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# ISLAM, THE SWORD OR THE TAX

By Paul Stenhouse, MSC

*This is the third of a series of seven articles*

**I**N FEBRUARY this year the world's media seemed to revel in the glut of mind-numbing images coming out of Libya as ISIS – their current celebrity – satisfied its hunger for blood-letting and cruelty by hacking to death and beheading 21 Coptic Christian workers.

These innocents, in the wrong place at the wrong time, were reportedly offered their lives in return for embracing Sunni Islam. They refused and were killed. All on camera.

Pope Francis declared the 21 hostages so brutally beheaded for their faith, to be 'martyrs'.<sup>1</sup> As did Coptic Pope Tawadros II.

Christians are declared to be 'martyrs' when they are put to death because of their Faith. They are not declared to be 'martyrs' if they die as suicide bombers or as mercenaries in the act of killing others.

In April this year a video was released showing at least 16 Ethiopian Christians being shot and another 12 being beheaded by ISIS, again in Libya. And now, as we go to press, we learn that ISIS has kidnapped at least 88 Eritrean Christians trying to flee Libya by boat to Europe. Fears are held for their lives.

Too often one searches in vain in official statements from Muftis or Councils of Imams who make much of denouncing ISIS for acting in this

Qur'an, the hadith and much of Sunni understanding of Islamic history and tradition can be appealed to by ISIS and their supporters in defence of their actions in the name of Islam. Even when statements which attempt to strike such a balance are issued, they are sometimes poorly translated from Arabic, or poorly expressed in the vernacular of the country from which they originate, and are rarely publicised in the media.<sup>2</sup>

### Open Letter to ISIS

Last year the situation changed somewhat for the better. More than 120 Muslims in positions of authority from around the world – all Sunni – signed an Open Letter to the followers of ISIS. The letter drew extensively from the Qur'an, from selected passages of the Hadith and from classic Islamic texts, to rebut the ideology of ISIS.

Care was taken with the translations. Some attempt was made to support the claim that ISIS was acting in an 'un-Islamic' way.



Egyptian Coptic Christians gathered in a Church to honour their fellow Christians beheaded cruelly by ISIS in Libya. The Arabic text on the banner reads: 'Poor people trying to earn a living .... [they became] victims of political and religious conflicts. We did not hear or see any action by the Arab League to save the Christians from the clutches of extremist organisations.'

allegedly un-Islamic way, for any sign of grief or of regret at the barbarism committed in the name of Islam. Or for any acknowledgement that the

## Abolishing Governments

**S**UPPORT FOR God's party was the true measure of a Muslim's faith. Obeying laws inimical to Islam, even if they have been made by a Muslim government, was evidence of lack of faith and made one complicitous in "upholding ... un-Islamic doctrines." With this scarcely veiled threat against Muslims disagreeing with his Islamic ideology, Mawdudi asserted that jihad has both offensive and defensive dimensions. It can be seen as offensive in that 'the Muslim Party assaults the rule of an opposing ideology,' and defensive in that it is 'constrained to capture State power' to establish the principles of Islam. Instead of coercing people to abandon their un-Islamic ways, the party of God 'abolishes the government which sustains these principles.

- Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah*, Harvard University Press, 2008 p.247. Jalal is quoting Abdul Ala Mawdudi, from his book *Jihad in Islam*, reprint Lahore, Islamic Publications, 2001, pp.6-11, 19-21, 27. Mawdudi is one of the principal ideologues of modern day Islamic terrorists.

Like the recent challenge thrown at the leaders of Egypt's al-Azhar Mosque by President Abdul Fatah al-Sisi, the letter was an unprecedented and courageous first real attempt to deny oxygen to the virus of Sunni Islamic extremism.

In his address to the Sunni Muslim leaders President al-Sisi said,

'You imams are responsible before Allah. The entire world is waiting on you. The entire world is waiting for your word ... because the Islamic world is being torn, it is being destroyed, it is being lost. And it is being lost by our own hands'.<sup>3</sup>

The Open Letter to ISIS and those who may be tempted to follow it, was written three months before this speech by the Egyptian President.<sup>4</sup>

Both illustrate how intricate is the bond, and yet how deep is the rift, between Religious Islam and Political Islam.

