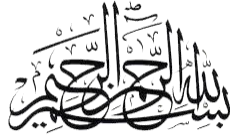


**Demystifying the
'72 Virgins in Paradise for
Suicide' Myth**

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Introduction

Nearly eight years have gone by since the September 11th attacks, yet myths and misconceptions pertaining to Islam are as pervasive as ever. One of the most prevalent of these myths is the claim that in Islam a suicide bomber will enjoy 72 virgins in Paradise as a reward for killing himself in an attempt to force others to submit to Islam. This allegation has been circulating on network TV talk shows and in general Western discourse about Islam for many years.

In this article, we will respond to this myth by firstly clarifying some of the rulings regarding *Jihad* in Islam. We shall also define what it means to be a true martyr according to Islam, and consider a prophetic tradition (*Hadith*) regarding the reward for a true martyr by analyzing its content and context. Finally, we will touch on the topic of the status of

women in Islam, and what Islam says about sex and a man marrying more than one wife.

The assertions made in this article are based on the four agreed-upon sources of Islamic Law: The Quran, the Hadith, scholarly consensus, and juristic analogy.

Suicide Bombings Are Absolutely Forbidden in Islam

To begin with, suicide bombers are not considered martyrs in Islam; much to the contrary, they are in the Hell-Fire. Islamic scholars the world over have condemned suicide bombings, from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia¹, to the scholars of Deoband², India, from Shaikh Muhammad Hassan³ of Egypt, to the Fiqh Council of North America⁴ and the Islamic Council of Spain, as well as numerous others, yet their condemnations have somehow received little attention in the media.

The Quran states:

﴿وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُمْ رَحِيمًا﴾ [النساء/29]

¹ Shaikh Abdul Aziz Aal-Ashaikh, reiterating the Fatwa issued by the former Grand Mufti, Shaikh Ibn Baz.

² See the Fatwa issued by *Majlis al-Ulema Deoband*.

³ Founder of the *Rahma Islamic Channel*.

⁴ Headed by Dr. Muzzamil Siddiqui.

﴿And do not kill yourselves (nor kill one another). Surely, God is Most Merciful to you.﴾ {Surah an-Nisaa', Verse 29}

It is clear from this verse that suicide is categorically forbidden in Islam, and is considered a grave sin. Likewise, there are numerous prophetic traditions stating that one who commits suicide will abide in the Hell-Fire for eternity, wherein he will repeat the act of suicide over and over. The reason for this stern punishment is because Islam states that one does not possess his or her body in order to dispense with it at will; rather, it belongs to its Creator and Sustainer, God.

Furthermore, it is not permissible to force another individual to take on Islam as his religion. Even if one was forced to declare his faith in Islam, his Islam is deemed null and void, and he is not regarded as a Muslim by the rules of Islamic law.

The Quran says:

﴿لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ﴾ [البقرة/256]

﴿There is no compulsion in religion. Verily, the Right Path has become distinct from the wrong path.﴾ {Surah al-Baqarah, Verse 256}

To add to this, it is a grave violation of the merciful Prophetic character to kill the weak in order to intimidate and instill fear in the

strong. This violates every tenet of Islam, which teaches patience for the afterlife and repelling evil with what is better. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ⁵ spent his entire life defending the weak, poor, orphans, and women.

Let us now turn to the topic of the protection of non-combatants in Islam.

Protection of Non-Combatants According to Islamic Law

In the media, we often hear the quotation of Quranic verses and Hadith (Prophetic sayings) out of context regarding the use of force, in an attempt to show that Islam justifies aggression against non-believers. However, it is important to understand that non-Muslims fall into four categories according to Islamic law, three of which are absolutely protected by Shariah⁶.

The categories of non-Muslims in Islam are:

1. The *ahl al-dhimma*, or non-Muslim citizens of an Islamic state, and they are protected.

⁵ 'Peace and blessings of God be upon him' is a prayer customarily said by Muslims when a prophet of God is mentioned. It is symbolized by ﷺ in Arabic.

⁶ **Fiqh as-Sunnah**, Sayyid Sabiq, Vol.3, Pgs. 67-74, Dar El Fikr, 1998.

