

Review

# The Qur'an's Message on Spirituality and Martyrdom: A Literary and Rhetorical Analysis

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**Abstract:** Is the Qur'an a spiritual text that links human existence to divine benevolence? Or does the Qur'an advocate martyrdom and justify violence against non-believers? This debate acquired new urgency with the rise of terrorism perpetrated in the name of Islam in the later decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the Qur'an provides spiritual guidance to millions of Muslims around the world. On the other, Islamic terrorist organizations draw inspiration from the Qur'an. Some Western experts also cite Qur'anic passages as supporting violence and terrorism. This paper interprets the Qur'an in the tradition of Arab scholars of the early medieval period (eighth century CE) who began *al-balāgha*, a study of literary devices used in the rhetorical expression of the Qur'an. The paper analyzes how literary and rhetorical elements in the Qur'an have shaped its message on man's relationship with the divine, as well as two key theological concepts in Islam: requital and final judgment. The paper demonstrates how an appreciation of the Qur'an's literary and rhetorical elements is critical to understanding its spiritual message, as well as its stance on violence and martyrdom.

**Keywords:** Qur'an; jihad; literary analysis; rhetorical device; spirituality; violence; terrorism; metaphor; rhythm; oath; intertextuality

In recent years, numerous devastating terrorist acts have been perpetrated in the name of Islam, giving rise to the term Islamic terrorism (Bar 2004). Leaders of several terrorist organizations have cited passages from the Qur'an in order to frame their political and violent actions in a religious and ideological context (Holbrook 2010). Their claims have overshadowed the views of millions of moderate Muslims, who do not support the politicization of Islam or the use of the Qur'an to justify violence and martyrdom (Bar 2004). This dichotomy has sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and in the Muslim world. Is the Qur'an a spiritual text that links human existence to divine benevolence? Or does the Qur'an advocate martyrdom and justify violence against non-believers? Though several Muslim scholars and prominent Western leaders have reiterated time and again that Islam does not justify terrorism, leaders of Islamic terrorism and some Western analysts unequivocally state that the Qur'an supports violence and martyrdom (Bale 2013; Solomon and al-Maqdisi 2009, pp. 1–10). Today, the Qur'an has come to occupy a central role in the "clash of civilizations or a culture war" between the West and the Muslim world (Esposito 2015).

But long before Islamic terrorists and Western analysts interpreted the Qur'an, Arab scholars in the early medieval period (eighth century CE) embarked on *al-balāgha*, a study of the literary devices used in the rhetorical expression of the Qur'an (Nelson 1985, p. 7). *Balāgha* began as an offshoot of exegetical studies, mainly to prove the inimitability (*i'jāz*) or uniqueness of the Qur'an, but soon evolved into an intellectual and literary interpretation. In modern times, both Arab and Western scholars have recognized that Islamic terrorists and moderate Muslims frequently draw widely divergent and even antithetical interpretations from the Qur'an. This has led to a renewed interest in understanding the literary and rhetorical devices of the Qur'an and how they influence its message.

## 1. The Effects of History, Authorship and Literary Genre on the Qur'an's Message

The Qur'an developed during the late antiquity period (seventh to eighth century CE), when ancient Arabic poetry and its skilled oral recitation had reached great heights (Neuwirth 2014, p. xxi). According to scholars, the first words of the Qur'an, spoken by the angel Gabriel, "Read in the Name of your Lord" (Qur'an 96:1),<sup>1</sup> were revealed to Prophet Muhammad at age forty during a period of retreat and meditation in a cave outside Mecca in 610 CE (Abu-Hamdiyyah 2000, p. 45). The remainder of the Qur'an was revealed to him gradually over a period of twenty-three years, until shortly before his death at age sixty-three. Muhammad memorized the verses and repeated them to a pre-Islamic community of Arabs, polytheists, Jews, and Christians, who were already following monotheistic religions (Mattson 2013, p. 17). A community of believers formed, taking guidance from the message of the revelation and its deliverer, the Prophet. The Qur'an thus evolved as an oral tradition, in a milieu where two great traditions were represented: the local Arabic, represented by ancient Arabic poetry; and the Biblical, transmitted by Jews and Christians. Both have greatly influenced the style and content of the Qur'an.