Some commentators doubt the sincerity of the Open Letter<sup>5</sup> because of its ambiguity and evasiveness. Despite its flaws I thought it to be a genuine first attempt publicly to confront the difficulties and contradictions that Muslims and non-Muslims find inherent in Islam's foundational texts and traditions.

The letter's very ambiguities and evasiveness highlight the dilemma facing moderate religious Muslims who are confronted by the inexorable and inhuman violence of ISIS and its ilk who claim to be devout Muslims

as they murder their fellow-Muslims who don't submit to them, and non-Muslims whose only fault is that they are not Muslims.

The authors of the letter were clearly shocked 'by the spilling of Muslim blood, and taking their lives, raping their women, stealing their wealth and violating their rights.'<sup>6</sup>

Their letter deplored the killing of prisoners as 'heinous war crimes,'<sup>7</sup> specifically condemned the merciless killing of James Foley, Stephen Sotloff and David Haines,<sup>8</sup> and described the Arab Christians and members of other minorities as 'friends, neighbours and co-citizens'. 'They are no enemies but friends'. They deplored their being killed, their churches and other holy places destroyed, and their possessions seized.<sup>9</sup>

The 120 signatories felt obliged to praise ISIS for being fearless and being ready to sacrifice their lives, but they denied that jihad could be waged 'just because people have different religions or opinions'.<sup>10</sup>

This is a welcome clarification. They went on to make it clear that 'jihad without legitimate cause, legitimate goals, legitimate purpose, legitimate methodology and legitimate intention is not jihad at all but warmongering and criminality'.

But their explanation of what would be this 'legitimate cause, legitimate goal, legitimate purpose, legitimate methodology and legitimate intention' that justifies jihad, raises more difficulties than it solves. It leaves the non-Muslim lost in a swirling mass of undefined terms and finely nuanced ambiguities that would make the Delphic oracle blush.<sup>11</sup>

Ibn Khaldun [1332-1406 AD] Islam's leading historiographer, in his *Muqaddimah* or 'Introduction to History,' is not so nuanced. Writing for his fellow Muslims, he did not scruple to make transparently clear that 'in the Muslim community the holy war is a religious duty because of ... the obligation to convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force.' He notes that for 'other religious groups,' the 'holy war' is 'not a religious duty for them'. He explains that this is so because for other religions political authority and power 'has nothing to

## Islam, Poll Tax, Death

**T**HREE GROUPS ... constitute the (Christian) Churches. Others have no significance. These are the Melchites [whose head is the Pope of Rome], the Jacobites [whose head is the Patriarch of the Egyptian Copts], and the Nestorians. We do not think that we should blacken the pages of this book with discussion of their dogmas of unbelief. In general, they are well known. All of them are unbelief. This is clearly stated in the noble Qur'an. (To) discuss or argue those things with them is not up to us. It is (for them to choose between) conversion to Islam, payment of the poll tax, or death.

- Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*. Translated from the Arabic by Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Series xliii, 3 vols. Princeton University Press, 1958, vol. 1, p.480. The additions in square brackets [ ] are ours.

do with religion,' and he adds: these other religions are under no obligation to gain power over other nations, 'as is the case with Islam'.<sup>12</sup>

Dr Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-styled 'Caliph' of the Islamic State, can be assumed to be aware of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* and its unequivocal position on Jihad. As Ibn Khaldun's statement undoubtedly agrees with al-Baghdadi's thinking, it would have been helpful if the 120 signatories had addressed this point.

Do they agree that Islam is obliged 'to gain power over other nations' either 'by persuasion or by force'? If they differ from Ibn Khaldun, how do they plan to counteract his influence on impressionable young Muslims likely to support al-Baghdadi and ISIS?

### Islam, the Sword or the Tax

As mentioned above, this letter is unprecedented. The authors devote the whole letter to refuting ISIS's interpretation of the Qur'an, the Hadith and Islamic tradition.

Implicitly the letter acknowledges that there are passages in the Qur'an, the Hadith and much of Sunni understanding of Islamic history and tradition that can be appealed to by ISIS and their supporters in defence of their actions in the name of Islam.

