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RAHAT-UL-QULOOB

Bi-Annual, Trilingual (Arabic, English, Urdu) ISSN: (P) 2025-5021. (E) 2521-2869
 Project of RAHATULQULOOB RESEARCH ACADEMY,
 Jamiat road, Khiljiabad, near Pak-Turk School, link Spini road, Quetta, Pakistan.
 Website: www.rahatulquloob.com

Approved by Higher Education Commission Pakistan

Indexing: » Australian Islamic Library, IRI (AIOU), Tahqeeqat, Asian Research Index,
 Crossref, Euro pub, MIAR, ISI, SIS.

TOPIC:

The Ethical Foundations of the Prophetic Battles

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How to Cite: Muhammad Mudasar Nawaz, Dr. Sana Jadoon, & Farzana Solangi.
 (2025). ENGLISH: The Ethical Foundations of the Prophetic Battles. *Rahat-Ul-Quloob*, 9(2), 01-14. Retrieved from
<https://rahatulquloob.com/index.php/rahat/article/view/478>

URL: <http://rahatulquloob.com/index.php/rahat/article/view/478>

Vol. 9, No.2 || July–December 2025 ||English - Page. 01-14

Published online: 27-11-2025

The Ethical Foundations of the Prophetic Battles

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Abstract:

The paper discusses the code of ethics that ruled military conflicts throughout the prophetic era by claiming that the military conflicts were governed by a complex network of ethical codes of conduct that shifted the tribal warfare that existed before the Islamic faith. The paper identifies fundamental theories such as the divine necessity of defensive war, the absolute shield of non-combatants, firm forbids treachery and mutilation, and the requirement of justice and mercy even to the enemy through examination of some of the most significant wars in the history of the Islamic faith: Badr, Uhud, and Khandaq. Comparative analysis reveals a lot of convergences with contemporary Just War Theory and International Humanitarian Law, but what is also mentioned are the theocentric differences. The article also concerns the historical and modern misunderstandings of this tradition and concludes that the prophetic model provides a crucial and indigenous asset to inform the contemporary thinking of Muslims on the conflict system, to challenge the extremist discourses, and to deepen the world discourses on the morality of wars.

KEY WORDS: Islamic Just War Theory, Prophetic Sunnah, Ethical Conduct, Non-Combatant Immunity.

Introduction:

The history of war in the early Islam especially the wars that were led by Prophet Muhammad, have been limited to strategic and political reports. Nevertheless, there is another deeper aspect that is more often than not, which was the strict ethical code by which these military interventions were carried out. The Prophetic battles should be regarded as a paradigm shift in the world of tribal revenge, incessant cruelty, and destruction of the defeated in the war, the moral restraint and humanism became central aspects of the conflict. Knowledge of this ethical code is not just an academic matter of historical theology, but is essential to the understanding of the basic principles of the Islamic *jus in bello* (the law governing the conduct of military warfare) and in the discourse of ethics of war and peace in the present.

The main point of the current article is to place the ethical grounds in a systemized way, which supported the Prophetic battles. We shall not only chronicle the events but also critically look at the injunctions, practices and

precedents established in these conflicts. Some of our fundamental values will include the necessity to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants, the ban of treachery and mutilation, the humane treatment of the prisoners of war and the reduction of the destruction of nature. These principles were not ideals but practical and implemented and applied, and they left a legacy of controlled warfare. As an example, the explicit commandment of the Prophet, “Do not kill women, children, the old, and the monk in his monastery.”¹ is an iconic document that formalized the immunity of civilians. His message to his soldiers, also, is the same, the rejection of the pre-Islamic principles of total war is highlighted by the refusal to be treacherous, excessive, and to kill a newly born child.²

This paper maintains that the code of ethics which was put into practical use in the Prophetic battles formed a part and parcel of their mission and enabled the warfare to no longer be an instrument of brute strength but a means of justice with a divinely decreed restraint. The discussion of these historical precedents in terms of ethics may help better understand an important input in the history of international humanitarian law and confront contemporary misunderstandings. The main sources, the Quran and the authoritative Sunnah, are going to be discussed in the following sections to build a consistent image of an ethical battlefield, the lessons of which are still extremely significant to us.

