

Islam and War: Sayyid Sīstānī on the Ethics of Conflict

We live in a time when warfare is conducted with a level of violence unprecedented in human history. Cluster bombs are commonplace, and mass executions are so visible, they virtually disappear. In such circumstances, how can Muslims understand and live by a religion that calls to higher ideals, even as much of the Muslim world is being torn apart by violence in which their co-religionists are either perpetrators or victims of such atrocities?

In this interview, Sayyid Sulayman Hassan Abidi discusses some of the main issues addressed in Sayyid Ali al-Sistani's 2014 letter to the Iraqi forces battling ISIS. The issues range from what role warfare and violence have in Islam, to how one can derive and stay true to Islamic ethics and virtues during these conflicts. Sayyid Sulayman Hasan provides insight into these questions and more, gleaned from both the verses of the Qur'an and the lives and words of the Ahl al-Bayt.

Multimedia Directed by Huda Abdul-Razzak

Video

Table of Contents:

- 0:00 – The Purpose of Sayyid Sistani's Letter, Its Importance, and Audience
- 4:57 – What Role Does Violence Play in Islam?
- 7:29 – Islamic Ethics of War
- 13:10 – Islamic Ethics and Modern Warfare
- 17:55 – Is ISIS Faithful to the Islamic Sources?
- 26:00 – The Boundaries of Islam: Who Is and Is Not a Muslim?

Audio

Listen or [download the audio file](#) of the video-interview below.

[Islam and War: Sayyid Sistani on the Ethics of Conflict](#)

Sayyid ‘Alī Ḥusaynī Sīstānī’s Letter to the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq against ISIS

This is the official english translation provided by the [Office of Sayyid Sistani in Najaf, Iraq](#).

Advice and Guidance to the Fighters on the Battlefields

In the Name of God, Ever-Merciful, Ever-Compassionate

Praise belongs to God, Lord of the Cosmos, and ever-lasting peace be upon the best of His creation, Muhammad and his noble and pure progeny.

I call your attention to the following:

Let the dear fighters know, the ones who have been given the honour to be present in the battlefield against the transgressors, that:

1. Just as God, exalted is He, has called the believers to Jihad [against the transgressors] and made it one of the pillars of religion, and just as God has privileged the Holy Warriors over those who do not fight [in Jihad], He, noble is His name, has placed certain conditions and etiquettes [on the conduct of Jihad]. Such conditions are necessitated by wisdom and mandated by the primordial nature of human beings. It is necessary, then, to learn these conditions and etiquettes thoroughly and to follow them sincerely, for one who learns these conditions and follows them sincerely will receive his deserved reward and blessings from God, and one who neglects them will not receive [the blessings] he hoped for.
2. With regards to Jihad there are general guidelines to which one must adhere even when confronting non-Muslims. The Prophet, peace be upon him and his progeny, advised his Companions to follow these general guidelines before sending them off to battle. In an authentic tradition, it has been reported that the Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765), peace be upon him, said, “When the Messenger of God, peace be upon him and his progeny, would want to send a fighting contingent he would sit down with them and advise them to represent God justly and to follow the good example of the religion of the Messenger of God. He would [further] say, ‘Do not indulge in acts of extremism, do not disrespect dead corpses, do not resort to deceit, do not kill an elder, do not kill a child, do not kill a woman, and do not cut down trees unless necessity dictates otherwise.’”
3. Similarly, the fighting against those Muslims who oppress [others] and who wage war [unjustly] has its guidelines and etiquettes, too. Indeed such guidelines and etiquettes informed the actions of the Imam ‘Ali (d. 661), who, when confronted with such situations, admonished his followers [to follow them]. The Muslim world agreed in unanimity that the actions, guidelines, and etiquettes of Imam ‘Ali are a worthy example to emulate. So pay heed to the example of Imam ‘Ali and follow his path. He,

peace be upon him, emphasizing on what the Prophet, peace be upon him and his progeny, had conveyed in Hadith of Thaqalayn and Gadir and many others, said, "Set your sights on the Family of the Prophet. Adhere to their direction. Follow their footsteps. Verily, the Family of the Prophet will not lead you away from the path of guidance, nor will they make you return to the path of destruction. If they rise, so shall you; and if they stand, so shall you. Do not traverse the path ahead of them, for you shall lose your way; and do not lag behind of them, for you shall perish."

