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Beheading in the Name of Islam

by Timothy R. Furnish
Middle East Quarterly
Spring 2005, pp. 51-57

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Images of masked terrorists standing behind Western hostages in Iraq and Saudi Arabia have become all too common on Arabic satellite stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Manar. Islamist websites such as *Muntadiyat al-Mahdi*[1] go further, streaming video of their murder.

The February 2002 decapitation of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl, true to its intention, horrified the Western audience. Chechen rebels, egged on by Islamist benefactors, had adopted the practice four years earlier,[2] but the absence of widely broadcast videos limited the psychological impact of hostage decapitation. The Pearl murder and video catalyzed the resurgence of this historical Islamic practice. In Iraq, terrorists filmed the beheadings of Americans Nicholas Berg, Jack Hensley, and Eugene Armstrong. Other victims include Turks, an Egyptian, a Korean, Bulgarians, a British businessman, and a Nepalese. Scores of Iraqis, both Kurds and Arabs, have also fallen victim to Islamist terrorists' knives. The new fad in terrorist brutality has extended to Saudi Arabia where Islamist terrorists murdered American businessman Paul Johnson, whose head was later discovered in a freezer in an Al-Qaeda hideout. A variation upon this theme would be the practice of Islamists slitting the throats of those opponents they label infidels. This is what happened to Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, first gunned down and then mutilated on an Amsterdam street,[3] and to an Egyptian Coptic family in New Jersey after the father had angered Islamists with Internet chat room criticisms of Islam.[4]

The purpose of terrorism is to strike fear into the hearts of opponents in order to win political concession. As the shock value wears off and the Western world becomes immunized to any particular tactic, terrorists develop new ones in order to maximize shock and the press reaction upon which they thrive. In the 1970s and 1980s, terrorists hijacked airliners to win headlines. In the 1980s and 1990s, the car bomb became more popular; Palestinian terrorists perfected suicide bombings in the 1990s. But what once garnered days of commentary now generates only hours. Decapitation has become the latest fashion. In many ways, it sends terrorism back to the future. Unlike hijackings and car bombs, ritual beheading has a long precedent in Islamic theology and history.

Apologetics and Reality

Some American commentators say that Islamist decapitations are intended as psychological warfare and devoid of any true Islamic content. Imam Muhammad Adam al-Sheikh, head of the Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, for example, claimed incorrectly that "beheadings are not mentioned in the Koran at all."[5] Asma Afsaruddin, an associate professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at the University of Notre Dame, also misrepresented Islamic theology and history when she told a reporter, "There is absolutely no religious imperative for this."[6] The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) as well as the American Anti-Arab Discrimination Committee (ADC) have both signed on to a statement that such killings "did not represent the tenets of Islam."[7] Sam Hamod, former director of the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., claimed that the Qur'anic passage on beheading unbelievers did not actually mean that people should be killed.[8] Such fulminations have had an effect: the Western news media has, perhaps as a result of political correctness or its own bias, twisted the reality of Islamic history and propagated such revisionism. With such apologetics, Western academics either display basic ignorance of their fields or purposely mislead. The intelligentsia's denial of any religious roots to the recent spate of decapitation has parallels in the logical back flips and kid-glove treatments in which many professors engaged in order to deny a religious basis for violent jihad.[9] Afsaruddin and Hamod aside, Islamists justify murder and decapitation with both theological citations and historical precedent.

Decapitation in Islamic Theology

Groups such as Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Unity and Jihad) and Abu 'Abd Allah al-Hasan bin Mahmud's Ansar al-Sunna (Defenders of [Prophetic] Tradition)[10] justify the decapitation of prisoners with Qur'anic scripture. *Sura* (chapter) 47 contains the *ayah* (verse): "When you encounter the unbelievers on the battlefield, strike off their heads until you have crushed them completely; then bind the prisoners tightly."[11] The Qur'anic Arabic terms are generally straightforward: *kafaru* means "those who blaspheme/are irreligious," although *Darb ar-riqab* is less clear. *Darb* can mean "striking or hitting" while *ar-riqab* translates to "necks, slaves, persons." With little variation, scholars have translated the verse as, "When you meet the unbelievers, smite their necks."[12]

