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MARTYRDOM AND HOURIS

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A top police officer wrote to me what is the Qur'anic basis of the belief that those who became martyr will go to paradise and will be awarded with 70 houris (hours). This becomes an incentive for terrorists to die in the 'cause of Islam'. Unfortunately it is commonly believed by Muslims that hours are feminine gender and some men even boast that Allah has promised hours to men and nothing to women.

This belief has no foundation in the Qur'anic text. It is nothing more than a popular belief and is being used by vested interests. It is, therefore, necessary to explore what Qur'an has to say. First of all, one must understand what is *shahadat* (martyrdom) in Qur'an. Of course the literal meaning of *shahadat* is to witness, to acknowledge, bearing testimony, to be present and also martyrdom.

The question is why *shahadat* is used for martyrdom whereas literally it means to witness and to be present. One bears testimony to something which one witnesses and this witnessing is not only in physical sense i.e. witnessing with eye but also in psychological and spiritual sense i.e. to have a vision, vision of future and it is for this vision that one lays down ones life.

Thus one virtually witnesses what one is dying for and it is in this sense that *shahadat* becomes martyrdom and it is in this sense that Qur'an says that a martyr never dies and lives for ever and never dies. Thus martyrdom in Q ur'an is a very noble act of sacrifice of ones life and puts a martyr along with *siddiquin wa al-salihin* i.e. upholders of truth and doers of good deeds. It is not an act of killing but rather getting killed to uphold truth.

Thus martyrdom in Qur'an is to realize and witness oneself virtually what one wants to bring about in this world and to unhesitatingly give ones life for the purpose. The Qur'an divides knowledge of something in two categories namely knowledge of certainty (*'ilm al-yaqin)* and eye of certainty (*'ayn al-yaqin*) i.e. witnessing something with ones own eye and not only with knowledge of something and the martyr falls into second category i.e. he witnesses it with his own eyes and hence a *shahid*.

This act of shahadah would never involve killing but of sacrificing and if at all any killing it would be of in defense and there is no question of killing indiscriminately as often terrorists do. Terrorism is a killing to destroy whereas shahadat is an act of laying down life to construct a truthful and just order and many of the Prophet's companions laid down their lives to bring about this truthful and just order.

Now coming to the question of hur which, according to the popular belief, has been promised for martyrs in the Qur'an, let it be known that in the first place jannah i.e. paradise (jannah literally means a land covered and hidden with trees and intense greenery) to all those who are *salih* (those who bring about welfare of others) and doers of good deeds (*'amal saih*).

The relevant verse on hur is as follows: “Immortal youths will wait upon them with goblets, and ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs by which their minds will not be clouded and which will not make them drunk; and with fruit of any kind that they may desire. And (with them will be their) companions pure, (hur al-‘in), most beautiful of eye like unto pearls (still) hidden in their shells. And this will be reward for what they did (in life) (and not only for martyrs). No empty talk they will hear there, nor any call to sin but only the tiding of inner soundness and peace. (56:22-26)

This is most sublime description of jannah which all doers of good will achieve and hur is not as often believed feminine gender but it includes both genders. Its literal meaning is intense whiteness of the eye balls and lustrous black of the iris (Qamus). Hawar indicates simply whiteness or moral purity and it was in this sense that Christ’s companions are referred to as hawwariyun i.e. morally pure beings.

In this whole discourse on hur there is no reference to sex or lust but of richness of soul and moral purity. In fact hur is plural of both ahwar (masculine) and hawra’(feminine). Thus hur in Qur’an would mean morally pure men and women who will be companions of those who enter paradise. And Qur’an also says that there will be no empty talk (laghw) and one will hear only peace and peace (salaman salaman) i.e. eternal peace of soul.

Thus neither hur are women nor seventy in number. This sublime description of jannat (paradise) is spiritual in nature and those who resist all temptations and do nothing but good and are truthful and just would bring about such an order of eternal peace in this and the other world.

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