

Letter to the Editor

by David Yerushalmi

I just read the article “Using the Qur’an to Justify Terrorist Violence: Analysing Selective Application of the Qur’an in English-Language Militant Islamist Discourse,” by Donald Holbrook (http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com_rokzine&view=article&id=117&Itemid=54).

The article is based on a grievous misconception about how the Quran is applied to Islamic normative dictates and the translation of these dictates to praxis. The author appears to be guided by the principle that if he can show that Al -Qaeda and its offshoots don’t follow the Quranic verses of war literally, the counter-narrative propaganda effort can show these so-called jihadists to be “dishonest and hypocritical” - the author’s words - and discredit them among the population of potential recruits and of supporters.

The entire article is a self-selection of war-like verses quoted by al Qaeda types and an effort by the author to show how these quotes have been abused.

Unfortunately, the author appears to have no understanding of how a juridical religion like Islam (akin to Judaism) applies Scriptural text through the filter of theological jurisprudence to arrive at legal and normative mandates for behaviour. Thus, not once in the article does the author reference or even suggest the role of *usul al fiqh*—the accepted science of jurisprudence of *Sharia*. Specifically, he treats the verses of the Quran as if their meaning for praxis or normative instructions on how a Muslim engages the infidel is somehow self-evident. This is of course absurd. Scripture in and of itself is absolutely meaningless and can be interpreted in as many ways as there are followers who wish to self-interpret.

What matters in juridical religions like Judaism and Islam is not the apparent meaning of the verses (like: “an eye for an eye”), but the meaning as *required* by the law - in Judaism: *Halacha*; in Islam: *Sharia*. A specific example of the author’s wholesale failure to understand the distinction between dogma, Scriptural exegesis, and praxis in juridical religions is the typical retreat to “Old Testament” violence. He writes:

“Fragmented elements endorsing violence are not unique to the Qur’an of course. Sections of the Bible and the Old Testament in particular, for example, contain vivid descriptions of bloodshed celebrated for its divine purpose. For instance, the Old Testament displays scant tolerance for ‘idolaters’, e.g. in sections of Deuteronomy where believers are commanded to: ‘pull down their altars, break their sacred pillars, hack down their sacred poles and destroy their idols by fire’ (7:5-6). Similar

condemnation of idolatry in the Qur'an forms the foundation of one of the more popular verses used to justify violence: *At-Taubah* (9): 5 ('the verse of the sword', see below). Numerous other commands and accounts of the Old Testament similarly glorify and legitimise violence.[11] 'Islamic activism is not', as Quintan Wiktorowicz reminds us, '*sui generis*.'

Footnote 11 is a long list of Scriptural examples of the Old Testament's violent bent:

[11] The Book of Joshua, for instance, describes how, acting on the commands of Moses whose orders in turn were passed down from God, Joshua's conquest took prisoner the kings of the enemies and 'struck them down and put them to death' (20:18) since 'they should be annihilated without mercy and utterly destroyed, as the LORD had commanded Moses' (20:20). Consider also the ruthlessness of war as explained in God's laws delivered by Moses (in Deuteronomy), e.g.: When you advance on a city to attack it, make an offer of peace. If the city accepts the offer and opens its gates to you then all the people in it shall be put to forced labour and shall serve you. If it does not make peace with you but offers battle, you shall besiege it, and the LORD your God will deliver it into your hands. You shall put all its males to the sword, but you may take the women, the dependants, and the cattle for yourselves, and plunder everything else in the city' (20:10-14) and 'In the cities of these nations whose land the LORD your God is giving you as a patrimony, you shall not leave any creature alive' (20:20:16) (*The New English Bible: The Old Testament* Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press. 1970).

For better or for worse, no observant or "Orthodox" Jew who takes the Torah seriously would read the Book of Joshua as a normative mandate for conducting war. From the time of the *Mishna*, through the *Talmud*, and including the "*poskim* of the *achronim*" (the contemporary Jewish legal scholars), the Book of Joshua (as with all of the "Old Testament") has never been understood legally to be the manual on how to fight wars. While some of these Scriptural verses are cited by the legal scholars of old and new to arrive at a jurisprudentially sound *halachic* decision, the verses themselves are patently meaningless without the Talmudic jurisprudence as a filter.

This is just as true for the Quran and for the *Hadith* of the *Sunna*, which make up the foundational canon of *usul al-fiqh* - Sharia's own jurisprudence. To read the verses of the Quran and to argue that al Qaeda has misunderstood them is utterly irrelevant if not trite. The question is whether al Qaeda has interpreted those verses as a matter of law - Sharia - in accord or not with the *ijma* or consensus rulings of the leading ulema - whether of the *Salaf* type or one of the specific *maddhahib*.

This article demonstrates nothing more than a fundamental misunderstanding of the enemy threat doctrine.

David Yerushalmi

Washington, DC

Response to David Yerushalmi

by Donald Holbrook

The writer of this ‘Letter to the Editor’ misses the point of my article entirely. As was clearly stated, the article did not intend to dissect the Quran itself (or any other religious texts for that matter) nor did it intend to assess the merit of jurisprudential and related debates and their application to real life. The focus was on ideological use of the textual material to glorify violence and propaganda.

It is a fact that radical websites, publishing networks and related media are increasingly popular and growing in number. These channels – rather than scholarly jurisprudence - act as *filters*. Jihadist ideologues use Scriptural passages to design a package of argumentation, mixing grievances and isolated elements from religious debates to concoct a narrative designed to generate further support for militant Islamism. Many of the key propagandists and actors involved have no particular training in religious and jurisprudential argumentation traditions. The article I wrote focuses on *these mainly web-based filters* and the ideologues’ efforts to translate the militant narrative into English with particular attention to influence a potentially receptive audience in the UK. The fact that the Qur’an is quoted out of context in these texts is recognized, including in sources quoted in the article. However, David Yerushalmi, the writer of this ‘Letter to the Editor’ appears more concerned with de-linking and defusing possible parallels between Islamic texts and passages from the Old Testament than with the uses and abuses of Quranic verses by salafi jihadists and their ideological followers.

Donald Holbrook

St. Andrews