For centuries, leading Islamic scholars have interpreted this verse literally. The famous Iranian historian and Qur'an commentator Muhammad b. Jarir at-Tabari (d. 923 C.E.) wrote that "striking at the necks" is simply God's sanction of ferocious opposition to non-Muslims.[13] Mahmud b. Umar az-Zamakhshari (d. 1143 C.E.), in a major commentary studied for centuries by Sunni religious scholars, suggested that any prescription to "strike at the necks" commands to avoid striking elsewhere so as to confirm death and not simply wound.[14]

Many recent interpretations remain consistent with those of a millennium ago. In his Saudi-distributed translation of the Qur'an, 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali (d. 1953) wrote that the injunction to "smite at their necks," should be taken both literally and figuratively. "You cannot wage war with kid gloves," Yusuf 'Ali argued.[15] Muhammad Muhammad Khatib, in a modern Sunni commentary bearing the imprimatur of Al-Azhar university in Cairo, says that while traditionalist Muslims tend to see this passage as only applying to the Prophet's time, Shi'ites "think it is a universal precept."[16] Ironically, then in this view, Zarqawi has adopted the exegesis of his religious nemeses. Perhaps the most influential modern recapitulation of this passage was provided by the influential Pakistani scholar and leading Islamist thinker S. Abul A' la Mawdudi (d. 1979), who argued that the *sura* provided the first Qur'anic prescriptions on the laws of war. Mawdudi argued

> Under no circumstances should the Muslim lose sight of this aim and start taking the enemy soldiers as captives. Captives should be taken after the enemy has been completely crushed.[17]

Accordingly, for soldiers of Islam, victory should be the only consideration. Status of prisoners of war was open to interpretation. Mawdudi maintained that the verse did not clearly forbid execution of prisoners but that "the Holy Prophet understood this intention of Allah's command, and that if there was a special reason for which the ruler of an Islamic government regarded it as necessary to kill a particular prisoner (or prisoners), he could do so."[18] As do many Islamists, Mawdudi cited historical examples of the Prophet Muhammad ordering the execution of prisoners, such as some Meccans captured at the Battle of Badr in 624 C.E. and at least one Meccan seized at the Battle of Uhud in the following year. While such examples do not directly address decapitation, they do allow for murder of prisoners-of-war. Mawdudi's interpretation, though, does not sanction the execution of hostages. Only the government, and not individual Muslim soldiers, could determine the fate of captives.[19]

Another, albeit less-frequently, cited Qur'anic passage also sanctions beheadings of non-Muslims. *Sura* 8:12 reads: "I will cast dread into the hearts of the unbelievers. Strike off their heads, then, and strike off all of their fingertips." In the original text, the relevant phrase is *adrabu fawq al-'anaq,* "strike over their necks." This verse is, then, a corollary to *Sura* 47:3. Yusuf 'Ali is one of the few modern commentators who addresses this passage, interpreting it as utilitarian: the neck is among the only areas not protected by armor, and mutilating an opponent's hands prevents him from again wielding his sword or spear.[20] The point of this opening phrase—to "cast dread" or, as some translations have it, "instill terror"—has now been adopted by Islamist terrorists to justify decapitation of hostages.

Decapitation in Islamic History

While some Islamists might justify murder of prisoners on Qur'anic prescription, others reinforce their conclusions by drawing analogies to events during the almost 1,400 years of Islamic history. Here beheading of captives is a recurring theme. Both Islamic regimes and their opposition have utilized beheadings as both military and judicial policy.

