

Chapter 4

Sara Omar, “Invoking the Qur’an in a Muslim debate over suicide attacks”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Sara Omar’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Sara Omar analyzes how some modern Muslim scholars have invoked the Qur’an to portray “suicide” attacks in the State of Israel as heroic acts of martyrdom, and others have used it to construct such attacks as prohibited acts of suicide. Omar argues that scholars on both sides of the issue tend to cite certain Qur’anic verses as if their meaning is self-evident and uncontested – rather than discussing interpretive issues – and in ways that contradict traditional understandings of the socio-historical contexts in which the verses emerged. According to Omar, the brief references to scriptural verses in their arguments also contrast the elaborate and nuanced political arguments that they sometimes give.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Omar’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand her argument.

1. According to Omar, Muslim scholars in some contexts have described “suicide” attacks as a justified form of self-defense, while other Muslim scholars have condemned them as prohibited actions for Muslims.
 - a. What sorts of arguments have each set of scholars given to support their position, according to Omar?
 - b. What role has the Qur’an played in their arguments?
2. Omar critiques the way that the Qur’an has been used by scholars on both sides of this debate. On what grounds?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take time to reflect on the following issues:

3. Does Omar's chapter change your understanding of the various roles that the Qur'an plays in Muslim communities? If so, how?
4. Omar describes (and critiques) two different approaches to suicide bombings and the Qur'an. How does it affect your view of each of these approaches to consider them side-by-side?
5. Christian and Jewish communities often engage in similar "prooftexting" practices. Does that affect your view of the Muslim scholars discussed in Omar's chapter?
6. Imagine a neighbor tells you, "Because of the Qur'an, some Palestinians carry out suicide attacks." How would you respond?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Omar's chapter mentions *fatwas*. This Arabic term refers to non-binding legal opinions that are given by scholars of Islamic law, usually in response to questions by individual inquirers. For more on this concept, see, e.g.:
 - o Khaled Abou El Fadl's description of the practice at www.searchforbeauty.org/fatwa-s-non-binding-legal-opinions.
 - o Hamida Ghafour (2016). "The Fatwa Hotline: 'We have heard everything,'" *The Guardian*, 20 August. Available at: theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/20/heard-everything-women-fatwa-hotline-abu-dhabi.
- To learn more about jihad and martyrdom in the Islamic tradition, see, e.g.:
 - o Asma Afsaruddin (2016). "Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought and History." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Available at: oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-46.
 - o Talal Asad (2007). *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 - o Sohail H. Hashmi (ed.) (2012). *Just Wars, Holy Wars, and Jihads: Christian, Jewish and Muslim Encounters and Exchanges*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
 - o Meir Hatina (2014). *Martyrdom in Modern Islam: Piety, Power, and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 - o Michael Bonner (2006). *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.