Word of the revelation caused intense turmoil in a society that was stratified into rigid clans and ruled by powerful pagan families. Monotheism and the concept of a Day of Judgement ran contrary to existing polytheistic traditions. Furthermore, as Muhammad claimed that his followers were morally equal, slaves began converting in large numbers (Kadri 2012, p. 23). In the intense inter-tribal conflict that followed, the Prophet and his followers migrated to Medina (*hijra*), where he led a determined military campaign against his opponents and established the religion of Islam (Kadri 2012, p. 25). Suras (chapters) revealed after the migration to Mecca describe detailed rules for warfare and fighting, including treatment of prisoners and non-believers. Today, these verses, many altered to match political narrative, form the core of militant Islamic philosophy and rhetoric.

The Qur'an has been available in written form from soon after its revelation (Cook 2000, pp. 3–7). The reader's viewpoint regarding the Qur'an's authorship plays a critical role in interpreting its message. The self-referential Qur'an refers to its own authorship frequently calling itself the "word of God" (Qur'an 10:37–38, 11:13, 52:33–34). Muhammad is simply a messenger (*rasūl*), whose duty is to communicate the divine message to the community. To a reader approaching the Qur'an as a text of divine origin, its verses convey a powerful message: the supremacy of God, a statement of His will, and the recompense awaiting those who submit to it and those who reject it.

The literary genre of the Qur'an is hard to define but is critical to its message. Though rich in rhythm and rhyme, the Qur'an explicitly states that it is not a poem. The following line appears in the thirty-sixth sura, *Ya Sin*: "We (God) have not taught the Prophet poetry, nor could he ever have been a poet (Qur'an 36:69)." This defense of the Qur'an from being labeled a poem likely has a historical basis. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in an era when Arab poets used praise-poems to boast and exaggerate claims (Abdel Haleem 2016, pp. 232–38). Following the Prophet's claim that the Qur'an was a revelation from God, many non-believing Meccans are said to have dismissed the Qur'an as poetry. The twenty-sixth and thirty-sixth suras, *Al-Shu'ara'* and *Ya Sin*, emphasize the divine source of the Qur'an and prohibit it from being called poetry created by man.

Some scholars have described the genre of the Qur'an as "a sort of drama enacted between the Prophet and his audience" (Nelson 1985, pp. 1–15; Neuwirth 2014, p. xi). In contrast to narrative prose, a drama involves multiple and changing voices that allow the reader to focus on the lyricism and poetry of each recited verse rather than on the reconstruction of a chronology of individual, seemingly disconnected, utterances. The Qur'an uses an unusual literary style—swift changes in dramatic scene—narrated by an unusual narrator, God, to powerful effect. This dramatic effect is further enhanced through the use of literary devices that range from deeply spiritual lyrics to scenes in which God, in the first or third person, narrates the story using declarative and figurative language.

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an verses are listed in the format Chapter: verse.

The effectiveness of the Qur'an's dramatic style in conveying its message is seen in the story of Adam. Adam's creation is described by God using theatrical abstract terms, "When I have shaped him and breathed My Spirit into him . . ." (Qur'an 38:72) Physical details such as the day of the creation, rib, and serpent could potentially diminish God's grand style and are not mentioned. The dramatic effect of each scene is further enhanced by dialogue. In the second chapter, the angels are questioning God as to why He wanted to create man. In this scene, rife with drama and suspense, the angels ask God, "How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?" God replies, "I know things you do not." (Qur'an 2:30) This verse not only conveys God's divine power but also His partiality for man. Later God shows His honor for man by ordering the angels and Iblis (Satan) to bow down before Adam (Qur'an 7:12). The angels comply but Iblis refuses, telling God, "I am better than him: You created me from fire and him from clay." (Qur'an 7:13) God's anger at being disobeyed is unmistakable and fearsome: "Get down from here! There is no place for your arrogance. Get out! You are contemptible!" (Qur'an 7:14) God is again angry when Adam and Eve have sinned and He banishes them from the Garden, but here His anger is tempered with sorrow and a promise to forgive those who accept His guidance (Qur'an 2:38–9).