2. The *mu'aahad*, or citizen of a non-Muslim state that is at peace with the Muslims, and he must also be protected, whether in his homeland or while visiting Muslim lands.
3. The *musta'man*⁷, or visitor to a Muslim land with permission from the authorities or to deliver a message, and he is also to be granted full safety.
4. The *harbi*, or one physically attacking and at war with the Muslims, and in this case, self-defense is permissible.

Without exception, the verses of the Quran and the Hadith that speak of warfare all refer to this fourth category of non-Muslims. These passages simply serve as support and encouragement for believers to defend themselves bravely when they serve the cause of justice. It is a major deviation from the Shariah to take the verses of the Quran or Hadith referring to this fourth category and apply them to anyone in the first three protected categories of non-Muslims.

An Example of Quoting a Passage Out of Context

An example of a verse that is often quoted out of context is the following passage from Surah Tawbah:

⁷ Journalists, tourists, and embassy workers are fully protected by the Shariah as they fall into this category.

﴿فَإِذَا انْسَلَخَ الْأَشْهُرُ الْحُرْمُ فَاقْتُلُوا الْمُشْرِكِينَ حَيْثُ وَجَدْتُمُوهُمْ
وَاخْذُوهُمْ وَأَحْصُرُوهُمْ وَأَقْعُدُوا لَهُمْ كُلَّ مَرْصِدٍ فَإِن تَابُوا وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ
وَأَتَوْا الزَّكَاةَ فَخَلُّوا سَبِيلَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾ [التوبة/5]

«Then when the Sacred Months have passed, then slay the *Mushrikûn* (the idolaters of the Quraysh Tribe) wherever you find them, and capture them and besiege them, and prepare for them each and every ambush. But if they repent and perform prayers, and give charity, then leave their way free. Verily, God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.» {Surah Tawbah, Verse 5}

As the Quranic exegetes⁸ explain, this verse was revealed regarding a tribe of Arabs called the Quraysh who had broken a covenant of peace with the Muslims. While the covenant was in place, they were considered *muaa'hads*, entitled to complete protection (see category two above). However, by attacking the Prophet's kinsman, they became *harbis*, who threatened the Muslims. As such, Muslims were now permitted to engage them in battle. The same verse offered options to avoid unnecessary violence: a general amnesty for the Quraysh until the passing of the Sacred Months, and a command for the Muslims not to harm them if they repent from waging war against the Prophet ﷺ, pray, and give charity. It is interesting to note that the verse closes by reminding us of God's mercy and forgiveness.

⁸ See **Tafseer at-Tabari**, Vol. 14, Pgs. 133-140, Muassasat ar-Risalah, 2000.

The scholars of Islamic jurisprudence state that when a command is given in the Quran to do something that was previously forbidden, it indicates permission. For example, a doctor might tell you, “Eat meat,” after you were on a strict vegetarian diet. Of course, what is intended here is, “It is permissible for you to eat meat now”, and no one would argue that the doctor meant “Eat meat at all times.” Similarly, the command here ‘*slay them*’ actually means ‘it is now permissible to fight the Quraysh, although you were previously forbidden from that.’

The clause in the verse ‘*wherever you find them*’ means ‘even if they are in the Sanctity of Makkah, which God has made sacred.’ This exclusive permission was necessary because Islam had previously forbidden fighting in the sacred territory of Makkah, it being home to the Kaaba, the House of God, built by the Prophet Abraham ﷺ. Thus, the verse gave special permission to the Prophet ﷺ to enter even the sacred precincts in order to liberate the city from the Quraysh.

Interestingly enough, the Muslims did not actually fight the Quraysh after the Sacred Months passed; rather the Quraysh surrendered peacefully and were given a general amnesty. The Prophet ﷺ later said, **“This city (Makkah) was sanctified by God the Day He created the Heavens and the Earth; and it is Sanctified by God until the Day of**

Judgment. No one was given permission to fight here before me, and it was only made permissible for me during one hour of a day.”⁹

Furthermore, this special permission was given to fight only those who carried arms against the Muslims. It is absolutely forbidden in Islam to harm a non-Muslim who does not carry weapons and is not involved in combat. According to an authentic Hadith, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ once saw a group of people gathering around the body of a woman who had been killed. When he asked what had happened, he was told the woman was killed during a battle.

