

On Islam and Jihad **Dr Farida Khanam**

A perusal of the Qur'an followed by a study of latter-day Muslim history will reveal a blatant contradiction between the two—that of principle and practice. Where recent developments in some Muslim countries bespeaks the culture of war, the Qur'an, on the contrary, is imbued with the spirit of tolerance. Its culture is not that of war, but of mercy.

At the very beginning of the Qur'an, the first invocation reads: *"In the name of God, the most Merciful, the most Beneficent"*. Throughout the Qur'an, God's name is thus invoked no less than 113 times. Moreover, Qur'an states that the prophets were sent to the world as a mercy to the people (21:107).

The word 'jihad' has nowhere been used in the Qur'an to mean war in the sense of launching an offensive. It is used rather to mean 'struggle'. The action most consistently called for in the Qur'an is the exercise of patience. Yet today, the 'Muslim Mujahideen' under unfavorable conditions have equated "God is Great" with "War is Great." For them, the greatest reward is to be able to wield a Kalashnikov rifle.

In the light of on-going conflict, we must ask why so great a contradiction has arisen between the principles of Islam and the practices of Muslims. At least one root cause may be traced to historical exigency.

Since time immemorial, military commanders have been accorded positions of great eminence in the annals of history. It is a universal phenomenon that the hero is idolized even in peace time and becomes a model for the people. It is this placing of heroism in the militaristic context which has been the greatest underlying factor in the undue stress laid on war in the latter phase of Islam's history. With the automatic accord in Muslim society of a place of honor and importance to the heroes of the battlefield, annalists' subsequent compilations of Islamic history have tended to read like an uninterrupted series of wars and conquests.

These early chronicles having set the example, subsequent writings on Islamic history followed the same pattern of emphasis on militarism. The Prophet's biographies were called 'maghazi', that is 'The Battles Fought by the Prophet,' yet the Prophet of Islam in fact did battle only three times in his entire life, and the period of his involvement in these battles did not total more than one and half days. He fought, let it be said, in self-defense, when hemmed in by aggressors, and he simply had no option. But historians—flying in the face of fact—have converted his whole life into one of confrontation and war.

We must keep it in mind that the Prophet Muhammad was born at a time when an atmosphere for militancy prevailed in the Arab Society. There being, in their view, no other path to justice. But the Prophet always opted for avoidance of conflict. For instance, in the campaign of Ahzab, the Prophet advised his Companions to dig a trench between them and the enemies, thus preventing a head-on clash.

Another well-known instance of the Prophet's dislike for hostilities is his cessation of the campaign of Hudaibiya with a treaty which made more concessions to the enemies than to his own people. In the case of the conquest of Mecca, he avoided a battle altogether by making a rapid entry into the city with ten thousand Muslims—a number large enough to awe his enemies into submission.

In this way, on all occasions, the Prophet endeavored to achieve his objectives by peaceful rather than by war-like means. It is, therefore, unconscionable that in later biographical writing, all the events of his life have been arranged under the heading of 'battles' (ghazawat). How he managed to avert the cataclysms of war has not been dealt with in any of the works which purportedly depict his life.

Ibn Khaldun, the celebrated 14th century historian, was the first to lay down definite rules for the study and writing of history and sociology. He followed the revolutionary course of attempting to present history as a chronicle of events centering on the common man rather than on kings, their generals and the battles they fought. But since war heroes were already entrenched as the idols of society, the caravan of writers and historians continued to follow the same well-worn path as had been trodden prior to Ibn Khaldun. When people have come to regard war heroes as the greatest of men, it is but natural that it is the events of the battlefield which will be given the greatest prominence in works of history. All other events will either be relegated to the background or omitted altogether.

In the later phase of Islam, there came into existence a powerful group of Sufis—many of them great men, who exerted their influence on a multitude of people, their goal being to put an end to this contradiction between the tenets of Islam and Muslim conduct: they at least wanted to strike a balance between the two. But the Sufis failed in this, the principal reason being that they expressed themselves in terms of dreams and the realization of inspiration. The militant interpretation of Islam, on the contrary, was ostensibly based on history and knowledge. Dreams and personal realizations could, therefore, never adequately counter what had come to be regarded as hard facts. Objective reasoning cannot be bested by subjective postulations, and so the Sufis failed to establish the equilibrium between precept and practice which they so ardently desired.

In the past when the sword was the only weapon of war, militancy did not lead to the mass-scale loss of life and property as modern warfare brings in its wake. In former times, fighting was confined to the battlefield; the only sufferers were those engaged in the battle. But today, the spear and sword have been replaced by megabombs and devastating long-range missiles, so that killing and destruction take place on a horrendous scale. It is the entire human settlement which has now become the global arena of war. Even the air we breathe and the water we drink are left polluted in war's aftermath.

Hence people in the West find Islam outdated and irrelevant precisely because of its militant interpretation. Demands for a reform in Islam are on the increase, as the 'old' version of Islam cannot apparently keep pace with the modern world. But, in reality, it is not reformation which is urgent, but revival. What is needed is to discard as superficial and erroneous the militant and political interpretation of Islam, and to adopt the original, 'old' version of Islam based on peace, mercy and the love of mankind.

The so-called Muslim Mujahideen have been exhorting their co-religionists to do battle all over the world. But the Qur'an says: '*...and God calls to the home of peace*' (10:25). It is up to right-thinking people everywhere to disregard the Mujahideen call, and to start seeing and accepting Islam as it is truly represented by the Qur'an.