The Qur'an's divine origin establishes its authority in the spiritual life of Muslims. Its dramatic elements reinforce its central message of divine benevolence to man, a quality that inspires deep reverence and intense spirituality in millions of moderate Muslims around the world. In mainstream Islam, God is an authoritarian figure that demands obedience from followers, but He is also intensely compassionate and merciful—so much so that compassion (*al-Rahmān*) and mercy (*al-Rahīm*) are the first of God's many names. Islamic terrorist groups, however, have exploited the deep reverence that devout Muslims have for divine authority to propagate a revivalist message that advances their political goals (Al-Zawahiri 2008; Azzam 2002; Haykel 2009; Wood 2015). These groups advocate a puritanical doctrine in which Muslims should bring back the "authentic" and "pure" Islam of earlier pious generations (*al-Salaf al-sālih*) under a Caliphate where "God's sovereignty is supreme and absolute" (Maher 2016, p. 7). By claiming that the modern nation-state with secular legislation usurps God's sovereignty and is a heterodox affront to Islam, these Islamic fundamentalist organizations have effectively framed their regressive and violent political doctrine in a divine context.

## 2. Rhyme, Rhythm, and the Divine—Human Relationship

Having understood the basic framework of the Qur'an—its historical origin, authorship, and genre—one can now proceed with analyzing how specific literary and rhetorical elements shape its message.

Rhyme, simple and multisyllabic, as well as end rhyme and internal rhyme, permeates the Qur'an (Stewart 2000, p. 31). Rhythm and rhyme can only be appreciated in the original Arabic as they are lost in translation. The structure of the Arabic language is conducive to rhyme, both simple and multisyllabic, in that all morphemes fit into one of a number of syllabic patterns (Hoffman 2007, p. 13). These syllables mark such aspects of meaning as passive voice, plurality, gender, case, intent or desire, and reciprocity (Nelson 1985, p. 7). Thus, rhyme, rhythm, and syntax interact to not only add aesthetic expression to the recitation, but also emphasize the meaning of the verses (Serrano 2016, p. 3). The two most well-known verses in the Qur'an, the *al-Fātiha* and *Āyat-al-Kursī*, highlight this relationship between rhyme, rhythm, and prayer.

*Al-Fātiha*, the opening sura of the Qur'an, establishes the connection between the human and the divine. Compact yet lyrical, this sura of only seven verses (a line or a statement in the Qur'an is called a verse in Arabic) captures the essence of the Qur'an, both through meaning and rhyme. The first four verses of the *Al-Fātiha* with transliteration<sup>2</sup> and translation by Abdel Haleem (2016), are reproduced below:

<sup>2</sup> [http://transliteration.org/quran/WebSite\\_CD/MixDictionary/Fram2E.htm](http://transliteration.org/quran/WebSite_CD/MixDictionary/Fram2E.htm); downloaded 5 August 2017.

1. *Bismi Allāhi Ar-Rahmāni Ar-Rahimi*
2. *Al-Ĥamdu Lillāhi Rabii Al-‘Ālamīna*
3. *Ar-Rahmāni Ar-Rahimi*
4. *Māliki Yawmi Ad-Dīni*
5. *Īyāka Na‘budu Wa’Īyāka Nasta‘īnu*
6. *Ahdinā Aṣ-Ṣirāṭa Al-Mustaqīma*
7. *Sirāṭa Al-Ladhīna ‘An ‘amta ‘Alayhim Ghayri Al-Maghḍūbi ‘Alayhim Wa Lā Ad-Ḍāllīna* (Qur’an 1:1–7)

1. In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy!
2. Praise belongs to God, Lord of all worlds.
3. the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,
4. Master of the Day of Judgement
5. It is You we worship; it is You we ask for help.
6. Guide us to the straight path.
7. the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.

Structurally, each line of the *al-Fātiha* ends in the sound “in”, a rhyming pattern that lends itself naturally to melodic chanting. Assonance of the vowel sound /i/ in the end words of each line, *Rahimi*, *Nasta‘īnu*, and *Mustaqīma*, not only establishes a rhyming pattern but also underscores the meaning of these words (mercy, judgment, help, path, and astray, respectively). Similarly, alliteration in two names of God, *Rahmāni* and *Rahimi*, derived from the Arabic root *r-h-m*, meaning “mercy”, provides rhythm and also emphasizes God’s compassionate qualities. Thus, the *Fātiha* is a hymn that evolves in subsequent verses into a prayer. Spiritually, the *Fātiha* has been the focal point of Islamic devotion from the time of the revelation. The rhythmic pattern of its seven verses emphasizes the fundamental theme of the Qur’an: the relationship of the human worshipper with the “one and only God” (*tawhīd*).