The practice of beheading non-Muslim captives extends back to the Prophet himself. Ibn Ishaq (d. 768 C.E.), the earliest biographer of Muhammad, is recorded as saying that the Prophet ordered the execution by decapitation of 700 men of the Jewish Banu Qurayza tribe in Medina for allegedly plotting against him.[21] Islamic leaders from Muhammad's time until today have followed his model. Examples of decapitation, of both the living and the dead, in Islamic history are myriad. Yusuf b. Tashfin (d. 1106) led the Al-Murabit (Almoravid) Empire to conquer from western Sahara to central Spain. After the battle of Zallaqa in 1086, he had 24,000 corpses of the defeated Castilians beheaded "and piled them up to make a sort of minaret for the muezzins who, standing on the piles of headless cadavers, sang the praises of Allah."[22] He then had the detached heads sent to all the major cities of North Africa and Spain as an example of Christian impotence. The Al-Murabits were conquered the following century by the Al-Muwahhids (Almohads), under whose rule Castilian Christian enemies were beheaded after any lost battles.

The Ottoman Empire was the decapitation state par excellence. Upon the Ottoman victory over Christian Serbs at the battle of Kosovo in 1389, the Muslim army beheaded the Serbian king and scores of Christian prisoners. At the battle of Varna in 1444, the Ottomans beheaded King Ladislaus of Hungary and "put his head at the tip of a long pike … and brandished it toward the Poles and Hungarians." Upon the fall of Constantinople, the Ottomans sent the head of the dead Byzantine emperor on tour to major cities in the sultan's domains. The Ottomans even beheaded at least one Eastern Orthodox patriarch. In 1456, the sultan allowed the grand mufti of the empire to personally decapitate King Stephen of Bosnia and his sons—even though they had surrendered and, seven decades later, the sultan ordered 2,000 Hungarian prisoners beheaded. In the early nineteenth century, even the British fell victim to the Ottoman scimitar. An 1807 British expedition to Egypt resulted in "a few hundred spiked British heads left rotting in the sun outside Rosetta."[23]

Decapitation has also been quite common among Muslims whenever orthodoxy confronts Mahdist movements. According to Islamic tradition, the Mahdi, or "rightly-guided one" will come before the end of time to usher in a worldwide, perfect Islamic state. Every few generations, a charismatic leader emerges claiming to be the Mahdi. Since the Mahdi is the harbinger of just government, then any leader he challenges is by nature corrupt. The fervor of such claims often leads both the orthodoxy and the Mahdists to label the other unbelievers, allowing them to invoke Qur'anic verse 47:3 and behead captives.

A prime example of this occurred 500 years ago in the Gujarati sultanate of western India. Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri (d. 1505 C.E.) asserted that he was the Mahdi.[24] His followers, who came to be known as Mahdavis, accused the Gujarati sultans and religious officials of *takfir* (unbelief). The sultans fought back, often displaying the severed heads of Mahdavi caliphs in order to intimidate would-be followers. The Gujarati brutality served its purpose and, by the end of the sixteenth century, the Mahdavis faded into oblivion.

Perhaps the most famous Mahdist movement—and one of very few to gain power[25]—was that led by Muhammad Ahmad of Sudan in the late nineteenth century. In 1880, Muhammad Ahmad declared himself Mahdi and led jihad against the Ottoman Empire, its Egyptian subjects, and their British allies.[26] He and his followers beheaded opponents, Christian and Muslim alike. This Mahdi's most famous victim was Charles Gordon, a British general in Sudan on behalf of Anglo-Egyptian forces. Rudolf Slatin, an Austrian taken prisoner by the Mahdist army, later described the Mahdists' triumphant reaction to Gordon's execution in January 1885. One historian related how:

> Three black [Mahdist] soldiers were in the lead, one of whom he recognized as a man named Shatta. … Shatta was carrying something wrapped in a bloody cloth. Slatin stood silent as they stopped in front of him, their faces triumphant. With a smile, Shatta undid the cloth while the crowd shouted. Slatin looked: it was Gordon's severed head … "Is this not the head of your uncle, the unbeliever?"[27]

While not as graphic as an Al-Qaeda video, the impact on Victorian society was the same. Revenge would take years. Muhammad Ahmad died, probably of typhoid or malaria, in 1885, but his state fell to the British army only in 1898.

