said ... “Martyrs are five: the one killed by a plague, the one killed by a disease of the belly, the one who drowns, the one killed by a collapsing building, and the martyr in the path of Allah.” (*Al-Muwatta'* of Imam Malik : 8.2.6)

Ahmad Thomson

Ahmad Thomson is a practising barrister and author, whose more recent works include *The Last Prophet*, *The Islamic Will*, *The Difficult Journey*, *The Way Back*, *Making History* and the revised editions of *Jesus*, *Prophet of Islam*, *Blood on the Cross* (in two parts: *For Christ's Sake* and *Islam in Andalus*), and *Dajjal – the AntiChrist*.

Notes:

¹ *Qur'an*: the 'Recitation', the last Revelation from *Allah* to mankind and the *jinn* before the end of the world, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, may *Allah* bless him and grant him peace, through the angel Jibril, over a period of twenty-three years (beginning in 610 and ending in 632), the first thirteen of which were spent in *Makka* and the last ten of which were spent in *Madina*. The *Qur'an* amends, encompasses, expands, surpasses and abrogates all the earlier revelations revealed to the earlier Messengers, peace be on all of them. The *Qur'an* is by far the greatest of all the miracles given to the Prophet Muhammad by *Allah*, for he was illiterate and could neither read nor write. The *Qur'an* is the uncreated word of *Allah*. The *Qur'an* still exists today exactly as it was originally revealed, without any alteration or change or addition or deletion. Whoever recites the *Qur'an* with courtesy and sincerity receives knowledge and wisdom, for it is the well of wisdom in this age.

² *hadith*: reported speech of the Prophet Muhammad, may *Allah* bless him and grant him peace.

³ *mumin*: a *mumin* (the plural is *muminun*) is someone who possesses *iman*; *iman* is belief, faith, acceptance in the heart of Allah and His Messenger. *Iman* consists of believing in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, the Garden and the Fire, and that everything, both the good and the bad, is by the decree of Allah.

⁴ *deen*: means life transaction, the way you live and behave towards *Allah*, submission and obedience to a particular system of rules and practices. Literally it means the debt or exchange situation between two parties, in this usage the Creator and the created, or as some say between the conditioned and the unconditioned, the limited and the limitless, or the many and the One. *Allah* says in the *Qur'an* that surely the *deen* with *Allah* is *Islam*.

⁵ *shari'a*: lit. road, the legal modality of a people based on the Revelation of their Prophet. The final *Shari'a* is that of *Islam*. *Islam* can be defined briefly as: 'submission to the will of Allah, the way of life embodied by all of the Prophets, given its final form in the guidance brought by the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.' Shaykh 'Abd' al-Qadir as-Sufi writes, 'It is the behaviour modality of a people based on the revelation of their Prophet. The last *Shari'a* in history has proved to be that of *Islam*. Its social modality abrogates all previous *shara'i* e.g. Navaho, Judaic, Vedic, Buddhist, etc. These *shara'i* however, continue until the arrival and confrontation takes place in that culture with the final and thus superior *Shari'a* – *Islam*. It is, being the last, therefore the easiest to follow, for it is applicable to the whole human race wherever they are.' (*Qur'anic Tawhid*. Diwan Press. 1981).

⁶ *kafirun*: the plural of *kafir*, disbelievers. The *kafir* is the one who denies the Existence of *Allah* and who rejects His Prophets and Messengers, and who accordingly has no peace or trust in this life, and a place in the Fire in the next life. Shaykh 'Abd' al-Qadir as-Sufi writes, '*Kufr* means to cover up reality: *kafir* is one who does so. The *kafir* is the opposite of the *mumin*. The point is that everyone knows 'how it is' – only it suits some people to deny it and pretend it is otherwise, to behave as if we were going to be here for ever. This is called *kufir*. The condition of the *kafir* is therefore one of neurosis, because of his inner knowing. He 'bites his hand in rage' but will not give in to his inevitable oncoming death.' (*Qur'anic Tawhid*. Diwan Press. 1981).

⁷ *ghazwa*: a raid, a military expedition, especially a desert raid.

⁸ *sunna*: the customary practice of a person or group of people. It has come to refer almost exclusively to the practice of the Messenger of Allah and of the first generation of Muslims.

[Definitions of Arabic terminology are from *A Glossary of Islamic Terms* by Aisha Bewley, (Ta-Ha Publishers, London, 1998). Quotations from the *Qur'an* are from *THE NOBLE QUR'AN – a New Rendering of its Meaning in English* by Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, (Bookwork, Norwich, 1999). Quotations of *hadith* are from *Al-Muwatta* of *Imam* Malik translated by Aisha Bewley and Yaqub Johnson (Diwan Press, Norwich, 1982) and the *Sahih* of *Imam* Al-Bukhari translated by Dr. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Madina University Press, 1971).]