4. By the majesty of God! By the majesty of God! Souls are sacred! Never should you do to them that which God has not deemed permissible. What great travesty it is to kill innocent souls, and what great honour it is to safeguard innocent souls, just as God, exalted is He, mentioned in His book [i.e. the Qur'an]. The killing of an innocent soul has dangerous consequences, both in this world and in the hereafter. History has taught us that the Commander of the Faithful [i.e. 'Ali], peace be upon him, took much caution to protect the sanctity of the human soul in his wars. He, in his historical document, said to [his companion] Malik al-Ashtar, whose friendship and proximity to 'Ali is well known, "Be vigilant! Do not spill the blood of the innocent without any right to do so, for nothing is more inviting wrath, greater in evil consequences and more effective in the decline of blessings and cutting life span more than the unlawful spilling of blood. On the Day of Reckoning, God shall judge wisely between those servants of His who spilled blood. Do not strengthen your authority by the unlawful spilling of blood, for that will surely enfeeble and weaken the authority and [may] even cause it to perish or shifting (to other who are wise). There is no excuse for you in front of God nor I, if you kill unlawfully, because that shall cause you punishment."

If you [i.e. the fighters of the Popular Mobilisation Committees] find yourselves in an uncertain situation from which you fear the Divine Wrath, issue a vocal warning [to those fighting you], or issue a physical warning by directing your bullets in a manner which does not strike the target or cause its destruction apologizing (for such a disliked confrontation) to your Lord and taking precaution not to kill innocent souls.

5. By the majesty of God! By the majesty of God! The lives of those who do not fight you are sacred, especially the weak among the elderly, the children, and the women, even if they were the families of those who fight you. It is unlawful for you to violate the sacredness of those who fight you except for their belongings.

It was the noble habit of the Commander of the Faithful [i.e. 'Ali], peace be upon him, to prohibit [his soldiers] from attacking the properties of the families, the women, and the children of those against whom he fought, despite efforts by some of those who [claimed to] follow him, especially the Kharijites, who insisted on legitimizing it. To refute them, 'Ali would say, "(Their) men have fought so we fight the men, but we do not inflict harm on their women and children, for they are Muslims and within the Realm of Hijra (abode of emigration). Thus you have no right over them. But whatever they procured and used against you in the course of fighting, and whatever their army possessed and acquired belongs to you. Whatever is in their homes is an inheritance for their offspring according to the ordinance of God. You have no right over their women or over their offspring."

6. By the majesty of God! By the majesty of God! It is [abhorrent] to cast suspicion over the integrity of people's faith in order to target them and legitimize the taking away of that which is sacred [i.e. their life]. Alike the way of the Kharijites of the early Islamic period and their contemporary followers who are ignorant of the basic tenets of religion, following their own personal moods and whims and have sought to justify their [un-Islamic] actions by recourse to some textual evidence which they never understood. The Muslims of today have to live with the consequences of these misinterpretations.

Know that whosoever bears testimony that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His messenger is indeed a Muslim. That person's life and property must be safeguarded. If that person falls into the trap of [theological] deviance and religious innovations, then know that not every misguidance leads to infidelity, nor does every innovation strip one of Islam as his faith. At times, a person is subjected to death penalty due to a turmoil caused by him or due to retribution he still stays a Muslim.

In the Qur'an, God has addressed the Holy Warriors in the following:

"O Believers, when you are journeying in the path of God, be discriminating, and do not say to him who offers you a greeting, 'Thou art not a believer', seeking the chance goods of the present life". [Similarly] it has been widely reported that the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, prohibited declaring the masses of those who fought him as unbelievers; indeed this was the inclination [i.e. to declare the enemy as unbelievers] of the leaders of the Kharijites in his camp. But he [i.e. 'Ali] used to say that they [i.e. his enemies] were a people who had fallen into misjudgement and error, though this does not justify their repugnant act and could not be an excuse for their obnoxious deeds. In a sound report on the authority of [Imam] al-Sadiq who narrates on the authority of his father, peace be upon them both, that "'Ali, peace be upon him, did not label any of those who fought him as polytheists or hypocrites but rather he would say, 'They are our brothers who have transgressed against us' and he would [also] say about those who fought him 'We fight them not because we think of them as unbelievers and not because they think we are unbelievers.'"

7. Never inflict harm on non-Muslims, regardless of their religion and sect. The non-Muslims [who live in predominately Muslim lands] are under the protection of the Muslims in those lands. Whosoever attacks non-Muslims is a betrayer and traitor. And rest assured that such an act of betrayal and treachery is one of the most repugnant acts in accordance to innate nature and the religion of God.

Regarding those who are not Muslim, God mentions them in His Book, "God forbids you not, as regards those who have not fought you in religion's cause, nor expelled you from your habitations, that you should be kindly to them, and act justly towards them; surely God loves the just." The Muslim must not allow the violation of the sanctity of those who are not Muslim and who live under the protection of Muslims. Rather, the Muslim must honour and guard those who are not Muslim as he would with his own family. When we read stories about the life of the Commander of the Faithful we learn that when Mu'awiya sent Sufyan son of 'Awf from the tribe of Ghamid to carry out raids on the frontiers of Iraq - in order to frighten the people [of Iraq] - and when he [Sufyan] killed the Muslims and those who were not Muslim from among the people of Anbar, the Commander of the Faithful was saddened greatly by this. In a sermon [which followed], he [i.e. 'Ali] said, "And this one from the tribe of Ghamid [i.e. Sufyan]...his horses have entered Anbar and killed Hassan son of Hassan al-Bakri and he pushed back your horsemen

from the boarders. And it has been told to me that a man from among them [i.e. the raiders] would enter the house of the Muslim and the non-Muslim women and would then forcefully remove her anklets, bangles, necklaces, and her earrings. And no woman could resist it except by reciting the verse from Qur'an "We are for God and to Him shall we return (2:156)" and seeking mercy. Then the raiders left overloaded with wealth with no wounds or loss of life. Had a Muslim died as a result of this sorrow and regret [after the raids] then no one is to blame him. But in [in my eyes] he deserves [praiseworthy] mention."

8. By the majesty of God! By the majesty of God! Do not steal the wealth of people. The wealth of a Muslim is unlawful unless he agrees to its procurement. Those who usurp from others, they have obtained a piece of fire from the fires of hell. God, exalted is He, said, "Those who devour the property of orphans unjustly, devour fire in their bellies, and shall assuredly roast in a blaze." And in a tradition reported on the authority of the Prophet, peace be upon him and his progeny, that he said, "Whosoever steals and usurps the wealth of another, God will turn away from him and will not accept and reward him for his good deeds until he repents and returns the wealth to its rightful owner."

We also find when we read stories about the life of the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, that he forbade [his soldiers from] taking his enemy's wealth except for that found in their military encampment. And whenever someone [from the enemy's camp] brought forth proof that his personal wealth was taken [unlawfully] he ['Ali] would ask that it be returned. In another report on the authority of Marwan son of al-Hakam, who said, "After 'Ali defeated us in Basra he returned to the people [i.e. soldiers] their wealth. Who brought proof was given the wealth and (even) who didn't had proof was given by a swear on the name of his God."

9. By the majesty of God! By the majesty of God! Do not violate the sanctity of all things sacred. Do not violate or infringe on them with your tongue or action. Be cautious and do not target a person due to the mistakes of others. God, exalted is He, says, "And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another." Do not base on suspicions, distorting the certainty. Certainty entails caution and suspicion entails attacking others without proof. Your hatred of someone does not justify that you violate his sanctity, for God says: "And do not let the hatred of people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to righteousness."

[Moreover], it has been reported that the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, that he said in a sermon in the Battle of Siffin: "Do not disrespect the corpse of the dead, and if you defeat the men of your enemies do not violate the sanctity of their women and their houses. Do not enter their houses. Do not take anything from their houses. Take only what you find in their military encampments. Do not provoke their women by harming them even though they may attack your honour and abuse your leaders and noble men. And, it is reported that after the Battle of the Camel ended, he [i.e. 'Ali] came across a large gathering of wailing women crying over their lost ones. When they saw him they shouted in one voice 'Here comes the killer of our loved ones!', but he [i.e. 'Ali] did not respond. After [some time elapsed] he said to some of those near to him, pointing at a room which housed [captives] among them leaders of those who fought him like Marwan son of Hakam and 'Abdullah son of Zubayr, 'Had I been the killer of [their] loved ones I would have killed these people, too.'

It has also been reported that when he [i.e. 'Ali] heard that some from among his companions such as Hujr son of 'Adi and 'Amr son of al-Hamiq slandered the People of Sham [i.e. Greater Syria] during the Battle of Siffin, he said: "I dislike for you to be of those who slander [others]. It is better for you to describe their deeds and state of action; surely this is the more refined way of speaking [about others] and more justified in excuse and rather than slander them, it is better that you say 'O God protect our lives and protect their lives and bring harmony between us and them and deliver them from error so that the ignorant can reach to the truth one inclined towards rebellion and revolt could turn away from it.' They [i.e. 'Ali's companions] said, "O Commander of the Faithful, we accept your counsel and we [will] strive to imitate your mannerism."

10. Do not deprive any people, who do not fight you, of their rights even if they anger you. It has been reported from stories about the life of the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, that he afforded those of other faith the same [respect] he afforded to the Muslims so long as they did not wage war against him. And he would never launch a military assault unless he was attacked first. For instance, when he was in the middle of delivering a sermon in [the Mosque of] Kufa a group of Kharijites stood up and interrupted him and shouted on more than one occasion 'Judgement belongs to God [alone]!', to which he replied 'Truthful words indeed but couched with false intentions. You have three rights over us: we do not take away [your right] to pray in the mosques of God; we do not deprive you from your share of the spoils of war as long as you fight along us; and we do not wage war against you unless you launch the first attack.'

11. Know that most of those who fight you are victims who have been led astray by others. Do not let those who led others astray be better than you. Let your righteous actions, your well-wishing nature, your just conduct, your forbearance, and your avoidance of extortion, sin and aggression serve as an example for them. Whosoever helps misguided souls find the path of righteousness is like the one who saves a soul from perdition. And whosoever misguides a person knowingly it is as if he has killed him.

We find in the stories about the lives of the Imams of the Progeny [i.e. AhlulBayt], peace be upon them, that they would go to great lengths to dispel whatever misconception those who fought them held, even if there was no hope of acceptance, seeking excuse (for unwanted confrontation) from their Lord educating the Muslim multitudes and their way of setting an example for future generations. It has been reported in some traditions on the authority of al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, that Imam 'Ali, peace be upon him, on the Day of Basra [i.e. the Battle of the Camel], said to his companions: "Do not be quick to judge the enemy until I make clear to them what is between God, I and them." He ['Ali] then approached them and said: "O People of Basra have you found in my rule any oppression? They said: "No." He [then] said: "[Have I] broken a promise?" They said: "No." He [then] said: "Have I shown desire for this [material] world so that I and my family took something and prevented you from having it, is this why you have breached the allegiance to me?" They said: "No." He [then] said: "Have I applied punishment unfairly?" They said: "No."

Imam Husayn followed a similar course of action in [the Battle of] Karbala. He took care to dispel doubt and clarify matters so that the living live and the dead die not in vain but after clear proof has been brought forth before them. In fact one cannot fight a Muslim people without establishing first a clear

proof and without trying to dispel doubt and clarify misjudgement. This practise has been established in the Qur'an and prophetic traditions.

12. Let no one [among you] think that there is a solution in oppression which cannot be gained by justice. Such a thought ascends from a narrow observation of the incidents without considering the mid and long term consequences of such an attitude. The adherents to such thoughts are those who have no information on the tradition of life and the history of nations which alerts on loosing innocent lives and spread of abhorrence in the society as a result of the atrocity of them.

It has been reported in the traditions that 'The one who finds difficulty to implement justice will find greater difficulty to deal with injustice'. The contemporary history leaves a great lesson for those who ponder on it. Few rulers, for the sake of strengthening their power, oppressed and prosecuted hundreds of thousands of people. And God, exalted is He, came at them from whence they did not reckon. As if they had destroyed their sovereignty with their own hands.

13. It may be the case sometimes that when you adhere to good conduct and remain disciplined you suffer [military] losses; this, nevertheless, is more spiritually rewarding, everlasting end and of greater benefit. The example set by the Imams serves as a case in point. They did not wage war unless they were attacked, even if such actions caused them temporary losses. It is reported in a tradition that on the Day of the Camel when the armies gather to fight, a person from the army of the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, proclaimed, "Do not attack until I tell you to." So some of his companions said, 'But they have fired [arrows] at us.' He said, 'Wait.' When the enemy's fired arrows which killed one of them, he said, 'Fight away with God's blessing.' Imam Husayn, peace be upon him, followed a similar course of action on the day of Ashura.

14. Be the guardians and well-wishers of those who you are with you, so that they feel secured with you and support you against your enemies. Help the weak among them in whatever you can. They are your brothers and your family. Show compassion towards them just as you show compassion towards you own. Know that you are within God's sight, and that He counts your actions, intents, and your inner dispositions.

15. Do not let anything take precedence over your obligatory prayers. There is no better deed than prayers that a person can take towards his Lord. Prayer is the means through which man humbles himself before his creator and is a greeting which one offers toward Him. It is the foundation of religion and the criterion through which actions are judged. In the occasions of fear and war, God has given you some discount to the extent that proclamation of 'God is Great' is enough replacing the units of the regular prayer even if the person is not facing the Qibla.

