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That there is no compulsion in Islam and that Islam is a religion of peace are common refrains among Muslim activists,[1] academics,[2] officials,[3] and journalists.[4] In an age of terrorism and violent jihad, nowhere, they argue, does the Qur'an allow Muslims to fight non-Muslims solely because they refuse to become Muslim.[5] Proponents of Islamic tolerance point to a number of Qur'anic verses which admonish violence and advocate peace, tolerance, and compromise.[6]

But not all verses in the Qur'an have the same weight in assessment. Unlike the Old or New Testaments, the Qur'an is not organized by chronology but rather by size of chapters.[7] Even within chapters, chronology can be confused. In sura (chapter) 2, for example, God revealed verses 193, 216, and 217 to Muhammad shortly after he arrived in Medina. God only revealed verses 190, 191, and 192 six years later.[8] This complicates interpretation, all the more when some verses appear to contradict.
Abrogation in the Qur'an

The Qur'an is unique among sacred scriptures in accepting a doctrine of abrogation in which later pronouncements of the Prophet declare null and void his earlier pronouncements.[9] Four verses in the Qur'an acknowledge or justify abrogation:

When we cancel a message, or throw it into oblivion, we replace it with one better or one similar. Do you not know that God has power over all things?[10]

When we replace a message with another, and God knows best what he reveals, they say: You have made it up. Yet, most of them do not know.[11]

God abrogates or confirms whatsoever he will, for he has with him the Book of the Books.[12]

If we pleased, we could take away what we have revealed to you. Then you will not find anyone to plead for it with us.[13]

Rather than explain away inconsistencies in passages regulating the Muslim community, many jurists acknowledge the differences but accept that latter verses trump earlier verses.[14] Most scholars divide the Qur'an into verses revealed by Muhammad in Mecca when his community of followers was weak and more inclined to compromise, and those revealed in Medina, where Muhammad's strength grew.

Classical scholars argued that anyone who studied the Qur'an without having mastered the doctrine of abrogation would be "deficient." [15] Those who do not accept abrogation fall outside the mainstream and, perhaps, even the religion itself. The Ahmadiyah sect, for example, today concentrated in Pakistan, consistently rejects abrogation because it undercuts the notion that the Qur'an is free from errors.[16] Many Muslims consider Ahmadis, who also see their founder as a prophet, to be apostates.

Because the Qur'an is not organized chronologically, there has been a whole subset of theological study to determine which verses abrogate and which are abrogated. Muslim scholars base their understanding of theology not only upon the Qur'an but also upon hadiths, accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's life. One hadith in particular addresses abrogation. It cites Abu al-A'la bin al-Shikhkhir, considered by theologians to be a reliable source of knowledge about the Prophet's life, as saying, that "the Messenger of God abrogated some of his commands by others, just as the Qur'an abrogates some part of it with the other." [17] Muhammad accepted that God would invalidate previous revelation, often making ordinances stricter.[18]

Abrogation occurs not only within the Qur'an, but also by the Qur'an toward earlier revelations, such as those passed on by Jesus or Moses. Sura 2:106 refers to commandments sent to prophets before Muhammad.[19] 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, commentator and translator of the Qur'an, interpreted the verse to mean that God's message is the same across time, but its form may differ according to the exigencies of time.[20] 'Abd al-Majid Daryabadi, a Pakistani Qur'an commentator, suggested, however, that the laws might differ across time but that there should be no shame in the same lawgiver replacing temporary laws with permanent ones.[21]

Also cause for discussion among scholars is the question of whether God withdrew revelations from the memory of Muhammad and his followers, causing such revelations to disappear like some of those mentioned in the Qur'an about which little is known today.[22]

This leads to the classical theological dispute about whether such interpretations dilute the idea that the Qur'an is eternal.[23] Those who discount or downplay abrogation interpret the verses revealed by Muhammad in Mecca to address spirituality and see those revealed later in Medina not as abrogation but rather expanding context to understand the whole.[24]

Abrogation in Classical Scholarship

Muslim scholars in the classical period agreed about the principle of abrogation in the Qur'an. In the eleventh century, Abu Muhammad 'Ali bin Ahmad bin Sa'id Ibn Hazim (d. 1064), an Andalusian theologian, philosopher, historian, and jurist, examined the Qur'an chapter by chapter to show which verses supplanted other verses.[25]

Classical scholars also examined the pattern in which Muhammad engaged in abrogation during revelation because Qur'anic laws were brief and insufficient for the needs of the huge Muslim community.[26] Muhammad changed his rules according to the circumstances. Within the hadith, there are a number of examples. Muhammad, for example, revealed verse 2:187 regulating sex during Ramadan after 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab questioned him.[27] Likewise, Muhammad abrogated another verse encouraging all believers to fight militarily for God (4:95) after he was challenged by a blind man who could not.[28]

Abu Ja‘far Muhammad bin Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), a Sunni famous as a historian, argued that “abrogation can only be done with regard to commands and prohibitions.”[29] Debate continued over the following centuries, however, giving rise to the science of Asbab an-Nuzul (The reasons of revelations). The father of the field, Abu al-Hassan Ali bin Ahmad al-Wahidi an-Naisaburi (d. 1075), argued that understanding the reasons for revelations was crucial to resolve apparent inconsistencies.[30] Context underpins the field. Some revelations were, for a time, forgotten,[31] altered,[32] or eliminated by Satan’s influence.[33] Scholars argue about whether God first revealed chapters 74 or 96.[34]

Abu al-Kasim Hibat-Allah bin Salama (d. 1019) argued that the starting point of any investigation of the Qur’an is the science of abrogating and abrogated verses.[35] He identified four categories of abrogation: 43 chapters unaffected by abrogation;[36] six chapters that augmented the concept of abrogation but were themselves not abrogated;[37] 40 chapters with abrogated wording but authority intact;[38] and 25 chapters with both their wording and authority abrogated.[39] (See Table 1: Abrogation in Practice, below)

Table 1: Abrogation in Practice

Verse Abrogating	Verse Abrogated	Issue
2:185	2:184	Fasting
2:234	2:240	Divorced women
2:285	2:284	Revelations
3:85-6; 9:73	2:62; 2:256; 5:69	Tolerance – Ahl al-Kitab
4:11-12	2:180; 2:240	Bequest-Inheritance
5:90	2:219; 4:43	Wine drinking
8:66	8:65	Fighting abilities
9:29	2:109; 60:8-9	People of the Book
9:36	2:217; 45:14	Prohibition of fighting
22:52	53:19-23	Satan and his daughters
24:2	4:15-7	Adultery and fornication
33:50	33:52	Muhammad’s wives
58:13	58:12	Money for conferring
64:16	3:102	Fear of God
73:20	73:2-3	Night prayer

Muhammad’s ability to add or delete verses according to questions or contemporary issues also demonstrates the flexibility of the Qur’an.[40] Classical theologians accepted that Medinan chapters supersede Meccan, not only for chronological reasons, but also because the Medinan verses represent Islam during a period of strength.

Still, there are internal debates about various manners of abrogation. Among Sunni theologians, there are disputes about whether sunna (the rules for life as shown by Muhammad, as opposed to the hadith which are prescripts traced to Muhammad through his conversations with other people) can abrogate the Qur’an. The Maliki and Hanafi schools suggest that the sunna and the Qur’an can abrogate each other while Shafi’i do not.[41] Ahmad bin Muhammad an-Nahhas, an Egyptian Shafi’i exegete, (d. circa 1515) catalogues the opinions:

- The Kufans agree that the Qur’an may abrogate both the Qur’an and the sunna;
- The Shafi’i say that the Qur’an can only abrogate other passages of the Qur’an but disagree that the sunna can abrogate the Qur’an;
- Others, according to Nahhas, argue that the sunna can abrogate both the Qur’an and the sunna;
- While still others say that the sunna abrogates the sunna but not the Qur’an;

And a last set prefer not to set such rules but rather judge on a case-by-case basis.[42]

The Egyptian theologian Abu al-Fadl ‘Abd ar-Rahman Jalal ad-Din as-Suyuti (d. 1505) related comments by Muhammad’s cousin Ibn ‘Abbas who explained, “Sometimes the revelation used to descend on the Prophet during the night, and then he forgot it during daytime. Thus God sent down this verse [2:106].” Suyuti continued to cite one verse whose end abrogated its beginning.[43] In another case, a hadith abrogates the Qur’an. While the Qur’an talks only about scourging and exiling the adulterer;[44] Muhammad stoned some adulterers to death, establishing it as the penalty.[45] Here, though, Suyuti focuses not only on the abrogation itself but also on determining the wisdom behind it.[46]

Contemporary theologians and populists have reopened the debate about the legitimacy of abrogation. Ali Dashti (1894-1982), a traditionally-trained Iranian scholar who served sporadically in parliament during the first half of the twentieth century, accepted the explanation that revelation of the Qur’an was linked to Muhammad’s need to answer queries and his need to respond to random incidents.[47] He also suggested that abrogation implied human rather than divine provenance for the Qur’an.