Historical Background:

The prophetic battles that took place in 624-627 CE cannot be interpreted outside the context of the intricate sociopolitical and religious environment of the seventh century Arabia. The Arabian Peninsula was a patchwork of tribal groups, in which there was no loyalty, and where honor codes provided a form of revenge justice. The place where Prophet was born, Mecca was a powerful commercial and religious center whose economy and social hierarchy could not have been separated by the polytheistic pilgrimage that was based on Ka'ba. The Islam message with its rigid monotheism and the demand of social justice proved a real menace to this successful order, which resulted in systematic persecution of the emerging Muslim community. This persecution ended in the Hijrah (Migration) to Yathrib (modern-day Medina) in 622 CE that led to the establishment of an independent Muslim polity and predetermined the military campaigns to come.

The first and the most important of these battles was the Battle of Badr, which was fought in 2 AH/624 CE. It was not a premeditated attack, rather a defense of a giant Meccan commercial caravan returning to Syria, and in turn that was

an investment of the stolen wealth of the Muslims who had been displaced.³ The Meccans with the intention of destroying the Muslim community sent an army thrice the number of the Muslim army. The Muslims overcame all the odds to have a decisive victory which they credited to divine intervention. Badr created important precedents morally. Prophet provided clear guidelines to fight when they picked up arms and not when they are weak. The battle was a turning point and it entrenched the Muslims in Arabia and showed them that their cause was safe.

The next year, in the vengeance of Badr, the Meccans attacked Medina with a three thousand strong army. The Uhud battle (3 AH/625 CE) was a bitter experience to the Muslim nation. Following the first victory, a strategic miscalculation on the part of a group of Muslim archers who had abandoned their strategic location to go in search of spoils, the Meccan cavalry was able to flank the main body of Muslim forces and the Prophet himself suffered injuries. Uhud emphasized that the imperative of discipline, compliance to command and the perils of distraction with worldly things (ghanimah) are critical even during battles. It emphasized the fact that the result of military effort depended on the will of the deity and a code of strategy and ethics.

The worst challenge was the Battle of the Trench (Khandaq) of 5 AH/627 CE. To check the increasing power of Medina, a confederation (al-Ahzab) of more than ten thousand men, consisting of Quraysh of Mecca and his allies and Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayzah, besieged the city. The Muslims followed a new defensive position proposed by Salman al-Farsi to counter the Meccan cavalry and excavated a trench. The siege was increased by betrayal on the part of some of their own members and this led the Muslims to the edge of destruction but they eventually defeated the siege through disunity among the confederates and the ravages of a great storm. This was a decisive turning point as the military strength of the Quraysh was defeated by the inability of the confederacy and the offensive military power was lost.

The Constitution of Medina, which was a pioneering document instituted by the Prophet when he arrived in the city, was a sociopolitical context of these battles. This charter established a pluralistic society (ummah) of Muslims, Jews and polytheists who shared civic duties and defense against foreign attacks⁴. The conflicts were, then, not just the religious wars, but the wars of survival of this still young political organism against the unrestrained outer violence and inner treachery. They were warfare campaigns aimed at achieving the right of the Muslim people to live in liberty and to worship, and predetermined the

further peaceful conquest of Mecca and the eventual unification of Arabia under a new ethical and political government.

Prophetic Battles based on Ethical Principles:

The military activism of the Prophet Muhammad was not just a tactical undertaking but was mainly based on overall ethical approach as a result of revelation. This paradigm changed war as an anarchical endeavor of tribal revenge into a form of discipline informed by ethical demands, and it set a tradition of justice that placed the human dignity first in the middle of a conflict.