The Qur’an also uses other sophisticated rhyme schemes, such as chiasmic rhyme, to enhance its spiritual effect. Chiasmus, involving repetition of a group of verse elements in reverse order, such as the rhyme scheme ABBA, was a cornerstone of Semitic literature and Biblical texts in particular (Sells 1996). An example in the Bible includes, “But many that are first/Shall be last,/ And many that are last/Shall be first” (Matthew 19:30, New Revised Standard Version). The *Āyat-al-Kursī* (Throne Verse) from the second sura (*Al-Baqara*) has become famous for its unique symmetrical structure that can be appreciated in the original Arabic (Qur’an 2:255). In this verse, the reciter imagines walking through the sura, and on reaching the center, finds that the words in front are a perfect reflection of the words behind. This is represented in the fifth verse, “He knows what is before them and what is behind them”. This central verse is flanked symmetrically outwards. For example, the third verse “all that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him” corresponds to the seventh verse “His throne extends over the heavens and the earth”. Thus, the structure of the sura is critical to delivering its meaning: God’s supremacy over human existence.

Ultimately, both *al-Fatihā* and *Āyat-al-Kursī*, through their rhetorical structure and literary elements, define man’s relationship to God as that of surrender to His will—a key concept from which Islam, translated as “surrender” from Arabic, gets its name. For moderate Muslims, this surrender is spiritual and the recitation of the Qur’anic verses evokes “humility and awe” (Pickthall 1999, p. vii). Islamic terrorist organizations, on the other hand, are principally concerned with the realization of God’s unity, *tawhīd*, and maintenance of doctrinal purity by return to an earlier era when the “pure” form of Islam was practiced (Al-Zawahiri 2006). By attempting to emulate the practices of an earlier “golden” era, these organizations are seeking to convince Muslims who feel disenfranchised that return to an older idealized version of Islam will help them reclaim their Islamic identity, as well as bring back historic Arab power and prosperity (Maher 2016, p. 7).

### 3. Iltifāt: A Rhetorical Device That Emphasizes Divine Authority

Because rhyme lends itself naturally to chanting and repetition, the Qur'an frequently uses a unique rhetorical device known as *iltifāt* to retain the attention of the listener during the recitation of long passages. Iltifāt is described by Arab scholars as a sudden grammatical shift to create a desired effect—for example, change between first, second, and third persons, or change in number from singular to plural (Iqbal 2013, p. 44). Examples of iltifāt abound in the Qur'an: "It is *He* who sends the winds as heralds of good news before His Mercy. *We* send down pure water from the sky, so that *We* can revive a dead land with it, and *We* give it as a drink to many animals and people *We* have created" (Qur'an 25:48–49). In this passage, the pronoun for God suddenly shifts from the singular "He" in the third person to the divine plural "We" in the first person. This sudden and dramatic shift from not-God to God talking—God being the central figure—emphasizes God's will by drawing attention to His message.

To a reader unfamiliar with Arab linguistics, iltifāt may appear to be grammatically incorrect. Balāgha scholars, however, have described iltifāt as "remarkable things and exquisite subtleties in the Glorious Qur'an" (Abdel Haleem 2011, p. 187). Iltifāt is not exclusive to the Qur'an. Also called *shaja'at al-'arabiyya* (the daring of the Arab language), iltifāt is used in Arab literature to "retain freshness and variety for the listener" and "to keep his mind from boredom and frustration" (Abdel Haleem 1992). In the Qur'an, iltifāt has been used to describe God's authority, either through benevolence ("To anyone who does these things, seeking to please *God*, *We* shall give a rich reward", Qur'an 4:114) or punishment ("But their *Lord* inspired the messengers: *We* shall destroy the evildoers, and leave you to dwell in the land after them", Qur'an 14:13). This abrupt change from God being referred to in the third person to God speaking in the first person expresses His power and majesty. In the first verse (4:114), the shift to first person emphasizes God's generosity to those who do good deeds, thus highlighting qualities of God that are important in establishing a spiritual connection with mankind. In the second verse, God's authority is meant to inspire fear among "evildoers" and benevolence to those who do "good deeds" (14:13). In the Qur'an, God's benevolence is directed to believers of the Revelation, while "evildoers" are those who have expelled the Prophet from his homeland. Islamic terrorists ignore God's benevolence and use verse 14:13 to characterize non-believers as "evildoers" (Rane 2009, p. 192).