Ahmad von Denffer (1949-present), a convert to Islam who writes about religion, argues that understanding of abrogation is important to understand the correct application of God’s laws and is among the most important preconditions for interpretation of the Qur’an.[48]

Other Muslim commentators, however, are more dismissive about abrogation, citing verses—all Meccan—to argue that God’s laws are immutable.[49] Many contemporary Islamic propagandists fear how abrogated verses might affect proselytizing. On one Islamist Internet site, one participant sought to refute the abrogation principle by attacking “corrupted interpretation” of two verses (2:106 and 16:101).[50] Muhammad Asad (1900-92), born Leopold Weiss—who converted from Judaism to Islam, after which he worked with the Pakistani theologian Muhammad Iqbal and later became Pakistan’s ambassador to the United Nations—argued that classical theologians misinterpreted passages relating to abrogation and cited another verse (10:64) to reinforce the idea of immutability. “In short,” he argued, “the ‘doctrine of abrogation’ has no basis in historical fact, and must be rejected.”[51]

Abrogation and Jihad

How does the theological debate over abrogation impact contemporary policy formulation? While not all terrorism is rooted in Islam, the religion is an enabler for many. It is wrong to assume that more extreme interpretations of religion are illegitimate. Statements that there is no compulsion in religion and that jihad is primarily about internal struggle and not about holy war may receive applause in university lecture halls and diplomatic board rooms, but they misunderstand the importance of abrogation in Islamic theology. It is important to acknowledge that what university scholars believe, and what most Muslims—or more extreme Muslims—believe are two different things. For many Islamists and radical Muslims, abrogation is real and what the West calls terror is, indeed, just.

During the lifetime of Muhammad, the Islamic community passed through three stages. In the beginning from 610 until 622, God commanded restraint. As the Muslims relocated to Medina (623-26), God permitted Muslims only to fight in a defensive war. However, in the last six years of Muhammad’s life (626-32), God permitted Muslims to fight an aggressive war first against polytheists,[52] and later against monotheists like the Jews of Khaybar.[53] Once Muhammad was given permission to kill in the name of God, he instigated battle.

Chapter 9 of the Qur’an, in English called “Ultimatum,” is the most important concerning the issues of abrogation and jihad against unbelievers. It is the only chapter that does not begin “in the name of God, most benevolent, ever-merciful.”[54] Commentators agree that Muhammad received this revelation in

631, the year before his death, when he had returned to Mecca and was at his strongest.[55] Muhammad bin Ismail al-Bukhari (810-70), compiler of one of the most authoritative collections of the hadith, said that “Ultimatum” was the last chapter revealed to Muhammad[56] although others suggest it might have been penultimate. Regardless, coming at or near the very end of Muhammad’s life, “Ultimatum” trumps earlier revelations.

Because this chapter contains violent passages, it abrogates previous peaceful content. Muhsin Khan, the translator of Sahih al-Bukhari, says God revealed “Ultimatum” in order to discard restraint and to command Muslims to fight against all the pagans as well as against the People of the Book if they do not embrace Islam or until they pay religious taxes. So, at first aggressive fighting was forbidden; it later became permissible (2:190) and subsequently obligatory (9:5).[57] This “verse of the sword” abrogated, canceled, and replaced 124 verses that called for tolerance, compassion, and peace.[58]

Suyuti said that everything in the Qur’an about forgiveness and peace is abrogated by verse 9:5, which orders Muslims to fight the unbelievers and to establish God’s kingdom on earth.

Prior to receiving “Ultimatum,” Muhammad had reached agreements with various Arab tribes. But when God gave Muhammad a revelation (2:190-2), Muhammad felt justified in breaking his cease-fire. For Isma’il bin Kathir (1301-73), a student of Ibn Taymiyya and an influential Qur’an interpreter in his own right, it is clear: As jihad involves death and the killing of men, God draws attention to the fact that disbelief, polytheism, and avoidance of God’s path as shown by the Qur’an are worse than killing them.[59] This creates license for future generations of Muslims to kill non-Muslims solely on the basis of their refusal to accept Islam.