Godly Directives and Ethical Conscience:

Divine direction was the key to the moral system in the war of prophecy. The ethics of war was no longer a matter of individual judgment or the feelings of the day but it was within the control of the injunctions of the Quran and the application of the Prophet himself. The creation of justice and the end of religious persecution were the main moral imperatives. The verse on Quran, has said, Permission [to fight] has been granted those whom they are fighting, because they were wronged. And surely Allah is capable of granting them conquest " (Quran 22:39) actually makes the conquest of fighting defensive against oppression.⁵ This changed the spirit of conquest or plunder to defense of the weak and freedom of faith. The final goal was not to destroy the enemy, but to establish a right social order in which individuals would be able to worship. This is also a divine command that had stringent boundaries with the Quran dictating that one should fight in the path of Allah those who are fighters but are not transgressors. In fact, Allah is not pleased with the presence of transgressors" (Quran 2:190).⁶ This use of the word transgress (ta'tadu) is general, which includes the start of hostility, excessive use of force, and the use of non-combatants, and that way places the idea of proportionality and restraint to the center of military actions.

High regard of Human Decency and the Ban on Violence of Non-Combatant:

The most ground-breaking ethical principle was probably the categorical protection of the non-combatants. Contrary to the war conventions of the pre-Islamic times, the Prophet gave explicit and recurrent orders to his armies. He clearly stated, Kill not women, children, old, the monk in his monastery.⁷ This injunction made the principle of civilian immunity institutionalized as the dignity of people, who did not represent a military threat was acknowledged. This value was applied to religious leaders who were devoted to worship,

irrespective of their belief which showed a respect to the spiritual life. Moreover, the Prophet forbade the mutilation which was a usual attribute of tribal conflicts to create fear by saying, "Do not mutilate."⁸ He also prohibited the murder of non-combatants peasant and servants, and he also warned against the indiscriminate destruction of infrastructure, he told people not to chop down productive trees or do away with inhabited territory except when absolutely required by military necessity.⁹ These regulations formed an operational code, which separated the combatants and non-combatants well and aimed to avoid the maximum destruction of the collateral damages, which was an indication of a great respect to human life, livelihood, and environment.

Equity and Righteousness in War decisions:

The prophetic model demanded the concepts of justice and fairness as the principles of work both before, during, and after the battle. This started by giving the enemy a fair opportunity to choose and opt either to become Muslims or in the case of polytheists to become subjects of the Muslim rule and pay jizyah as a form of protection but which will take the place of war. In a battle, betrayal was highly prohibited. The trio of directives in the words of the Prophet, Do not be treacherous,¹⁰ made sure that treaties even with the adversaries were to be kept and the use of deceptive means that disregarded oaths incomposible. This spirit of fairness was also applied to the sharing of spoils of war which were given out in line with known rules in the Quran (8:41) and this avoided internal feudalism and made the entire work of the army receive its due reward. This justice was also characterized by the manner in which the prisoners of war were treated. Although prisoners might be ransomed, released in a show of mercy, or ultimately assimilated into the Muslim community, the Prophet led by example to treat prisoners in a humane way. He taught his companions after the Battle of Badr, "I recommend you to treat the captives well,"¹¹ the result of which were scenes in which the captors in the Muslim world distributed their own small portions of bread to their captives, and heeded their welfare.

Mercy and Compassion Even to Foes:

Going beyond the avoidance of cruelty, the prophetic ethic proactively involved mercy and compassion. This was not an abstract ideal but a reality that was practiced. After the historic conquest of Mecca, a city that had suppressed the Muslims over 20 years and launched war against them, the Prophet was in front of the gathered Quraysh people awaiting his verdict. At a time of unsurpassed historical importance he said, Go, thou art free.¹² And

there was something beautiful in this broad amnesty, which was given when his triumph was absolute, and which cut across the centuries of vengeance and opened the path to reconciliation. His own behavior also displayed this kind of compassion.¹³ There are reports about the Prophet that he had those who had died in battle given a dignified burial and also that he had asked whether those who were wounded in combat on the enemy side were fine, showing that he had a Quranic description as a mercy to the worlds (Quran 21:107).

Ethical Conduct Case Studies:

The ethics of Islamic war were not an abstract ideology but they were strictly applied during a fight. A closer look at particular campaigns shows the way these moral imperatives were turned into action, leaving behind a tradition of strategic ethics that had achieved a balance between military need and a humanitarian agenda.

The Battle of Badr: Foundations of Principles at Work:

The Battle of Badr (2 AH/624 CE) is the landmark case of how one can apply ethical principles in fights of prophet. This battle was a struggle with a much bigger army of Mecca, which provided the basis of regulations to follow by Muslim armies. The moral code was manifested at the very beginning. It was in this situation that, the Prophet Muhammad surrounded the Meccans in Badr with his smaller army, when they were camped, forcing them to move forward in the hot sun, which gave his own troops an upper hand in the battle, and limited direct bloodshed.¹⁴ This was a manifestation of the Islamic principle of employing strategic wisdom to attain military goals in an efficient manner.

The greatest ethical precedent established at Badr was relating to the way prisoners of war were treated. After the triumph of the Muslims, Prophet called a council to settle on the issue of the captives. Although there were those companions who supported the execution, the Prophet finally decided to give them clemency and they could be ransomed or in those who were literate they could teach ten Muslims to read and write in order to gain their freedom.¹⁵ This ruling laid down a number of important principles; the importance of knowledge, the significance of mercy even against opponents, and the fact that one should not kill those people who were reduced to helplessness. Moreover, the Prophet provided clear guidelines on how to treat captives, when he said, I recommend you to treat the captives well.¹⁶ Historical records state that the Muslim soldiers would give out their scarce food and water to the prisoners and their needs were usually a priority to the captives, and their needs came second. This behavior was a sharp contrast to the standards existing in 7th-century

Arabia, where defeated enemy warriors were usually either executed or enslaved with no regard to circumstances.

Finding a Way through Ethical Dilemmas: The Battle of Uhud:

The Battle of Uhud (3 AH/625 CE) contained challenging ethical issues that challenged the devotion of the Muslim community to its values even when it was losing a military battle. This was the first Muslim handicap after a body of archers deserted their position of strategical location at the mountain contrary to the strict instructs of the Prophet with the view of getting instant spoils of war. This disobedience brought about a major retaliatory attack that left the Muslims with great losses with the Prophet himself injured.¹⁷

The moral reaction to this crisis was eye opening. Although the overturn had been occasioned by the blatant disobedience of military directives, the Prophet did not approve of mass punishment, as well as severe retaliation against the rebellious soldiers. Rather, it was a great lesson of the significance of discipline and perils of pursuing material gain at the expense of collective security. When the Muslim troops came back together, the Prophet showed much restraint by not allowing the army to chase the fleeing Meccan army since he knew that this would only lead to the losing of too many lives, with no strategic advance.¹⁸ This ruling was an indication of the Quranic forbidding of transgression (2: 190) despite the provocation. Moreover, the Prophet was not vengeful upon hearing the news about the mutilation of the body of his uncle Hamzah as his first response was sorrow. Although he started with a declaration of revenge, he eventually forgave those who committed the acts and prohibited mutilation in future conflicts thus making it a normative rule in future wars and made it a permanent moral standard.¹⁹ This reaction turned a tragic event at the personal level into the possibility to strengthen humanitarian principles in war.

The Battle of the Trench (Khandaq): The Trench-Warfare of Strategic Ethics:

The Battle of the Trench (5 AH/627 CE) is the most developed use of strategic ethics in the prophetic military history. The Prophet accepted the new idea to trench a ditch around the defenseless parts of Medina when confronting a huge number of confederates that far exceeded his command. This military strategy served the military purpose of countering the cavalry advantage of the enemy with the minimum of direct fighting and casualties on both sides.²⁰

Ethical issues of this siege were especially complex. The treaty between the Jews and the Muslims was breached by one of the 12 Jewish tribes of Banu Qurayzah, which allied with the conquering armies, posed an existential threat

of the Jewish tribe itself to the city of Medina. This betrayal required a judicial method and not arbitrary punishment as the Muslims responded to the confederate army afterwards. The Prophet gave the Banu Qurayzah the option of their own arbitrator who used their religious law to sentence the Banu Qurayzah of treason²¹. Although the outcome of the decision made was harsh, the very procedure made several significant ethical precedents about due process and respecting agreements even with those who had demonstrated hostility.