The power of divine authority expressed through iltifāt is also seen in two well-known verses that describe the doctrine of *qisās*, or retaliation in kind: "In the Torah, *We* prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound as legal retribution. Those who do not judge according to what *God* has revealed are doing grave wrong" (Qur'an 5:45–46). In the first verse, (5:45), God uses the first person to command Muslims to accept a teaching from the Torah. In the second verse (5:45), God shifts to the third person to reiterate to followers that they must obey the doctrine. Through centuries, these verses, codified into Islamic penal code, have expressed God's will against individuals accused of grave crimes such murder, manslaughter, or physical mutilation. However, the verses also express God's benevolence through the creation of a framework for victims (or their families) to seek retributive justice (Hascall 2011). According to Islamic law, *qisās* can only be carried out against the specific individual guilty of having inflicted to original harm, and not against their families, spouse, or children (Maher 2016, p. 50). Islamic terrorist organizations, however, claim that logical inferences can be drawn from scriptural rulings and hold every citizen of an enemy state liable for the actions of their governments (bin Laden 2002). By deliberately misinterpreting the divine authority expressed in iltifāt, Islamic terrorist groups have not only obscured the Qur'an's message on jurisprudence and benevolence, but also used it to legitimize violence and mass killings.

### 4. Oaths: A Literary Device That Emphasizes Resurrection and Judgment

The Qur'an frequently uses a literary device that is somewhat unusual by modern standards: oaths. During pre-Islamic times, oaths were applied to gigantic objects that brought immense benefit to mankind, for example, the sun, the moon, and the earth (Alqurneh et al. 2014). In the Qur'an, an



oath is a solemn pronouncement evoking God to bear witness to the truth of a statement. God's oaths in the Qur'an emphasize two fundamental concepts that signify His power over human existence: resurrection and judgment. These concepts were new to pre-Islamic Arabs, who refused to believe that humans could be resurrected after death. In the seventy-fifth sura titled *Al-Qiyama* (The Resurrection), God, trying to convince disbelievers, declares: "I swear by the Day of Resurrection and by the self-reproaching soul! Does man think We shall not put his bones back together? In fact, We can reshape his very fingertips." (Qur'an 75:1–4) This short verse is remarkable for the tension created by the two oaths. The first oath, in which God swears by the Day of Resurrection, is striking and immediately draws the attention of the listener; at the same time, it provides evidence for a new idea (resurrection) in need of corroboration. The second oath on the "self-reproaching" soul expresses incredulity at disbelievers, while foreshadowing eschatological retribution to those unwilling to surrender to His power.

In sharp contrast to eschatological oaths, God uses metaphorical oaths to affirm His relationship with followers. The ninety-third sura, *al-Duhā*, is addressed to the Prophet during a period when he has not received a revelation for some time, and is afraid that God has abandoned him: "By the morning brightness/By the night when it is still/Thy Lord hath not taken leave of thee, nor despised thee" (Qur'an 93:1–3). The oaths in this verse have specific contextual meaning. "Morning brightness" refers to the time of the early morning when prayers of thanksgiving are traditionally performed; "night" is a reminiscence of a preceding nightly vigil. The verse consoles the Prophet, and by extension all believers, that God had not forsaken them. The contrasting pair of day and night provides a structural matrix for the ensuing verse: as the light of day follows night, so too will peace follow distress (Neuwirth 2014, p. 122).

Some suras have become famous for "clusters" of metaphorical oaths that vividly describe events drawn from Arab life, while also dramatically conveying the Qur'an's message. Sura, *al-Ādiyāt*, the short hundredth sura of only eleven verses, has become legendary for the complex sophistication of the imagery of a group of Bedouin attackers taking the enemy by surprise to conceptualize an eschatological catastrophe.