The Prophet ﷺ was distressed by this and said, “**She wasn’t going to fight you.**” He then sent for the commander of the battle, Khalid bin al-Walid, and forbade him from killing women and non-combatants.¹⁰

This Hadith is authoritative proof that in Islam it is forbidden to harm women, children, and non-combatants during wartime.

⁹ Narrated by Bukhari and Muslim.

¹⁰ Narrated by Imam Abu Dawud, Ahmed, Bayhaqi, and others.

The Hadith Regarding the Reward for Giving One's Life for the Sake of God

Let us now turn our attention to the Hadith describing the reward for a true martyr in Islam. Imam Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, and Ahmed, narrated that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

﴿لِلشَّهِيدِ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ سِتُّ خِصَالٍ : يُغْفَرُ لَهُ فِي أَوَّلِ دَفْعَةٍ ، وَيَرَى مَقْعَدَهُ مِنَ الْجَنَّةِ ، وَيَجَارُ مِنْ عَذَابِ الْقَبْرِ ، وَيَأْمَنُ مِنَ الْفَرَعِ الْأَكْبَرِ ، وَيُوضَعُ عَلَى رَأْسِهِ تَاجُ الْوَقَارِ الْيَاقُوتَةُ مِنْهَا خَيْرٌ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا وَمَا فِيهَا ، وَيَزَوَّجُ اثْنَتَيْنِ وَسَبْعِينَ زَوْجَةً مِنَ الْحُورِ الْعِينِ ، وَيُشَفَّعُ فِي سَبْعِينَ مِنْ أَقَارِبِهِ﴾.

حسنه المنذري في "الترغيب والترهيب" ، وابن حجر في "الفتح" من حديث عبادة بن الصامت.

﴿For the Shahid (or Martyr-Witness),¹¹ with God there are six distinctions: he will be forgiven with the first wound; he will see his resting place in Paradise; he will saved from punishment in his grave; he will be granted security from the Great Calamity (on the Day of Judgment); on his head will be placed a Crown of Dignity, a single gem of which is more valuable than the world and all that it contains; and he will be married to seventy-two wives, with

¹¹ See explanation below.

beautiful big and lustrous eyes, and intercede on behalf of seventy of his relatives.﴾

The authenticity of this Hadith has been graded by the majority of Hadith scholars as simply ‘acceptable’ and not ‘authentic.’ For the purposes of this article, we will assume that the text of the Hadith was actually spoken by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. However, we must bear in mind that the Hadith scholars were more lenient in accepting Hadiths concerning virtuous action that do not relate to doctrinal matters, such as this one, even if they had some reservations about its authenticity.

The True Meaning of Becoming a Shahid or a Martyr in Islam

The word ‘*Shahid*’ mentioned in the hadith is often translated as ‘martyr’. However, it means linguistically ‘to witness, or to see’. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught:

“There are five types of *Shahids*:

- 1.) One who dies from being stabbed,
- 2.) One who dies from an internal illness,
- 3.) One who drowns,

- 4.) One who dies by having a wall or building collapse on top of him,
- 5.) Or one who dies while striving in the way of God.”¹²

Another narration adds:

- 6.) “A person who dies in a fire, and
- 7.) A woman who dies during childbirth.”

Perhaps we can understand the reason for the use of the Arabic word ‘*Shahid*, i.e. witness’ since a true martyr in Islam is one who realizes that all events in the world are in truth Divine messages, hidden in the form of trials and tribulations. He does not busy himself looking at the envelope, the appearances of things, but rather looks within at the message written inside, and realizes that all things are tests from God. In this way, he gives up his life while bearing true witness to his faith.

To sum up, the true martyr according to Islam is anyone who dies a sudden death: from an illness, from an accident or a building falling upon him, while defending himself, while seeking knowledge, or striving in the way of God.¹³

¹² Narrated by Ahmed and Tirmidhi.

¹³ **Fiqh al-Islamiyy wa Adilatuh**, Wahba az-Zuhayli, Vol. 2, Pgs. 1589-1590, Dar al-Fikr, 2007.

Understanding of the Hadith Regarding the Reward for a Martyr

When read in light of the teachings of Islam, the true meaning of the Hadith regarding the reward for a martyr becomes clear. It is in reference to the honor and prestige that a person who gives his life in the cause of God—in the cause of justice and righteousness—and what he will receive in acknowledgement of this in the afterlife. It mentions a Crown of honor and dignity, encrusted with precious rubies, and other extravagant honors, such as interceding on behalf of his family in front of God, and being married to a number of spouses from the inhabitants of Paradise.

