

## Quran 9:1-6

### Introduction

In this module, we explore a well-known section of the Quran in which God authorizes Muhammad and his companions to act violently against another group of people.

### Orientation to the Text

The passage below is the beginning of a chapter in the Quran known as “Repentance.” Twelve years after Muhammad received his first revelation, he and his followers emigrated from Mecca to Medina, because they were being persecuted by Meccan polytheists. This landmark event took place in 622 CE and is known as the *hijra*. After the *hijra*, Muhammad and his companions continued to have conflict with “idolaters” from Mecca – the Quraysh tribe – as well as with polytheists elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula.

Traditional Islamic commentators consider “Repentance” to have been revealed by God to Muhammad in the period after the *hijra*. The chapter deals with a number of political and social issues faced by the Muslim community at the time, which was a political as well as a social and religious group. Topics include the relationship between the Muslims and Arab polytheists, interactions with the “People of the Book” – a phrase used in the Quran to refer to Jews and Christians – as well as taxes and other legal matters. The chapter also criticizes some members of the Muslim community for being unwilling to follow Muhammad into battle, and for trying to set up another mosque in competition with Muhammad’s mosque in Medina.

This passage is thought to have been revealed in approximately 629/630 CE, a few years before Muhammad’s death in 632 CE.

One of the key words in the passage is the Arabic word *mushrikun*. In the English version provided below, this word is translated “idolaters.” Another possible translation would be “polytheists.” More specifically, the word refers to people who associate partners with the one true God. In the Islamic interpretive and legal tradition, it is understood to refer primarily to Arab polytheists in the region of Arabia.

### Getting Familiar with the Text

*Read the short excerpt from the Quran printed on the next page. As you read, answer the following questions, which are designed to help you get familiar with the contents of the text.*

1. According to verse 1, Muhammad and his companions had made a treaty with some other people. With whom?
2. What does verse 3 say about the treaty?

3. Verses 4-6 say that Muhammad and his companions should *not* take action against some people. Against whom should they *not* take action?
4. In verse 5, permission is given to Muhammad and his companions to take action against certain people. What possible actions against these people are mentioned?
5. The text does not provide full information about the historical situation being discussed. What information is missing? How might this lead to a range of different interpretations of the passage?

### **Quran 9:1-6 (translation: Abdel Haleem 2008)**

<sup>1</sup> A release by God and His Messenger<sup>a</sup> from the treaty you [believers] made with the idolaters [is announced] – <sup>2</sup> you [idolaters] may move freely about the land for four months, but you should bear in mind both that you will not escape God, and that God will disgrace those who defy [Him].

<sup>3</sup> On the Day of the Great Pilgrimage<sup>b</sup> [there will be] a proclamation from God and His Messenger to all people: ‘God and His Messenger are released from [treaty] obligations to the idolaters. It will be better for you [idolaters] if you repent; know that you cannot escape God if you turn away.’

[Prophet], warn those who ignore [God] that they will have a painful punishment.

<sup>4</sup> As for those who have honoured the treaty you made with them and who have not supported anyone against you: fulfil your agreement with them to the end of their term. God loves those who are mindful of Him.

<sup>5</sup> When the [four] forbidden months are over, wherever you find the idolaters, kill them, seize them, restrict them, sit watching out for them at every lookout post – but if they turn [to God], maintain the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, let them go on their way, for God is most forgiving and merciful.

<sup>6</sup> If any 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 with no knowledge [of it].

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<sup>a</sup> I.e., the Prophet Muhammad

<sup>b</sup> The Day of the Great Pilgrimage has been interpreted as referring to either the Day of Sacrifice or the Day of Arafat, both of which are festival days in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar.

## Digging Deeper

After thinking about questions 1-5 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

6. What was your initial reaction to the passage? Did your response to the text change as you read it more closely?
7. One could argue that the passage is primarily about “how to engage with treaty-breakers.” Imagine a situation today in which one country violates a treaty or agreement with another country. (For example, imagine that the US launches a military attack against the UK, or that a country starts developing nuclear weapons after promising not to do so.) In what types of situations would you consider it justified for the aggrieved party to carry out any acts of violence?
8. Suppose you read the following on a website: “Muslim citizens of Europe and the US can’t be trusted. No matter how peaceful they may seem outwardly, they believe in the Quran, which commands Muslims to kill non-Muslims wherever they find them – just look at Quran 9:5.” How would you respond?

## Further Reading

- Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2017). “The ‘Sword Verse’ Myth.” In *Exploring the Qur’an: Context and Impact*. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 7-27.
- Caner K. Dagli (2015). “Conquest and Conversion, War and Peace in the Quran.” In *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne, pp. 1805-1818.
- David Dakake (2009). “The Myth of a Militant Islam.” In Joseph E.B. Lombard (ed.), *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, pp. 3-29.
- Omar Shaukat (2021). “Reading and debating the Qur’an with ISIS.” In Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.), *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge, pp. 22-31.

### Summary of Key Takeaways from This Module

- The Quran contains passages permitting Muhammad and his companions to act violently against some other people.
- Some passages in the Quran relate to specific historical contexts during Muhammad's lifetime.
- Passages in the Quran often leave a lot of questions unanswered about what precisely is being said. This has resulted in a variety of interpretations among Muslim commentators.
- It can be misleading to think of Muhammad and his companions simply as being part of a "religious" community, given the political aspect of the early Muslim group and its relations with other groups in Arabia.
- Some passages in the Quran permit violence, but those same passages also restrain and limit violence.
- Given the Quran's specific historical context, ambiguity, and lack of precise details, "applying" it to other situations is not a straightforward process.