*By the charging steeds that pant  
and strike sparks with their hooves,  
who make dawn raids,  
raising a cloud of dust,  
and plunging into the midst of the enemy,  
man is ungrateful to his Lord  
and He is witness to this  
he is truly excessive in his love of wealth.  
Does he not know that when the contents of graves are thrown out,  
when the secrets of hearts are uncovered, on that Day,  
their Lord will be fully aware of them all?*

(Qur'an 100:1–11)

In this sura, social context, vivid imagery, metaphors, and a cluster of oaths paint a tableau of charging horses whose riders are carrying out a raid to metaphorically represent the yet-to-be-experienced incidents leading up to the Day of Judgment. The first few verses depict horses in continuous and rapid motion that plunge into the camp of the enemy. The echo of this swift running is seen in the next few verses, which depict "human psychical movements" of greed and ingratitude (Neuwirth 2014, p. 105). The plunge of the charging horses into the enemy's camp is a metaphor for the threat of urgency of the Day of Judgment, when "secrets of the heart" will be uncovered.

To devout Muslims, the Qur'anic oath is God emphasizing the importance or truthfulness of a concept (Alqurneh et al. 2014). The emotional content and upheaval portrayed in these oaths inspire humility for God's power and majesty in moderate followers of Islam. Islamic terrorist groups, however, exploit the vivid imagery of these passages to glorify violence and martyrdom (Azzam 2003, pp. 42–48). These groups have especially used such verses to inspire European and American recruits, most of who are religious novices and lack the religious literacy to interpret the Qur'an's spirituality (Esposito 2015). Many of these new recruits feel alienated and marginalized in their own societies and are seeking a more meaningful and exciting life. Militant groups entice them through a literal and superficial interpretation of Quran'ic verses by portraying the life of a fighter, away from family in primitive conditions, as adventurous, and death through martyrdom as an opportunity to attain glory.

## 5. Metaphors: Spirituality versus Material Rewards

The Qur'an is rich in both metaphors that are deeply spiritual and those that symbolize material rewards. Spiritual metaphors emphasize the oneness of man and God, laying forth a concept of communion with God. These metaphors describe God and the human soul in intensely spiritual terms such as, "He is the First and the Last; the Outer and the Inner; He has knowledge of all things" (Qur'an 57:3). In this verse, God is described as the "first" and the "last" being, and represents both the "outer" world and "inner" intellect that allow Him to have absolute knowledge. The human soul is described as "whispering" secrets to God, for example, "We created man—We know what his soul whispers . . ." (Qur'an 50:16), thus establishing a deeply intimate relationship between God and humans.

Metaphors that apply to death are particularly spiritual. The time of death is metaphorically represented by night and death itself is described as "taking up of the soul": "It is He who calls your souls back by night—when death comes to one of you, those sent by Us take his soul—they are not remiss" (Qur'an 6:60–61). These metaphors serve to not only establish the eternal nature of the human soul but also ascertain its close connection with the divine. This theme is represented in the seventeenth sura titled *Al-Isra* (The Night Journey): "Glory to the One who took His servant on a night journey from the sacred place of prayer to the furthest place of prayer upon which We have sent down Our blessing, that We might show him some of Our signs" (Qur'an 17:1). Though scholars differ as to whether *Mi'raj* (Muhammad's ascent to heaven) and *isra* (Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem) occurred on the same night, verse 17: 1 metaphorically represents the Prophet's death as a mystical journey that evokes "subtle allusions to aspiration, visions of the divine, and the gaze of the contemplator" (Sells 1996, p. 47; Abdel Haleem 2016, p. 175).

In sharp contrast to spiritual metaphors are vivid sensory metaphors, many of which are drawn from the desert landscape and represent material rewards. Paradise, called *jannā*, means "garden" and is "graced with flowing streams" (Qur'an 5:119). Paradise is the abode of the righteous in the hereafter and is abundant with material rewards such as flowing water, food, luxurious couches, and virgin maidens. The garden admits those who "do good works" in this life (Qur'an 22:14), thus making paradise a metaphor for rewards that will come about in the phase of judgment. The concept of paradise reflects the fundamental significance of the final judgment and requital in Islamic theology. People make choices about their actions, however they do not receive full requital for their actions in this world (Qur'an 35:45). Full recompense occurs only after death, on the Day of Judgment, with those doing "good deeds" admitted to receive "full and lasting rewards" in paradise (Abdel Haleem 2011, p. 96).