A half century later, in the years after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Turkish Republic and imposed secular government, a revolutionary religious leader named Mehmet led a short-lived but violent Mahdist revolt.[28] Mehmet was a Sufi—an Islamic mystic—of the Naqshabandi order. Mehmet and his six disciples adopted the identities of the "Seven Sleepers" of the Qur'an: seven Christian youth who fell asleep in a cave during the time of Roman persecution of Christians in the third century C.E. and emerged, unscathed, over a century later when Rome had joined the faith.[29] By such identification, Mehmet and his Mahdist disciples sought to invoke the Qur'anic imagery of the small band of true believers standing against state idolatry. From Manisa, in west-central Turkey, Mehmet and his followers trekked to Menemen on the Aegean coast where, in the main mosque, Mehmet declared himself the Mahdi and called for the reestablishment of Islamic law canceled by Atatürk. Mehmet's enthusiastic supporters overwhelmed the local Turkish army garrison. They killed the commander and put his severed head on a pole and paraded it around town. The uprising was short-lived, though. The Turkish army rallied its forces and crushed the revolt, executing all involved.

Beheading has particular prominence in Saudi Arabia. In 2003 alone, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia beheaded more than fifty people.[30] This number included both Muslim and non-Muslim workers. Over the past two decades, the Saudis have decapitated at least 1,100 for alleged crimes ranging from drug running to witchcraft and apostasy.[31] The Saudi government not only uses beheadings to punish criminals but also to terrorize potential opponents. One famous example involved a Saudi national guardsman named Juhayman al-'Utaybi. In late 1979, the start of the fifteenth century in the Islamic calendar, 'Utaybi declared his brother-in-law Muhammad bin Abd Allah al-Qahtani to be the Mahdi. They seized control of the holy mosque in Mecca and called on all Saudis to rise up against the government in Riyadh.[32] The house of Saud responded forcibly with a shock-and-awe campaign. After a bloody battle, they regained control of the holy mosque. Within weeks, they had hunted down and either killed or captured the Mahdists. In early 1980, the Saudi government publicly beheaded 'Utaybi and his imprisoned followers. While outsiders may consider the Saudi practice barbaric, most Saudi executions are swift, completed in one sword blow. Zarqawi and his followers have chosen a slow, torturous sawing method to terrorize the Western audience.

All these various justifications contribute to the rash of beheadings in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Because Zarqawi and his followers consider the Iraqi and Saudi governments to be illegitimate, they find no injunction within Islamic law that would prohibit execution of prisoners. Indeed, Zarqawi has commented that he would "accept comments from ulema regarding whether his killing operations are permitted or forbidden according to Islam—provided that the ulema are not connected to a regime and are offering opinions out of personal conviction, and not to please their rulers"[33] Islamist beheadings may be condemned by the imam of the great mosque of Mecca and by religious leaders in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon,[34] but like self-styled mahdis throughout Islamic history, Zarqawi and Islamist terrorists simply dismiss these *fatwa*s (religious rulings) as empty rhetoric from lackey regimes. Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda is also on record as supporting beheadings, including that of at least one Egyptian worker in Iraq whom they classified as a "nonbeliever" by virtue of his citizenship in an apostate regime, as well as his presumed approval of the U.S. actions in Iraq.[35] Increasingly, Islamist groups conflate "unbelievers," "combatants," and prisoners of war, which, coupled with their claim to Islamic legitimacy, provides them with a license to decapitate.

Conclusion

Islamic civilization is not a historical anomaly in its sanction of decapitation.[36] The Roman Empire beheaded citizens (such as the Christian Saint Paul) while they crucified noncitizens (such as Jesus Christ). French revolutionaries employed the guillotine to decapitate opponents. Nevertheless, Islam is the only major world religion today that is cited by both state and non-state actors to legitimize beheadings. And two major aspects of decapitation in an Islamic context should be noted: first, the practice has both Qur'anic and historical sanction. It is not the product of a fabricated tradition. Second, in contradiction to the assertions of apologists, both Muslim and non-Muslim, these beheadings are not simply a brutal method of drawing attention to the Islamist political agenda and weakening opponents' will to fight. Zarqawi and other Islamists who practice decapitation believe that God has ordained them to obliterate their enemies in this manner. Islam is, for this determined minority of Muslims, anything but a "religion of peace." It is, rather, a religion of the sword with the blade forever at the throat of the unbeliever.

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