In order to properly understand this prophetic narration, we have to consider the following cultural and historical realities:

- 1.) It is important to note that sincerity alone at the time of one's death does not guarantee one will be considered a martyr by God, rather one's actions must also be in accordance to the Prophetic Way, the Sunnah, as detailed by the scholars.
- 2.) In Arabic culture and in fact many other cultures, getting married is a great tribute, and something very prestigious, for it attests to a man's maturity, uprightness, and prosperity. Traditionally, if a woman's father was very proud of the actions of a man, he would

perhaps offer his daughter in marriage to him.¹⁴ Marriage, and being considered worthy of marriage itself, is an indication of honor and respect, and a great distinction.

- 3.) The Hadith refers to marrying ‘wives’ and not enjoying ‘virgins.’¹⁵ Although the difference may seem subtle, this incorrect translation is very misleading. In Islam, maintaining an intimate relationship within the confines of marriage is rewarded by God, and seeking a spouse to keep oneself chaste is encouraged. Sexual relationship outside of marriage, on the other hand, is shunned.

The institution of marriage is intended to bring comfort, security, companionship, and love into one’s life. Sex within marriage is not taboo in Islam; rather it is considered to be something wholesome and rewarded by God. For marriage is designed to facilitate contentment with what is proper and correct and avoidance of what is illicit and harmful. Indeed, a husband is not even permitted to look at another woman lustfully. This judicious teaching of Islam leads to the strengthening of the family unit, and minimizes the rate of extra-marital affairs and divorce in society.

¹⁴ Islam requires a woman’s consent and approval to her marriage.

¹⁵ The word in Arabic is ‘*Zawja*,’ which means wife, not ‘*Bikr*,’ which means virgin.

4.) As for the number 72, it is a matter of the unseen world. This was revealed by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, and thus we cannot fully know the secret or wisdom for this number, and God knows best.

However we do know that, unlike the religious texts of other religions¹⁶, the Quran is the only sacred book that restricts the number of wives a man may have:

- 1.) **He may not marry** at all if he cannot provide a home and financially support his wife and children.
- 2.) **He must marry only one** wife if he cannot be just and equitable with more than one.
- 3.) **He may marry only up to** four wives, within the restrictions laid down by the Shariah. That is, each wife must be given her full rights, including a separate home, and full financial support. The husband must also take responsibility for his children, and

¹⁶ Interestingly, the Torah and the New Testament do not place any restriction on the number of wives a man may have. The current restriction of one wife was adopted from the Greco-Hellenistic tradition, in which prostitution was part of daily life. Athens was home to a number of brothels managed by the famed Greek lawmaker Solon: *"Solon, seeing our city full of young men, seeing, too, that they were under the compulsion of nature, and that they went their erring way in a direction they should not, purchased and stationed women in various quarters, equipped and ready for all alike."*- Athenaeus.

ensure that all family members receive their fair share of inheritance, and equal time and treatment.¹⁷

This is more just and realistic than secular law that states a man may legally have only one wife, yet legally have an unrestricted number of girlfriends, with no spousal or parental responsibility for his actions whatsoever. **In reality, secular law permits unrestricted polygamy in the sense that a man is permitted to have an unlimited number of sexual partners, whereas Islamic law places restrictions and responsibilities in this area of social conduct.**

We also know that the number of women generally outnumber the number of men in any society, and Islam takes a balanced and practical approach to this issue. In some European countries, a man may enjoy relations with any number of women, even prostitutes, as long as he does not marry them. This undermines the family structure, and leads to numerous societal ills.¹⁸

- 5.) Islam teaches that husband and wife will be reunited in Paradise. If the wife is at a higher level than the husband, then he will rise up to her level. And if the husband is at a higher level than the wife, she will rise up to his level. Also, when a Muslim woman is admitted into Paradise she will be bestowed with extraordinary beauty to last

¹⁷ See Surah an-Nisaa, Verse 3.

¹⁸ Take, for example, STDs. In the year 2006, there were an estimated 40 million cases of AIDS worldwide, according to the World Health Organization.

for all of eternity, a privilege for her devotion to God. That is, whatever she presently possesses of beauty will be enhanced and magnified to the extent that there will be no splendor more exceptional than hers.