While al-balāgha scholars and mainstream Muslims interpret such metaphors as affirming life, Islamic terrorists have exploited their symbolism to advance their violent political goals. For example, Qur'an 9:111 states "God has purchased the persons and possessions of the believers in return for the Garden—they fight in God's way: they kill and are killed—this is a true promise given by Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an." This verse, which celebrates the heroism of fighters who are killed in battle defending their faith, has been used by radical preachers to sanction suicide bombings (Feiz 2011). Radical Islamist preachers have achieved this by deliberately misconstruing the meaning

of two metaphors in verse 9:111. First, the garden metaphor has been interpreted to mean that death is an exalted state, since it allows entry into paradise. Second, “fight in God’s way” is used to glorify suicide attacks. Several verses in the Qur’an specifically forbid suicide and declare it a sin (Qur’an 4:29, 2:195, 6:151, 17:33). Leaders of Islamic terrorist organizations have circumvented this prohibition by declaring that “it is permissible for the weak to use their bodies as weapons against the strong” (Kadri 2012, p. 168). Such deliberate misinterpretation of metaphors has tainted the relationship of the Qur’an with its most vulnerable followers: disenfranchised youth seeking redress for real or perceived injustices.

## 6. Context, Intertextuality, War, and Peace

Intertextuality and context are two literary devices that are particularly important for interpreting the meaning of texts that have evolved from an oral tradition and in which verses or chapters do not appear in chronological order (Bauman 2008). Long recognizing the potential for misinterpreting the Qur’an, al-balāgha scholars have for centuries emphasized that context (*maqām*) and intertextuality (*al-Qur’an yufassir ba’dhuhu ba’da*) are critical for elucidating the meaning of verses (Abdel Haleem 2011, p. 161). These scholars stress that the meaning of a passage in the Qur’an depends not only on the actual words, but also on its context—that is, position of the verse within the sura, including what precedes it and what follows it, to whom it is addressed, and how. Intertextuality refers to internal relationships within the Qur’an, where some parts of the Qur’an explain the meaning of other parts. By ignoring the context or selectively applying intertextuality to passages, militant and peaceful followers of Islam frequently draw widely divergent and even antithetical interpretations from the same phrases and verses, especially those pertaining to war and tolerance.

The word *jihad* appears several times in the Qur’an and in the Western world it has come to symbolize a divine call to Muslims to wage war against unbelievers. However, *jihad* does not mean “holy war”. In Arabic, the word *jihad* means “effort, or struggle on behalf of God or Islam” (Kabbani and Muhammad 2006; Streusand 1997). Similarly, *mujahid* (plural *mujahidin*) means “one who is engaged in *jihad*” or “those who are defending themselves or the oppressed” and not “holy warrior” (Kabbani and Muhammad 2006; Streusand 1997). In the Qur’an, the word *jihad* usually appears in the expression *al-jihād fi sabil Allah* meaning “striving in the way of God” (Morgan 2010, p. 87). According to the Qur’an, *jihad* should be used only for defending religious freedom (i.e., the right to pray to God, Qur’an 22:39–41), self-defense (e.g., “Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you”, Qur’an 2:190), and to protect those who are oppressed, such as men, women and children “who cry for help” (Qur’an 4:75). Thus, according to al-balāgha scholars, *jihad* is God’s command to his followers to protect the weak and the oppressed.

By ignoring context and intertextuality, Islamic terrorists and some Western observers have drawn an interpretation from passages pertaining to *jihad* that is completely antithetical to that of al-balāgha scholars. A verse that is frequently interpreted as advocating violence begins with the words “kill them wherever you encounter them” (Qur’an 2:191). This verse, and the verses before and after it, abound in “affective” phrases—in other words, phrases that command, urge, or restrain the reader or listener (Abdel Haleem 2011, p. 212). Since affective verses are interactive and directly involve the reader or listener, they are open to interpretation. A prominent guiding figure and inspiration of a contemporary terrorist organization has interpreted these verses to mean that the Qur’an justifies the killing of non-Muslims (Azzam 2002). The phrase, however, should be interpreted in the full context of the verse where it appears: Muslims trying to reach the Sacred Mosque at Mecca to perform the pilgrimage.