ISIS is criticized in the letter for giving Arab Christians and the Yazidis 'three choices: jizyah [poll tax] the sword or conversion to Islam'.

The signatories condemn at length the attitude of ISIS, and accuse it of abominable crimes. This is heartening for all fair-minded people, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, but are we to conclude that they disagree with Ibn Khaldun when he wrote:

'We do not think that we should blacken the pages of this book [his famous *Muqaddimah* or Introduction to History] with discussion of their [Christian] dogmas of unbelief. In general they are well-known. All of them are unbelief. This is clearly stated in the holy Qur'an. To discuss or argue these things with them is not up to us. It is for them to choose between conversion to Islam, payment of the poll tax, or death'.<sup>13</sup>

## Mob Rule – 'Ochlocracy'

THE HISTORY of Turkey, Egypt and Persia during the last century shows that the population of Mohammedan countries have held very little consideration for the representative assemblies they elected. Very recent events in Persia and Egypt give clear evidence of this attitude. Parliaments in these countries were forced under pressure of public opinion as expressed in street-demonstrations to take decisions which people with common sense could not possibly have taken. The parliament, individual members and members of government, who resist, trying to govern according to their best knowledge, run the risk of being murdered, as has happened indeed in several cases. The unorganized masses take the political dispensation into their hands without a sense of responsibility. We could call this the supreme expression of democracy, but 'ochlocracy' would be a better name. In the good old days the king intervened in such cases with energetic measures, usually with success. Today, however, as a result of the artificial introduction of Western methods of government, the dynasty is incapable of properly fulfilling its political function. The countries which no longer possess a dynasty, e.g. Syria today, give still clearer proof of the insufficient functioning of modern Western political institutions in Mohammedan countries during periods of crisis.

— J. H. Kramers, 'In the Shadow of Allah,' in *Analecta Orientalia* of J. H. Kramers, Brill, Leiden, 1956, p.210. [*Ochlocracy* is from 'okhlos,' Greek for 'mob,' and 'cracy' is our English version of the Greek word 'kratia' from 'kratos' meaning 'power'. Editor]

Ibn Khaldun's opinion, however, is not just his own. It reflects the content of the Hadith – collections of sayings attributed to Muhammad or concerning him. To take only one example from al-Bukhārī's collection, we learn that al-Mughīra said to one of the commanders of the army of the Persian King Khosrau II:

'Our Prophet, the messenger of the Lord, has ordered us to fight you until you worship Allah alone [i.e. become Muslims] or pay Jizya [the poll-tax].'<sup>14</sup>

Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj al-Nāīsābūrī, whose collection of Hadith is regarded, along with al-Bukhārī's, as one of the most reliable, declares:

'[Muhammad] would say: Fight in the name of Allah and in the way of Allah. Fight against those who disbelieve in Allah. Make a holy war. ... When you meet your enemies who are polytheists, invite them to three courses of action. If they respond to any one of these, you also accept it and withhold yourself from doing them any harm. Invite them to make their Islam; if they respond to you, accept their Islam from them

and desist from fighting against them. ... If they refuse to make their Islam, demand from them the Jizya. If they agree to pay, accept it from them and hold off your hands. If they refuse to pay the tax, seek Allah's help and fight them.'<sup>15</sup>

Al-Bukhārī [810-870 AD], Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj [821-875 AD] and Ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī [1332-1406 AD] are only echoing the Qur'an's apparently clear command:

'Wage war against those who do not believe in the Last Day, and who do not forbid what Allah and his Messenger have forbidden, nor follow the religion of truth [even if they are] the people of the Book, until they pay the jizya [poll tax] on the back of their hands,<sup>16</sup> as a sign of their inferiority.'<sup>17</sup>

If these respected Islamic scholars are in error, this needs explicitly to be admitted and broadcast widely in the Muslim world. If they are not, then it is difficult to see how Sunni spokespeople can claim that ISIS is defaming Sunni Islam by their ideology and actions.

## Gentle Persuasion?

Ibn Ishāq [704-c.767AD] wrote or dictated the earliest biography of Muhammad. In his *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* 'Life of the Messenger of God,' we find that those who claim that the rejection by 'infidels' of the 'invitation' [*da'wa*] to become a Muslim is a hostile act against Islam, have the example of Muhammad to support them.

