

Suicide bombings are un-Islamic

Published in: New Straits Times, Friday 28 November 2014

By Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali

SUICIDE falls under the Quranic prohibition of killing without a just cause simply because a Muslim does not have the right to take his own life.

Since life is a God-given gift, it may not be subjected to destruction and abuse even by oneself. This is why syariah prohibits suicide as a heinous sin for which the perpetrator is liable, in the event of an unsuccessful attempt, to a deterrent penalty of ta'zir.

If the attempt succeeds, the person is still liable to an expiation (kaffarah) which may be taken from his property, according to the Shafie and Hanbali schools, whereas Imams Abu Hanifa and Malik do not make kaffarah a requirement. The Quranic authority on this is the verse: "Kill yourselves not — la taqtulu anfusakum- al-Nisa', 4:29).

People who are driven to despair are enjoined to have faith in God's mercy and remain hopeful. The prohibition of suicide by this clear text means that it is a violation of syariah and that anyone who facilitates or collaborates in the act of suicide is also liable to a deterrent punishment.

Quran commentators have drawn the following conclusions from this verse:

THE obvious meaning is that suicide is forbidden;

IT also means that people may not help one another in the perpetration of suicide;

ONE may not undertake a task which is likely to cause one's own death, even if it be religious obligation;

NO one should deprive oneself of the essentials of life and cause self-destruction; and,

LASTLY, that one may not kill oneself through consumption of lethal substances.

The Quran also forbids the believers from courting danger and inviting death and destruction upon themselves (al-Baqarah, 2:195).

The momentous decision to commit suicide is most likely to be taken by those who are driven to despondency and despair. The Quranic advice to such people is that they should remain hopeful of God's mercy to improve their condition (al-Zumar, 39:53).

Prophet Muhammad has spoken strongly in condemnation of suicide, and said in a hadith that "one who kills himself with something in this life will also be tortured by it on the Day of Resurrection".

Life is a divine trust (amanah) in the hands of its bearer, who is expected to safeguard and cherish it with a sense of responsibility and care. As for those who undergo painful experiences they cannot tolerate, they are advised that life is a testing ground and many will face hardship, but patience, perseverance and hope in the face of adversity build one's inner resources, and may also bring great spiritual rewards.

The fiqh manuals are silent on the issue of suicide bombing, a disturbing phenomenon which started when Israel unleashed a new wave of aggression on the street processions of the

Palestinian youth in 2000–2001. The upsurge in suicide bombing incidents by those claiming to be Islamic warriors has brought mixed responses from Muslim scholars. Most scholars of standing have condemned this, and the Sept 11 (2001) attacks on the United States, as violative to Islamic principles.

It is simplistic to lump together the Palestinian suicide bombings with al-Qaeda terrorist activities, as few would deny the genuine suffering of the Palestinian people or the legitimacy of their demand for a homeland and state. It is also simplistic to equate suicide bombing with martyrdom as many have claimed. This is because suicide bombing challenges two fundamental principles of Islam: the prohibition against suicide and the deliberate killing of non-combatants. The Muslim fighter enters the battle not with the intention of dying, but with the conviction that if he should die, it would be for reasons beyond his control. Martyrdom does not begin with a suicidal intention, let alone the linkage of that intention with the killing of non-combatants. Suicide bombers intentionally set out to kill themselves and other civilians and thus violate the norms of Islamic law and ethics.

In September 2003, former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad denounced Palestinian suicide bombing and said that suicide bombing was unacceptable in Islam. Dr Mahathir, himself a strong supporter of the Palestinians, added that they resorted to suicide bombing because they did not have proper weapons in their fight for an independent homeland.

“Nevertheless, it is wrong to commit suicide bombing because it causes loss of innocent lives. Fighting is one thing, but if you go onboard a school bus and kill all the schoolchildren, I don’t think it is a brave move.”

In November 2003, the Arab states condemned the suicide car bombing in Riyadh that killed 17 and wounded more than 100 persons, mainly Arabs. The 22-member Arab League denounced the attack as a “terrorist and criminal” act, while Saudi Arabia and its five neighbours in the Gulf Cooperation Council condemned it as “cowardly and terrorist”. Arab League secretary-general Amar Musa also said such acts “only aim to destabilise, terrify and kill” innocent people. Incidents of suicide bombing among Muslims have unfortunately increased ever since.

Those who have raised the issue of “collateral damage” in this context are mistaken because non-combatants are chosen as the direct target of suicide bombing. They are neither collateral nor incidental. Even if the cause of fighting the Israeli aggression is a valid one, it does not justify killing non-combatants.

To justify suicide bombing as retaliation or as a form of jihad is also questionable as it begins on an erroneous premise that goes against the ethics of both just retaliation and justified violence. What drives the bombers — often impressionable teenagers — on their suicidal missions are promises of a martyr’s reward by the so-called religious scholars, who fuel the frustration and volatility of tender emotions with their misguided instructions.

Mohammad Hashim Kamali is CEO of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia