

# U.S. Military Operations and the Question of Ramadan

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## Brief Analysis

**R**amadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar, will begin on November 16. Some in the United States and abroad have suggested that a moratorium in military operations would be appropriate. Others see no reason to stop. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has stated that "history is replete with instances where Muslims have fought Muslims and Muslims have fought non-Muslims throughout all of the various holy days, including Ramadan." What, then, is the Muslim sentiment regarding fighting during Ramadan? Is there historical precedent or religious requirement for the cessation of hostilities?

## Lack of Religious Justification

**R**amadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is a period in which pious Muslims desist from eating, drinking, and smoking between sunrise and sunset. According to the Qur'an, "Ramadan is the month in which the Qur'an was revealed, a guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the Criterion [of right and wrong]." (Surah ii:185) As such, Ramadan is the most important period for the Muslim. Interestingly, while much is prohibited during this time, war is not. War is prohibited during the first, seventh, eleventh, and twelfth month (known as the Sacred months), but not in the ninth. Worth noting is the fact that the American campaign against Afghanistan began during the month of Rajab, one of the Sacred months.

Recent statements from religious leaders about a continued American campaign over Ramadan include Shaykh Fawzi al-Zefsaf, a high-ranking Egyptian Sunni cleric at Al-Azhar University, who said on October 23: "Ramadan is a sacred month for Muslims, and continuing strikes with the death of innocent people would provoke Muslims throughout the world." However, Muslim leaders like Zaki Badawi, principal of the Muslim College of London, disagree. On October 25, he publicly stated that "Islamic law doesn't prohibit warfare during Ramadan." On the same day, Jaffar Abdel Salam, the vice rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo, remarked, "The Islamic laws are clear. [There are] four months when it is not permitted to make war and Ramadan is not among them."

A close look at modern Middle Eastern history shows that Muslims have in fact fought during Ramadan. Indeed, fighting has generally been encouraged during this holiday. Consider this call from Palestinian Hamas, just last year: "Let us make Tuesday, Ramadan 17, into a day of jihad, a day of resistance to the occupation, so that the occupiers will know that our people has ousted them irrevocably." This Hamas edict refers directly to the battle of Badr, where the Prophet Muhammad fought against the Infidels on 17 Ramadan, 624 AD to liberate the city of Mecca.

# Historical Cases of War during Ramadan

**M**uslims have fought in conflicts -- sometimes multiple -- that have persisted through Ramadan during thirty-seven of the last fifty-four years. In fact, there has been a total of sixty-one conflicts fought during Ramadan in this period. Examples include:

- Fighting took place over two Ramadans in the 1948 war between the Arab states and the new state of Israel.
- Fighting continued through nine Ramadans during the Yemeni civil war from 1962 to 1970.
- During Lebanon's civil war from 1975 to 1990, fighting took place over the course of seventeen Ramadans. In 1986, Christian forces called for a Ramadan ceasefire, which lasted just two weeks.
- In 1973, the Egyptians and Syrians waged war on Israel in what is called *harb ramadan*, or the Ramadan War.
- The Mujahedin fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 through nine Ramadans. In April 1989, the Soviets offered a Ramadan ceasefire; this offer was rejected.
- Iran and Iraq battled from 1980 to 1988, spanning eight Ramadans. In fact, in 1981, Iran rejected a Ramadan ceasefire offered by Iraq. The third year of the war began with what the Iranians called the *ramadan mubarak*, or blessed Ramadan, campaign. In May 1987, Iraq again presented a Ramadan ceasefire proposal, only to be rejected.
- The first Palestinian intifada, lasting from 1987 to 1993, was waged over six Ramadans.
- In 1995, 1997, and 1998, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) called for increased attacks against the Algerian government specifically during Ramadan. During Ramadan 1997, GIA members grabbed victims, stuffed their mouths with newspapers, and then proceeded to guillotine these "enemies of Islam."
- Fighting between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban has lasted through five Ramadans, beginning with Ramadan 1997, and is expected to continue through the coming Ramadan.
- The current al-Aqsa intifada in the Palestinian territories continued through Ramadan 2000, and is also expected to persist through this year's holy month.

It is worth noting that the only three Ramadan ceasefires ever proposed in modern history were suggested by Ba'athist Iraq, the former USSR, and the Christian forces in Lebanon.

## Politics and Ramadan

**M**uslim and non-Muslim allies participating in Operation Enduring Freedom are divided over whether to support continued American bombing during this Muslim holy month. Leaders from Indonesia, Egypt, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Malaysia have spoken out in opposition. Osama Baz, for example, a top advisor to Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, said it would be an "affront" to Muslims everywhere if the United States continued bombing Afghanistan during Ramadan.

But others have justified a continuation of the bombing. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain has said, "wars have been fought during Ramadan in the past." And Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf stated that bombing "should not have any effect on the campaign as such, [although] it may have some effects in the Muslim world."

It is vital to recognize that the arguments for and against bombing during Ramadan are political, not religious. Indeed, America will face political pressure should it decide to continue the campaign. Some Middle East governments fear that American bombing will lead to demonstrations against America and Arab regimes. Islamists perceive Arab regimes to be lackeys of the United States -- and often more evil than America. During Ramadan there exists ample opportunity for Islamists to mobilize public opinion against the United States, for example through greater attendance at mosques and religious activities such as iftars, or festive dinners to break the fast.

America faces a major dilemma if it suspends its bombing campaign; the Taliban will declare that America is weak both politically and morally, lacking the will to persevere. Consider the words of Osama bin Laden himself: "We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier. He is ready to wage cold wars but unprepared to fight hot wars and we are ready for all occasions, we rely on God." If the campaign ceases, the Taliban will believe that it has the ability to outlast the United States.

## Conclusion

There is no historic or religious justification for America to cease fighting during Ramadan; coalition politics are the only real consideration. While it is clear that America must be sensitive to the needs and concerns of Muslims, America is at war. On November 1, when National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said there would be no pause in the bombing for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, she had the weight of historic and religious precedent to bolster her words.

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