*They ask you [Prophet] about crescent moons. Say, “They show the times appointed for people, and for the pilgrimage.” Goodness does not consist of entering houses by the back [door]; the truly good person is the one who is mindful of God. So enter your houses by their [main] doors and be mindful of God so that you may prosper.*

(Qur’an 2:189)



*Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits.*

(Qur'an 2:190)

*Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing.*

(Qur'an 2:191)

*Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there.*

(Qur'an 2:192)

The context of pilgrimage in the verse is obvious from the mention of "Sacred Mosque", "crescent moons", and the custom of some Arabs on returning from the pilgrimage to enter their houses by the back door, considering this to be an act of piety. To al-balāgha scholars and majority of moderate Muslims, the context of the passage implies that killing is justified only in a very limited situation: in self-defense against those who prevent Muslims from reaching the sacred Mosque ("fight those who fight you"). Linguistic elements such as restraining language ("do not overstep the limits") and repetition ("God does not love those who overstep the limits") place additional restraints on fighters, such as prohibiting the killing of innocent civilians (18:74). In response to charges that this verse justifies the killing of non-Muslims, scholars of al-balāgha warn both Islamic terrorists and opponents of Islam against decontextualisation, quoting phrases in isolation that lead to misinterpretation of the Qur'an's message (Abdel Haleem 2011, p. 65). Islamic terrorist organizations, well-aware of limitations imposed by the Qur'an on the killing of ordinary citizens, have published lengthy documents that justify the legality of their actions by claiming that their citizen victims were neither innocent nor civilians (Al-Qaeda 2004).

Another verse that is frequently misinterpreted is *Al-Tauba* 9:5, the infamous "sword verse". The verse has acquired this name even though the word "sword" does not appear in the Qur'an. Islamic terrorists have quoted this verse in isolation, declaring that it is a call to kill "idolaters" (bin Laden 1998). Additionally, they have broadened the intended meaning of "idolaters" from the original translation to include Christians and Jews who, according to them, have deviated from the true meaning of their scriptures (Holbrook 2010). This interpretation is antithetic to the meaning derived by al-balāgha scholars, who read the verse in the context of where it appears in the sura.

*As for those idolaters who have honored the treaty you [believers] made with them and who have not supported anyone against you: fulfill your agreement with them to the end of their term. God loves those who are mindful of Him.*

(Qur'an 9:4)

*When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you find the idolaters, kill them, seize them, besiege them, ambush them. But if they repent, maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful.*

(Qur'an 9:5)

*If any one of the idolaters should seek your protection [Prophet], grant it to him so that he may hear the word of God, then take him to a place safe for him, for they are people who do not know.*

(Qur'an 9:6)

The context of the verse 9:5 indicates that the Qur'an permits war only in very limited circumstances (i.e., when idolaters violate their peace treaty). Faithfulness to a treaty was a serious obligation in ancient Arabic life and is repeatedly emphasized in the Qur'an such as "You who believe, fulfill your obligations" (Qur'an 5:1) and "do not break oaths after you have sworn them" (Qur'an

16:91). When 9:5 is interpreted in the light of these verses, the Qur'an's justification for war is not only limited, but is immediately followed by a call to protect non-believers in the subsequent verse (9:6).

Islamic terrorists also use isolated quotes from the Qur'an to justify their intolerance of other faiths. For example, leaders of a prominent terrorist organization have used Qur'an 16:25 and 22:39 to recommend that Muslims should invite non-believers to Islam and use force if the invitation is refused (Azzam 2002). However, the Qur'an clearly states that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256). The Qur'an even actively promotes tolerance for other faiths by referring to Christians using the honorific term "people of the book" (Qur'an 3:113), and by promising to protect "monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked" (Qur'an 22:39). Ultimately, a literary and intellectual interpretation of the Qur'an allows a divine message of tolerance to supplant the belligerent rendering of its more radical followers.

## 7. Conclusions

The Qur'an, in the Arabic original, is to all Muslims the sacred speech of God, a "sublime scripture" (Qur'an 41:41). Drawing on the richly textured vocabulary and rhetoric of the Arabic language and Biblical traditions, the Qur'anic revelation forms the basis for a composition that is an extraordinary synthesis of spirituality and scriptural authority. The richness and the eloquence of the Qur'anic language enhance its divine message to humans. The meaning of the Qur'an can be understood only by the reader who appreciates its rhetorical structure and respects the context of its verses. Islamic terrorists have exploited the Qur'an's rhetorical elements to match their political narrative and to inspire their followers into committing acts of violence. However, an intellectual and literary interpretation shows that the Qur'an is a scripture that represents God's power and majesty, His benevolence to man, and a path to spiritual communion. When read in the tradition of al-balāgha scholars, the Qur'an advocates tolerance for other faiths and proscribes violence except when defending religious freedom, self-defense, and protecting the oppressed.

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