The Muslim army had not compromised its morals even though it faced a lot of hardship during the month-long siege. The Prophet kept on preaching on the safety of non-combatants and the need to uphold morale by praying and acting ethically. The Prophet showed how moral obligations could find a balance between military needs and the principles of the moral world by the responses to a hungry companion who had slaughtered a camel without the required authorization, compensating him instead of punishing him, and aware of the extenuating circumstances.²²

All these case studies indicate that the prophetic battles stipulated a detailed ethical doctrine, which would subsequently become the basis of the Islamic military jurisprudence. Since the humane treatment of prisoners at Badr, the disciplined restraint of Uhud, even the strategic innovation of the Trench, every encounter led to the formation of a specific paradigm of warfare, when the military achievement was not the only principle of success, and when the moral norms were taken into account.

Comparison with the Contemporary Ethics:

The morality paradigm of the prophetic battles is an interesting topic to be compared to the just war theory and the international humanitarian law of the modern world. Although they have developed in the various historical and philosophical backgrounds, these systems demonstrate remarkable similarities in their guiding ideals, as well as unique areas of focus that remain informative in addressing conflicts in the contemporary world.

Parallels and contrasts with the Contemporary Just War Theory:

The classical tradition of Just War that has been codified by theorists such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Grotius has two fundamental pillars namely: *jus ad bellum* (the right to war) and *jus in bellum* (right conduct in war). The prophetic model has a great conceptual overlap with both categories, especially the latter one.

Both traditions limit legitimate warfare to defense purposes as regards *jus ad bellum*. The quranic injunction is given permission [to fight] to those who were

wronged (22:39) creates a clear causal relation between aggression and the right to self-defense, which makes the right to self-defense similar to the just cause principle of modern society. Likewise, the need to have a legitimate authority, represented by the leadership of the Prophet and the collective decision making of the Muslim polity, is analogous to the competent authority requirement.²³

The deepest similarities are, however, those in *jus in bello*. The prophetic ban on killing non-combatants, the ban on killing women, children, the elderly, and the monk in his monastery, is the direct correlative of the principle of distinction in the modern context. This ban on mutilation and betrayal goes hand in hand with the ban on perfidy and unjustifiable pain. The human treatment of detainees of war as it is done in Badr envisions the Geneva Conventions securities on POWs by more than thirteen centuries.²⁴

There are significant differences that however appear. Modern just war theory is mainly secular and anthropocentric whereas prophetic theory is basically theocentric. Its moral imperatives are based on the commandments of God and the imitation of the way of the Prophet (Sunnah), which offers a transcendent authority that there should be no use of utilitarianism. Moreover, the prophetic tradition stresses more on the internal character of the fighter, intentions (*niyyah*), self-restraint and mercy, as part of the ethical character of combat, rather than just a subjective submission to the rules.

Resourcing to Modern Conflict and international law:

The timeless nature of prophetic battle ethics, especially, is observed in the modern day debates of asymmetric warfare, counter-terrorism, and the defense of religious and cultural landmarks. This particular safeguarding of monks and monasteries by the Prophet provides an early precedent of the privileged status of religious personnel and property, which has since become an enshinement of much of international law but has often been broken in contemporary conflicts.²⁵

Modern military ethics can be informed directly on the basis of the principles that were generated in such battles. The ban on destroying trees and crops but only in case of necessity as stated by the early jurists (e.g.), forms a precursor to modern environmental protection in case of armed conflict. Equally, a focus on preventing civilian casualties, even to a tactical detriment, serves as an effective ethical refutation of theories of total war or policies that put military benefits over the safety of civilians.

The prophetic model provides support to fundamental norms and criticizes its restrictions in the context of international humanitarian law (IHL). The principle

of non-combatant immunity of the absolute nature of the situation empowers the legal and ethical argument to oppose the controversial contemporary practices such as targeted killings or inappropriate collateral damages. Moreover, it is holistic, encompassing the spiritual, ethical and tactical aspects of warfare, and this implies a more holistic approach to professional military education than one that is limited to Legal compliance. Educating soldiers of the real causes of ethical restraints, in the spirit of respect to human dignity as the creation of God, can lead to a higher level of internalization than education about the rules to be observed.²⁶

To sum up, the prophetic battle ethics has its origin traced to the 7th -century setting, but the good command of restraint, distinction, and humanity proves the extraordinary acumen. They not only simulate the modern just war theory and IHL but, in most instances, precondition and make them more profound. In a complicated and sometimes violent age, the historical moral model has become an essential asset in the development of a more human and ethical way to wage war where all sides should strive to the utmost standards of moral behaviours even in the twists of war.

