

## AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC STUDIES

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### **A FEW COMMENTS ON THE SO-CALLED 'SWORD' VERSE—Surah 9:5 {Depending on the Arabic codex used it may be sur. 9:4}**

#### I

The horrific incident of 9/11 and the later war on terror brought radical Islamism into the mainstream of western life. At present, it is quite difficult to undertake any type of study in the subject of Islam without being bombarded by energetic texts & passages from the Quran that seem to imply the necessity of killing the infidel. A number of approaches can be taken in a quest for the meaning(s) behind these words but at the same time it should be understood that we are reading these texts with contemporary ideas superimposed on our minds. Here is the Quranic text as recorded in two English translations:

“When the {four} forbidden 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.” The Quran translated by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem

“Then when the sacred months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them, capture them and besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every ambush. But if they repent, and maintain the prayer and give the zakat, then let them alone. Indeed Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful.” The Quran translated by Sayyid Ali Quli Qara'i

As you can see from the above there is a significant amount of give & take involved in Muslim and non-Muslim relationships. The first text is translated by a Sunni and the second is given from a member of the Shiite community, two men who are reputed Arabists. This same passage is also the launching pad for a number of notorious and infamous groups {ie. Hamas, Hezbollah, Al Qa'ida}. The interpretive approaches taken by each group, though, wide and varied, could be considered 'conservative' in their camps. But, for our purposes, we want to unravel some of the knots twisted ever so tightly within the above words, verses that have left multitudes of Muslims at odds with one another over how they are to be viewed in contemporary times. Before moving forward in this I will

now present the verses in their context with its preceding verses and also, those following {sur.9:5}.

**Sur 9** (1) A (declaration) of immunity from God and His apostle, to those of the pagans with whom ye have contracted mutual alliances:--(2) Go ye, then, for four months, backwards and forwards, (As ye will), throughout the land, but know ye that ye cannot frustrate God (by your falsehood) but that God will cover with shame those who reject Him. (3) And an announcement from God and His apostle, to the people (assembled) on the day of the great pilgrimage,-- that God and His apostle 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 God. And proclaim a grievous penalty to those who reject faith. (4) (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 God loveth the righteous. (5) *But when the forbidden months are passed then fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find 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 God is oft forgiving, most merciful.* (6) If one amongst the pagans ask thee for asylum, grant it to him, so that he may hear the word of God; and then escort him to where he can be secure. That is because they are men without knowledge. (7) How can there be a league before God and His Apostle, with the pagans, except those with whom ye made the treaty near the Sacred Mosque? As long as these stand true to you, stand ye true to them: For God doth love the righteous. (8) How (can there be such a league) seeing that if they get an advantage over you, they respect not in you either the ties of kinship or of covenant? With (fair words from) their mouths they entice you but their hearts are averse from you; and most of them are rebellious and wicked. (9) The signs of God have they sold for a miserable price, and (many) have they hindered from his way: evil indeed are the deeds they have done.

From the popular edition of Abdullah Yusuf Ali

## II

For the context and setting of the above passages, let's revisit the Arabian peninsula of the first Islamic century (622-32AD). Immediately after the hijra (Muhammad's move to medina) the continent exploded with conflicts everywhere. As the armies of Allah marched up ground and tramped out the deserts, village after village succumbed to the might of Muhammad. With each succeeding victory a compact was established between Muhammad and the newly conquered persons; the wording of which follows:

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the covenant of security granted under God by Muhammad, the Apostle of God, to the people of...Their ships, vehicles, and routes on land and on sea are secure under God's guaranty and Muhammad's...Whoever among them perpetrates a crime shall be liable for it in his own person, and it shall be legitimate for Muhammad to confiscate his wealth.”

Compacts of this type were the norm during Muhammad's tenure. The background for surah 9 (Repentance) is important in that it gives greater clarity to a very disturbing, albeit ambiguous set of passages. Fresh from the complete takeover of Mecca, Muhammad finds himself faced with Byzantines from the North who desire to make inroads into Arabia to annihilate the Muslim empire. He then makes a call to arms and about 30,000 men responded. Unfortunately, there were many who mocked the Apostle, some even going so far as to ignore his call to arms. Many non-Muslim parties refused to follow him to battle and others conspired to murder him. After the battle of Tabuk in which, according to Muslim historians, the Byzantines were soundly routed, Muhammad returned and put many on trial. These trials led to many people's *repentance*, Hence, the title of the surah. This is the typical story as passed down in Islamic annals. Moreover, it forms the context for a proper understanding of the sword verse.

1. Muhammad was being threatened from without as well as from within and through the help of Allah he defeated the pagan (Christian) Byzantines & the hypocrites dwelling among the Muslim peoples of God.
2. In the end he imposed a compact upon those persons under his jurisdiction (Christian, Jew and pagan). The sword verse, being a regulatory statute for the enforcement of these Islamic regulations.

Later, as the Islamic centuries passed, other scenarios arose in which non-Muslim parties showed an interest in the deconstruction of Islam's rule and reign. As would be the norm in any faith, the leaders simply returned to their early histories to see how difficulties were handled. Then, they revised the issues and envisioned modern successes for their day. Leadership among Muslims usually resides with the mullahs or clergy establishment. Mullahs possess a prestige that few westerners can figure out. By utilizing their influence over their disciples, they are able to continue the rich traditions of Islam's history. So, from ancient days, Muslim learning circles (halaqaat) have had to grapple with the dilemmas posed in this verse, and often under duress. To be sure, the goals & objectives of the halaqah dictated how the 'meaning' would be extracted and later on applied.