God said: "Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the middle prayer and stand before God, devoutly obedient. And if you fear [an enemy, then pray] on foot or while riding. But when you are secure, then remember God [in prayer], as He has taught you that which you did not [previously] know."

God has commanded the Believers to exercise caution and not to gather for prayer at once but to take turns [performing prayer]. It has been reported in the life story of the Commander of the Faithful that he asked his companions to be mindful of the [importance of] prayer. In a sound report narrated on the authority of Ja'far al-Sadiq, peace be upon him, that he said, with regards to the prayer of fear, in the midst of war and confrontation: 'Each person has to pray with indication wherever he is, even in the midst of sword fighting, wrestling and grappling. The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, (even) prayed on the night before [the Battle of] Siffin (the night of Harir). Their prayers were nothing more than proclamations that 'God is great' and invocations and supplications. That was their prayer and [even then] the Commander of the Faithful did not ask them to repeat their prayers.'

16. Help yourselves by remembering God frequently and reciting passages from the Qur'an. Remember that one day you will revert and stand before Him. It has been reported that the Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, was so watchful of remembrance of God that when in the midst of battle, on the eve of Siffin, a carpet was rolled out for him and he offered his recitation while arrows were being fired at him from all directions passing by his ears left and right, and he did not get scared and abandon his prayer until he completed it.

17. Strive to act – may God help you- in the same righteous manner as the Prophet and his progeny, peace be upon them, acted in both the times of war and peace so you could adorn Islam and set an example as it deserves. This is the religion which is built on illumination of innate nature, reason, and good manners. Suffices to say that this is the religion that raised the banners of reason and good manners, for its foundations are built on calls to contemplate and ponder the dimensions and horizons of the life and to take lesson from it and to act accordingly God said, "And by the soul ad He who proportioned it. And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness. He has succeeded who purifies it. And he has failed who instils it [with corruption]."

The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, said, "God has sent His messengers among them and series of His prophets to them to get them to fulfil the pledges the primordial covenant and to remind them of His blessings to them and to exhort them by preaching and to awaken the dormant intellects."

If only the Muslims follow the true teachings of Islam and abide by them they will surely find abundant blessings that will illuminate their path and expand their horizons. Be careful and do not hold on to the ambiguous readings of the scriptures, and if it is directed towards the people of knowledge – as God has asked you to do so- they would know the proper meaning and crux of the matter.

18. Do not be hasty in situations where caution is required else you would cast yourself to destruction. Your enemies wish for you to act in haste and improperly in precarious situations and wish for you to rush without taking any precaution and professional advice. Organise yourselves and coordinate with one another. Do not hasten to take a step forward until you are sure about its maturity, strength, necessary means, implications, guarantee of steadiness and potential results. God said, "O Believers take precaution and [either] go forth in companies or go forth all together.' And God said, "Indeed, God loves those who fight in His cause in a row as though they are a [single] compact structure."

19. Those (civilians) among you should be the well-wishers of the militants, acknowledging their sacrifice and protecting them from evils. They shouldn't be suspicious about them. God has not assigned any right upon others unless he has assigned the same for them. Each of them enjoys equal rights.

You should be aware of the fact that there is no one well-wisher than amongst you for each other, if you clean your hearts from grudge and unite together to the extent that if anyone of you commits few mistakes or even if many outrageous mistakes you should forgive, forget and overlook it. Whosoever thinks that someone else is more well-wisher than his own family, tribe and fellow citizens, he is mistaken. Those who want to experience things which have already been experienced (by others), would regret. One should know that the person who begins the forgiving and overlooking the mistakes of others is worthy of rewards of forgiveness, goodness and rectitude. God will not waste the reward of those noble deeds and at times will reward it completely in the darkness of Barzakh and the Day of Resurrection. Whosoever supports a Holy Warrior or his family and protects them, achieves an equal reward as that Holy Warrior.

20. Everyone must let go of those sentiments which carry hatred and bigotry. Follow the noble manners. God has made people into different tribes and races so that they may know each other. Do not be overcome by narrow-minded views and personal egos. Do you not see how the majority of Muslims today are engaged in self-destruction where they spend their resources, energy, and wealth on killing and destruction of each other? They should instead spend their resources and wealth on the advancement of knowledge and multiplying their resources and improve the welfare of the people. And be aware of a punishment which shall not visit the wrongdoers among you exclusively. Indeed the trouble has arrived. Try to put out the trouble and avoid kindling it. Hold on to the rope of God collectively and do not disunite. Know that if God finds any good in your hearts, He will give you (something which is) better than what has been taken away from you. Indeed God has power over all things.

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