Whatever may be the truth of Muhammad's *da'wa* allegedly sent to Byzantine emperor Heraclius and Persian king Khosrau II, he certainly employed that ruse with neighbouring Christian Arab tribes in what is, today, Yemen.

The signatories to the letter released on September 24 last year, make the following point:

It is worth noting that most of the people who became Muslims throughout history did so through gentle invitation [*da'wah hasanah*] ... and not through severity and coercion.<sup>18</sup>

This statement should be read in the light of the excerpt below, taken from Ibn Ishaq's Biography of Muhammad:

'Then the Apostle [Muhammad] sent Khalid bin al-Walid ... to the tribe of Beni Haritha bin Ka'b in Najran and ordered him to invite them to become Muslims, and to give them three days before fighting them. [our italics].<sup>19</sup> If they agreed then he was to accept their submission from them; and if they refused he was to fight them. So Khalid set out and came to them and sent out riders in all directions inviting the people to Islam saying "If you accept Islam you will save your life." They embraced Islam because of the threat. .... When they came to the Apostle [Muhammad] and he saw them he asked "Who are these people who look like people from India?" and they replied, "These people are the Beni al-Haritha bin Ka'b." ... The Apostle [Muhammad] said to them: "Had Khalid not written to me that you had accepted Islam and not resisted, I would have tossed your heads beneath your feet".<sup>20</sup>

Abū Bakr as-Ṣiddīq [632-634 AD], father of Muhammad's favourite wife

Aisha and therefore Muhammad's father-in-law, was chosen as Muhammad's successor, or 'Caliph,' when the latter died in 632.

In a letter addressed to Arab tribesmen who did not want to be Muslims, Abū Bakr described how Muhammad dealt with this situation:

'With His [Allah's] permission, the Apostle of Allah struck out at whoever turned away from Him until, willingly or unwillingly, he made his submission [Islam].<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere in the same letter he wrote:

'I have sent to you someone at the head of an army of the *Muhajirun*<sup>22</sup> and the *Ansar*<sup>23</sup> and those who follow [them] in good works. I ordered him not to fight anyone or to kill anyone until he has called him to the cause of God ... but I have ordered him to fight those who deny [Him] for that reason. So he will not spare any one of them he can gain mastery over, [but may] burn them with fire, slaughter them by any means, and take women and children captive.<sup>24</sup> 'And the only thing that he will accept from anyone will be submission [Islam].<sup>25</sup>

It is true that the majority of the Christians in Arabia, Roman Syria, North Africa, Persia and Spain, remained Christians despite intolerable restrictions on their freedom, for quite some years after the Arab invasions. It is gratuitous and patronizing, however, to claim that those of them who became Muslims 'did so through gentle invitation and

not through severity and coercion'.

The economic, political and social condition of non-Muslims living as *dhimmi*s, i.e. as 'protected' people who paid the poll tax, cannot be construed as 'gentle persuasion' if later they became Muslims, without doing violence to the reality of *dhimmitude*. They were not second-class citizens: *dhimmi*s were non-citizens.

Until the issues raised here – and they are only a few of the ones that could have been raised – are tackled and resolved, some may well conclude that the 120 signatories were not really serious about confronting the religious roots – the Qur'an, Hadith and classic Sunni texts – of modern-day radical Political Islam.

Readers could be forgiven for thinking that the signatories were addressing their letter not only to ISIS and its fanatical followers, but to the West – especially to the West's media and to its political power-brokers.

*To the Western media* : because the media's growing reliance on Qatar's *Al-Jazeera* should sound warning bells about 'freedom of the Press,' and because many of them have shown themselves to be fascinated by the naked power exercised by ISIS; and because they, and the so-called 'social media,' have become complicit in the horrors infecting the region and beyond.