This concept of eternal companionship increases husband and wife in love of each other, and he appreciates her beauty as being timeless, and not perishing like the false glamour seen on magazine covers or in the movies.

- 6.) As for sexual enjoyment, it is a right of both spouses in marriage, and it is encouraged and rewarded for by God. But outside of marriage, it is harmful to the family unit and forbidden. Islam takes a middle path in this regard: Sex is not something to be ashamed of as long as it is within the boundaries of marriage.

Other legal systems either permit unlimited sex outside of marriage, or look at it as something shameful and simply a means of reproducing. In Islam, there is nothing wrong with a husband and wife enjoying their intimate relationship together, within the limits and manners that were explained by the Prophet ﷺ.

- 7.) Finally, Islam promises man and woman equal rewards in Paradise, but each according to his or her personal desires.

The Quran states:

﴿لَهُمْ مَا يَشَاءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ﴾ [ق/35]

﴿They will have therein (in Paradise) whatever their souls desire, and We will grant them a further reward from Our Bounty.﴾ {Surah Qaf, Verse 35}

Women will have a reward and honor equivalent to that received by men, yet one that meets her nature and desires, as is clearly indicated by the verse. We must keep in mind, however, that the supreme reward will be the vision of God's Countenance; and this is what the words '*a further reward from Our Bounty*' in the verse above allude to.

The Honored Status of Women in Islam

It is important to note here that the notions about women in Islam commonly held in the West are contradictory to their true and honorable status in Shariah. The Islamic tradition abolished the pre-Islamic Arab practices of shunning infant daughters and burying them alive and usurping an orphan girl's wealth. It prohibited a wife from being inherited as property and automatically taken as a wife by a

relative of the deceased. Islamic law also abolished the concept that the husband is master over his wife and her wealth.

The Quran says:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَرِثُوا النِّسَاءَ كَرِهًا وَلَا
تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ لِنَدَاهُنَّ لَبَّاسًا مِمَّا آتَيْنَهُنَّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَأْتِيَنَّ بِفَاحِشَةٍ مُبَيِّنَةٍ
وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ فَإِنْ كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَيَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ
فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا﴾ [النساء/19]

﴿O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will, and you should not treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the *Mahr* (bridal gift) you have given them, unless they commit open adultery. And live with them honorably. If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing and God brings through it a great deal of good.﴾ {Surah an-Nisaa, Verse 19}

Islam enjoins that women should be treated with respect and kindness; daughters should be cherished and kind treatment towards them is a means to Paradise, and that a woman has the right to own property, manage her wealth, have inheritance, accept or deny a suitor in marriage, and apply for divorce if necessary.

Islam states that man and woman are complimentary parts of one whole; they are equal spiritually, but each has his or her respective rights and responsibilities.

The Quran says:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ
وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي
تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا﴾ [النساء/1]

﴿O mankind! reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single Soul, and created, from it His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;- Fear God, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for God ever watches over you.﴾ {Surah an-Nisaa, Verse 1}

Moreover, some of the greatest Islamic scholars and Hadith narrators of the Prophetic era were women; such as the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha, her sister Asmaa', his daughter Fatima, Umm Salama, Umm Sulaim, and numerous others.

We learn from this that Islam honors women, daughters, mothers, or wives, and grants them rights and protections unlike that found in any other religion or law.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Islam rejects the ‘72 Virgins in Paradise for Suicide’ myth, and abhors the killing of innocent people. The Shariah was revealed to protect human life and for the benefit of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ clearly prohibited harming non-combatants, violating treaties, and the mistreatment of women.

At times, misinterpretations of Islamic texts arise either as the result of differences in cultural attitudes towards sex, the reading of passages out of context, or interpretations in the absence of relevant religious and historical background necessary to comprehend their true meaning.

In the end, I realize that bridging the cultural gap between Islamic tradition and the minds of many in West will not be easy, and that it will require patience, humility, and much hard work. Yet I hope and pray that our efforts will bear fruit.

It is essential that the concepts discussed in this article be given light in academic, media, and government circles, in order to promote true understanding about Islam, bring about religious harmony, and to help lead us and our children to a better and more prosperous future.