According to Ibn Kathir in his commentary on Chapter 9:5, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, the first caliph, used this and other verses to validate fighting anyone who either did not pay religious taxes to the Muslims or convert to Islam. Ibn ‘Umar Ibn al-Khattab, one of the hadith transmitters, quoted Muhammad as saying, “I have been commanded to fight the people until they testify that there is no deity worthy of worship except God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” He testified that Ad-Dahhak bin Muzahim, an authentic transmitter of hadiths, said that the verse of the sword “abrogated every agreement of peace between the Prophet and any idolater, every treaty, and every term.” ‘Awfi cited Ibn ‘Abbas, who argued that “Ultimatum” obviated earlier peace treaties.[60] The Shafi’i school took this as a justification for killing anyone who abandoned prayer and for fighting anyone who refused to pay increased religious minority taxes.[61]

Such interpretations resonate. Muhammad Sa’id Ramadan al-Buti, a contemporary Al-Azhar University scholar, wrote that “the verse (9:5) does not leave any room in the mind to conjecture about what is called defensive war. This verse asserts that holy war, which is demanded in Islamic law, is not a defensive war because it could legitimately be an offensive war. That is the apex and most honorable of all holy wars. Its goal is the exaltation of the word of God, the construction of Islamic society, and the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth regardless of the means. It is legal to carry on an offensive holy war.”[62]

Defensive warfare in Islam is nothing but a phase of the Islamic mission that the Prophet practiced. After that, it was followed by another phase, that is, calling all people to embrace Islam. Even for People of the Book, there can be no role except conversion to Islam or subjugation to Muslim rule. Hence, Muhammad’s statement, “They would not invade you, but you invade them.”[63]

Modern Revisionism of Jihad

David Powers, a well-known researcher of classical Islam, agreed that 9:5 abrogates no less than 124 verses that command or imply anything less than a total offensive against the non-believers. However, he says the verse is itself considered to be abrogated by the conditional clause with which it concludes: “But if they repent and perform the prayer and pay the alms, then let them go their way.”[64] But such a condition is not magnanimous: When infidels repent and perform the Muslim prayer and pay alms, it means they have become Muslims. Once they are Muslims, there is no need to slay them. The clause thus becomes more coercive than conditional. It suggests that a non-Muslim must convert to Islam or be slain.

Still, no verse is more frequently cited by contemporary Muslims preachers and analysts to depict Islam as peaceful and compassionate as 2:256, “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” For Sheikh Abdur Rahman, the chief justice of Pakistan, this verse is one of the most important, containing a charter of freedom of conscience unparalleled in the religious annals of mankind.[65]

Muhammad offered this verse in his first year of residence in Medina when he needed the Jews’ support. Nahhas, with the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas, said: “Scholars differed concerning 2:256. Some said it has been abrogated by 9:73 for the Prophet compelled the Arabs to embrace Islam and fight those that had no alternative but to surrender to Islam. Other scholars said that 2:256 had not been abrogated concerning the People of the Book. It is only the infidels who are compelled to embrace Islam.”[66] Suyuti does not see 2:256 abrogated by 9:73 but rather interprets 9:73 as a case of postponing the fight until Muslims become strong. He argues that when Muslims were weak, God commanded them to be patient.[67]

This is also the case of sura 9:29, which deals with Jews and Christians. Fighting them is mentioned after the clarification regarding fighting the idolaters (9:5). This verse (9:29) was revealed when Muhammad was commanded to fight the Byzantines and prepared the expedition to Tabuk. Ibn Kathir declared: The order is to fight the People of the Book until they pay the jizyah (protection tax) with willing submission and feel themselves subdued. Had they been true believers in their religions, that faith would have directed them to believe in Muhammad because all prophets commanded them to obey and follow him. Yet when he was sent, they disbelieved in him even though he is the “mightiest of all messengers because it suits their desires and lusts, and because they disbelieved in the master, the mightiest, the last and most perfect of all prophets.”

Ibn Kathir continues: “This honorable verse was revealed with the order to fight the People of the Book. After the pagans were defeated, the people entered God’s religion in large numbers, and the Arabian Peninsula was secured under the Muslims’ control.”[68]

Conclusions

The issue of abrogation in Islam is critical to understanding both jihad and da’wa, the propagation of Islam. Some Muslims may preach tolerance and argue that jihad refers only to an internal, peaceful struggle to better oneself. Western commentators can convince themselves that such teachings are correct. However, for learned Muslim scholars and populist leaders, such notions are or should be risible. They recognize that, in practice, there is compulsion in Islam. They take seriously the notion that the Qur’an teaches not just tolerance among religions, but tolerance among religions on the terms of Islam. To understand the challenge of the current Islamist revival, it is crucial for non-Muslims and moderate Muslims alike to recognize that interpretation of Islamic doctrine can have two faces, and that the Medinan face may very well continue to overshadow the Meccan face for a major portion, if not the majority, of contemporary Muslims.

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