*To Western power-brokers* : because the West's military intervention will inevitably be called upon if the Sunni regimes in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf

## Holy Wars and Warriors

EVER SINCE the beginning of Islam, war on the unbelievers had been valued highest; this is what the Koran calls the 'exertion on the Way of Allah' or Holy War [*Jihad*]. The characteristic Arabic word *ghazwa* was also applied to it; this word actually means a raid into enemy territory. Mohammed's *ghawas* constituted the most important part of his biography. The participants were called *ghazi*, which term came to indicate warriors for the faith throughout Mohammedan history. Personalities of the period of conquest who remained most popular were the commanders fighting against the unbelievers, such as Khalid ibn al-Walid, the 'Sword of Allah,' 'Ukba ibn Nafi', the first conqueror of North Africa, and Kutaiba ibn Muslim who led his troops over the Oxus.

— J. H. Kramers, 'In the Shadow of Allah,' in *Analecta Orientalia of J. H. Kramers*, Brill, Leiden, 1956, p.298.

based on rational laws that would enable citizens to leave a primitive way of living [badāwa] and change to a new and more civilized way of living [ḥadāra].<sup>26</sup>

Despite the tentative and halting steps taken by the 120 signatories, there is genuine hope that the voice of moderate religious Islam is at last beginning to be heard, and the vision that Ibn Khaldun had of the *mulk siyāsī* or 'sovereignty based on rational Law' may in some way be realized.

Egyptian President Abdul Fatah al-Sisi deserves to be heard. He had ISIS in mind, and did not mince his words, as he addressed the 'Ulama' or 'learned scholars' of the Al-Azhar mosque and urged them to speak out against Islamic – mainly Sunni – extremism because, as he put it, 'the Islamic world is being destroyed, it is being lost. And it is being lost by our own hands'.<sup>27</sup>

1. Justin Worland, 'Pope Francis Condemns ISIS killing of Coptic Christians,' February 16, 2015.
2. Woodrow Wilson Centre, 'Muslims Against ISIS'
3. Dana Ford et al. CNN News, January 6, 2015
4. On September 24, 2014
5. [http://www.reddit.com/r/exmuslim/comments/2p5lyc/criticising\\_the\\_criticism\\_of\\_isis\\_from\\_120/](http://www.reddit.com/r/exmuslim/comments/2p5lyc/criticising_the_criticism_of_isis_from_120/) See also: Ayman S. Ibrahim, 'Muslim Scholars vs. ISIS,' *First Things* [undated].
6. See Arabic text: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/pdf/Booklet-Arabic.pdf> Section 9, page 13.
7. See English text: <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com/14/english-v14.pdf> Section 8, p.8.
8. *ibid.* section 7, p.6.
9. *ibid.* section 10, p.11.
10. *ibid.* section 8, p.7.
11. *ibid.*
12. 'Abd al-Rahman abu-Zaid ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah, an Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Series xliii, Pantheon Books, vol. 1, chapter iii, section 31, p.473.
13. *ibid.* p.480.
14. *Ṣaḥīḥ-Bukhārī*, Dar Ahya us-Sunnah al Nabawiya, vol.4, 386, p.255.
15. <http://www.usc.edu/org/cmje/religious-texts/hadith/muslim/019-smt.php#019.4294>
16. This is Philip Hitti's suggested translation of the much disputed ٱ in Q 9,29. See his *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan, London, 1968, p.144.
17. Q 9,29.
18. English text quoted note<sup>3</sup> section 4, p.5.
19. See Ibn Ishaq [Ibn Hisham], *Biography of Muhammad*, Arabic version, Dar Ehia al-Tourath al-Arabi, Rue Dakkache, Beirut, Lebanon, iv, p.248 line 6.
20. *ibid.*, pages 248-250. Trans. Paul Stenhouse.
21. *Tarikh at-Tabari*, ed.cit., i, p. 876. Trans. Paul Stenhouse.
22. 'Muhajirun': those Muslims who fled from Mecca to Medina with Muhammad.
23. Ansar' – the 'helpers', the Medinese tribesmen who 'supported' and 'helped' Muhammad.
24. *The History of al-Tabari*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, translated by Fred Donner, vol.10, p.57.
25. *Tarikh at-Tabari*, ed.cit., i, p. 876. Trans. Paul Stenhouse.
26. Muhammad Mahmoud Rabi', *The Political Theory of Ibn Khaldun*, Leiden, EJ Brill, 1967, pp.52, 169.
27. See *supra* note<sup>3</sup>.

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