



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (48/2004)

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## **BESLAN SCHOOL MASSACRE: Revenge in the name of Islam?**

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The 2 September seizure of a school in Beslan in the Russian Caucasus by Chechen separatists which resulted in the death of over 600 school children, parents, teachers and others, shocked and saddened the world. The Chechen rebel leader, Shamil Basayez, reportedly claimed responsibility for the hostage taking and killing, seeking to justify it partly as revenge for the crimes committed by Russian security forces in Chechnya.

But how could anyone justify the death of children as young as seven years old in the incident? In what way have these children contributed to the acts of the government? In Islam, accountability only befits the mukallaf, a person who has come of age, and is of sound mind. This means one has to be at least 15 lunar years, or its equivalent. Only then is he obligated to observe the precepts of the religion. Thus, children cannot be held responsible for their actions, what more for others' actions.

The fact that the perpetrators planned to seize and blow up the school, with full knowledge that there would be young children, belies the excuse that the death of these young children was merely 'collateral damage'. Rather, it was an intentional and calculated move to achieve the terrorists' political goal, which is the attention of the media and the world.

Previous statements made by the spokesperson of terrorists reflect a common rhetoric in the terrorists' statements which is: 'we will kill your people; men, women and children as you killed ours in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere'.

Osama bin Laden himself said in his fatwa on jihad against Jews and Crusaders that "the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it..."

In his letter to American people on Palestine, Osama reportedly said "If we are attacked, then we have the right to attack back. Whoever has destroyed our villages and towns, then we have the right to destroy their villages and towns. Whoever has stolen our wealth, then we have the right to destroy their economy. And whoever has killed our civilians, then we have the right to kill theirs."

While atrocities and persecution against Muslims is not new e.g. by European imperialists, was revenge everything to the Muslims who faced those circumstances? Not if Muslims look into their history and see how nobly Prophet Muhammad and other Muslim heroes behaved towards the enemy despite having been treated otherwise by them.

Prophet Muhammad and his companions were persecuted in Mecca for 13 years until they had to migrate to Medina. During that period, some of the companions were physically tortured and killed. Some had their wealth confiscated. The hostility continued even after their migration to Medina. Battles were fought and lives of Muslims were lost. At one point, Quraish from Mecca even blockaded and besieged Medina.

Despite such hostilities, the Prophet did not take revenge against the Meccan people, except punishing a few individuals, when he captured Mecca. He even forgave one who was an arch enemy of Islam, a woman who had viciously cut off various body parts such as the ears, nose and internal organs from the corpse of the Prophets' beloved uncle.

Similar stories were also recorded when Salahudin (Saladin) recaptured Jerusalem. He prevented his army from killing the general population. This was despite the thousands of lives taken by the Crusaders when they captured Jerusalem from the Muslims.

Armed jihad is not revenge. The Quran states that it is for defence against an enemy's attack, for defence of the oppressed and the weak and to protect places of worship.

No religion, Islam or others, will disagree that killing a human being is essentially evil unless there is an accepted and valid reason. That is why Islam limits the permissibility of killing in armed *jihad* to combatants only.

Guided by the spirit of the religion, Muslims should be very cautious about taking other human beings' lives. But the Al-Qaeda is taking the opposing path, stretching the original remit for killing, to include any person who contributes to war against Muslims. They quote the general opinion of the classical *ulama* without regard for the spirit of the religion.

By this reckoning, Al-Qaeda regards Americans as contributors to war against Muslims because they vote for their government which is deemed responsible for unfair policies against Muslims and pay taxes which are used to employ military personnel.

The fallacy of the argument is that, in practice, it eliminates any limitation of killing in war completely. This does not fit at all with the spirit of Islam. The *ulama* agree that the fundamental aim of the *syariah* is the protection of religion, life, mind, property and family. Hence, Al-Qaeda's stand outrightly contradicts the very aims of *syariah*.

Al-Qaeda criticises the West for not abiding with the Geneva Convention by causing the deaths of thousands of civilians through military operations and economic blockade. However, they conveniently defy it themselves because they view the United Nations as a *kufir* (*disbelieving*) system. As such, they believe that true Muslims like them cannot be part of, nor submit to such a system, or they will risk apostasy. Al-Qaeda has extrapolated the ruling allowing killing in war to include everybody, and they also do not feel obliged to follow any human-made convention. Thus, nothing limits the Al-Qaeda from killing.

This shows the vile thinking in the mind of Al-Qaeda. Muslims need to stay clear and not be persuaded by their emotional appeal. Such a line of thought is a big disservice to *jihad* and Islam. Indeed, Muslims should be the very people who uphold the Geneva Convention in putting limits to war. Although it is non-divine, it fits the spirit of Islam, which deems war to be essentially bad, and hence there must be rules to limit it.

However it would be a mistake to simply conclude that Al-Qaeda and the perpetrators of Beslan massacre were only motivated by revenge. One should not forget that terrorists are spawned by certain situations.

In its statements, Al-Qaeda has striven to position itself as the champion for Muslims' grievances. Although Al-Qaeda has chosen extreme means to express these grievances, some of them are valid and internationally recognized such as the continuing occupation of Palestinian land, aggression against Palestinian civilians, Washington's ignoring of Israel defiance of international conventions and resolutions; and Russian government repression of Chechen people.

The context of the Beslan incident is the Chechen people's position that they are in a state of all-out-war against an enemy that is continuing its oppression, wanting nothing less than total domination, and possibly extinction of the Chechens. Such a view is not baseless if one looks at the long history of oppression by the Czar empire, Soviet Union communist regime and the current Russian government against the Chechen.

So long as there is a precedent for the use of terror and attacking of non-combatants by the powers that be, the militants will reciprocate with the same, not to revenge, but to level the playing field. Thus also providing justification to invoke the 'Quranic injunction' of an eye for an eye. If the international community continues to be ineffective in addressing the grievances, people will empower themselves.

Acts of terrorism like the Beslan incident cannot be stopped by defeating the terrorist forces only. Also the problem cannot be overcome just by attacking the underlying values of the act, the obsession for revenge and its ideological motivation.

In this regard, the problem lies in both the misinterpretation of the text and the opportunity and context that provide for the text to be misinterpreted in that manner. The answer therefore requires the political will of powers that be to address the root causes of the grievances that terrorist groups seize upon and exploit in the name of avenging Islam.

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