By means of informal and formal discussions, along with carefully read treatises from the past, mullahs have arrived at some odd and often conflicting opinions concerning when and how to apply surah 9:5. When does one fight, kill, besiege..? How much force should be exerted to bring the non-Muslim populace to a place of acknowledging their obligations to a Muslim covenant and/or performing Muslim ritual prayers and the giving of the special tax? This verse, along with numerous others, has constantly been interpreted in a variety of ways through history. Each century has produced a view that has left the impression that it is a multifaceted text full of implied and subtle meanings. And so the seminarians continue their 'logical deductions & reasonings' today. Even if it means the loss of life for those not directly involved the fight for or with Islam.

When differences of opinions arise between the East and West, Ivy League officials in the west seek arbitration and ways to conciliate parties of vastly different persuasions. This manner of adjudicating problems has a long history in western politics. Often in the back of the politicians mind is a Christian ethic that he may or may not embrace as he performs policy duties. The Muslim on the other hand, looks into His past, and in particular to the traditions of Muhammad to determine what should or shouldn't take place next. Even if in public this is not stated it is still the process of thinking that has been molded in his culture and society. However he views the struggle between Western ideas and Islamic perspectives, the Islam of his school days will guide his eyes and help him focus. This is an obstacle too difficult to pass over.

### III

This verse has popularly been called the 'sword verse,' though the word *sword* is not mentioned anywhere in the passage in Arabic. Since it is misnamed in English it naturally leads to some false assumptions and destructive conclusions. Many, in which, scholars have justly been trying to rectify for some time now. As we move into the actual text let's try and remember several things, namely;

1. Our contemporary ideas stem from mass media hysteria. Mostly those who are unacquainted with the Arabic sources and/or persons who are moderate, of Muslim background

and are in denial concerning how the verse was/is being interpreted.

2. The context and backdrop of the wording's occurrence is supposed to be a part of the process used when looking for ways to understand its meanings in historic Islam.
3. How it typically has been acted upon historically by Muslims.

### SURAH 9:5 PHILOLOGICALLY INTERPRETED

By skipping the technical jargon and long extraneous sentences normally used in word studies, we can look at these words for what they say and are. Assuming that you are a non-Arabic reader, you will not be concerned with a lot of professional terminology. Many a journal excerpt has proved mentally fatal to the ambitious but undisciplined mind. But, if you are able to read the Arabic sources, then it is wholly unnecessary in a small article such as this to delineate all of the technical features of a language. All of us readers know that if one is reading in his/her native language that it is not necessary to be able to identify a prepositional phrase in a paragraph, although, you may read fluently and comprehend it thoroughly.

In a careful, close reading of a good diplomatic text we may translate sur. 9:5 from Arabic into English in this way: “For, when the holy months are passed, then kill the idolaters (polytheists) wherever you find (come to face to face with) them also, take them and capture them..But if they repent and arise to do (Muslim) prayer(s) and pay the (Islamic) tax, then leave them (alone) to their own path. Verily, God is the forgiving (one), the merciful (one).” This is an expanded translation of the Arabic but it holds tightly to the inherent meanings in each word and sentence. The parentheses contain added meanings needed to perceive the textual implications in each passage.

1. In Arabic, certain conjunctions, like *'fa and wa'* possess numerous meanings. Sometimes *and*, at times, *also*, other times, *then*. These arrangements also correspond to usages found in related Semitic languages.
2. Depending on the clausal structure, the reader will filter the meanings through a mind saturated with other forms of Arabic literature. The literature of Pre-Islamic Arabia is available in abundance for study of grammar, syntax etc.
3. Since Arabic writing did not begin with the compilation of the Quran, the early Islamic readers would have had a fulsome syllabary with which to interact. ..
4. Kill (in sur. 9:5) is an imperative with the suffix *them* attached as a parallel direct object (to idolaters) of the verb *kill*.
5. The flow of the passage easily connects the dots as to who the aggressors are and who the intended victims are to be. The Arabic word *'marsid'* is a place where one watches for the appearance of a coming enemy.
6. The time frame (sacred months) is set forth in the first sentence. The Arabic ensures that these months are understood to have been over at the time of the attacks. Even in pre-Islamic Arabia, these months were days of truce. Days when all fighting was suppose to cease.

7. Specific obligations are to be met and demonstrated as signs of true repentance if they are to be left free from further aggression; prayer, which should show spirituality and then payment of Islamic fees, which shows true conversion.
8. To leave them to continue 'in their own faith' is to permit continued resistance to God's holy, revealed religion. There is a special tax that is levied upon the people of the book, however, in this instance, the verse speaks of not only a subjugated group but a converted people.

If this were a short piece of poetry, it would be easy to subject it to a detailed form of study and scrutinize it for its beauty or lack thereof. But because it is highly prosaic, direct and to the point, one can only take it at face value and wonder at how such a day of revelation could have ever existed?

A final note: It is often protested by Muslims that the Hebrew scriptures of the Jewish community sanctioned the murder of multitudes of innocent peoples in the early days of its prophetic beginnings. Also, the New Testament of the Christians speaks particularly about Jesus coming and destroying an Anti-Christ prior to the initiation of His Millennial reign. Jewish authors would certainly take a different approach in explaining those occurrences but divine scripture (in their minds) did make allowances for their actions. Christians, on the other hand, have never advocated the physical overthrow of any and since, few Muslims are learned in the intricacies of tribulational & millennial schemes the accusations are far from accurate. To my knowledge, there are no Jewish or Christian parties advocating use of texts like these to physically assault people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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