Challenges and Misinterpretations:

However, even though the ethical framework of the Prophet military campaigns has been well-documented, the tradition has been misinterpreted quite extensively within the historical context and in the contemporary times. These misunderstandings are usually the result of decontextualization of particular events and neglecting about the entire system of ethical regulations governing the warfare.

Most Famous Myths on the Ethics of Prophetic Warfare:

Among the most enduring myths is the tendency of seeing the concept of jihad in a military context, but not in its more spiritual and moral aspects. This form of reductionism slips over the fact that the Prophet himself underlines the greater jihad, which is the self-improvement struggle, with the military action as the lesser one.²⁷ The other misconception that has become common is the use of verses that were revealed to a group in a particular historical conflict, especially those dealing with defence in urgent situations, as a general prescription to warfare and the neglect of the abrogating verses and the general moral direction of the Quran. As an example, the slogans concerning specific enemy tribes are mistakenly applied to all the non-Muslims, which is in conflict with the Quranic idea of no forced conversion to Islam, or there will be no hijrah (2:256).

Historical and Current Misuse and Misappropriation:

The moral restraint of prophetic war was historically violated in periods of the political growth, when the expediency in military operations prevailed over the ethics. Different ruling dynasties did not focus on the tradition selectively highlighting some of its elements and downplaying others to justify campaigns of conquest.

The worst use of the prophetic model in the modern context is perhaps by the extremist groups who totally reverse the meaning of the model. They use strategies that are explicitly prohibited by the Prophet like killing of civilians, suicide attacks, which ensures the death of non-combatants, and destroying religious sites in the name of religion justification.²⁸ These forces methodically disregard the strict requirements of lawful war, such as declarative act by authoritative authority, proportionality and categorical protection of non-combatants. They create a false history by emphasizing just limited cases in the past, without referring to the general principles of ethics, which essentially paints the entire picture of mercy, restraint, and discernment between combatants and non-combatants as the central element of the Prophetic practice. Such a distortion is not only an infringement of the Islamic law but also a distortion of the deep applicability of the prophetic model in the construction of a humanitarian way to solve conflicts.

Conclusion and Implications:

The analysis of the prophetic battles shows a high and very ethical order of conduct that had dwelled in wars in early Islam. This structure was not a mere peripheral feature of military strategy but, on the contrary, its core, it was a way of turning battle into a matter of tribal revenge rather than a military discipline that is governed by moral obligations. The major lessons that can be learned are the paramount significance of the divine guidance as the origin of moral limitations, the sacred dignity of all men as it is established in the categorical defense of non-combatants and the need of justice, fairness and pardon even in the cruelty of war. The kind treatment of captives at Badr, the uncompromising self-control after Uhud and the moral tactics of the Trench, set about an unalterable precedent in which humanitarian considerations would always moderate the military.

The modern implication of the ethical tradition of Islam remains significant. It offers a sound, local framework of dealing with modern issues of conflict, peacebuilding and international humanitarian law. These teachings are a decisive standard that must be used to measure all the modern warfare by

Muslim scholars, community leaders and military personnel. They provide a strong theological and historical ground to condemn any extremist thinking that authorizes killing of innocent people and to advance a conception of Islam that preaches justice and mercy. At a moment when Muslim societies tend to be either the targets or the targets of conflict or negative stereotyping, a refocusing on this moral tradition can enable the positive identity of the morally clear and humanitarian.

To the rest of the international community, this work is a challenge to reductionist discourses of Islam and violence, with a strong historical counter-narrative of a regulated and ethical war. To continue, additional studies are necessary to discover fully the links in relations between this early Islamic model and the evolution of the international humanitarian law. Cross-cultural dialogue may be fruitful through comparative studies between the other religious and secular traditions of ethics on war. Lastly, the approach to the systematic implementation of these classical ethics into the modern military training and religious education in the Muslim-majority countries is a vital practical source of ensuring that this fertile ethical heritage will be reflected in the modern practice and lead Muslims all over to a more fair and peaceful future.

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