From Jihad to Salam in Pursuit of Political Change:
A Perspective based on Qur'ānic Sources

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Abstract

The political reality of many countries in the Muslim World is untenable and reforms and change is absolutely necessary. This article argues that use of force and violence for political change is making things worse as one can witness in Syria and Iraq. The article advances a Qur'ānic perspective on the desirability of peace as a goal and peaceful means as instruments of change. The article acknowledges that the Qur'ānic sanction for use of force to defend religious freedom prcludes the advocacy of pacifism but nevertheless the article does make a strong case for privileging peace over use of force.

Keywords: *Jihad, Salam, Muslim World*

Introduction

يَاأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا ضَرَبْتُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَتَبَيَّنُوا وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَنْ أَلْقَى إِلَيْكُمُ السَّلَامَ لَسْتَ مُؤْمِنًا

"O You who believe, when you go forth to fight for the sake of Allah, investigate, and do not tell anyone who offers you peace, You are not a believer" (Quran 4:94).

In the past few years the Muslim Middle East has experinced a political roller coaster that gave the region a brief taste of democracy, during the Arab Spring 2011 to 2013, and then restored authoritarianism with an added dose of uncertainty, chaos and a steady erosion of the state as a viable political entity.

While 2011 promised comprehensive change and democratization, through a wave of revolutions, usually described as the Arab Spring,[1] recent developments not only reversed the gains of 2011 but have brought more war, more oppression and violence to the region. Muslims have experienced and witnessed how change could be brought through peaceful means, as in Tunisia and Egypt, and they also witnessed how violence and civil war can destroy

states and unleash demons of sectarianism and terrorism as in Syria, Yemen and Iraq.

In 2011, some commentators had argued that the emerging trend of political protests as witnessed so spectacualrly by the protests in Tahrir Square, Cairo, would make violent extremist groups such as Al Qaeda extinct. But history has proven them wrong with the emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[2] The Jihadi group has not only proven to be more cruel and extreme than even Al Qaeda, it had also stepped up in terms of activities. Where as Al Qaeda merely attacked, Islamic State captured andtried to hold territory and had gone so far as to declare an Islamic Caliphate. It is the failure of peacful efforts to bring about political transformation in Syria that has led to the Syrian civil war and the subsequent rise of the Islamic State. Even though the Islamic State is on the run and its demise seems imminent at the time of writing this article, the conditions in the region are not expereincing any repair. This essay while inspired by these events is however not about the region's geopolitics. It reflects more on the theology of use of force for political change in Islamic sources. It is about *Jihad* and *Salam* while seeking political change.[3]

The most pressing problem of the contemporary Islamic World is how to bring about fundamental political, social, and economic changes while continuing to maintain peace. The Muslim World cannot be allowed to degenerate into religious intolerance and it cannot exist under secular tyranny. People in most Muslim societies today are deprived of their basic rights, have little freedom of religion, and scarce opportunities for economic development. A lot of resources are being wasted in wars, civil wars, and weapons accumulation. The states in most Muslim countries seem to have a raison d'etre independent of the people's interests. Except in oil rich Gulf states where consent is bought through welfare and economic concessions, the rest of the Muslim states, particularly in Asia and Africa have very little to offer to their people. Some states like Syria and Egypt have even become the cause for great misery for their own people. Given these pathetic conditions, one has to recognize the absolute necessity for systemic change in the Muslim world.[4]

While most of the problems in the Muslim and Arab World appear to be political and religious in nature (as people demand democracy and/or more freedom for religion in the public sphere) one cannot escape the reality of economic underdevelopment in the Muslim World. Those states that seem to have a comparatively stable political atmosphere, such as Saudi Arabia, demonstrate that economic development, providing for their people higher incomes and standards of living, is more important than regime type.[5]

Alternatively, each country from the Arab Spring faced economic decline prior to its revolution, failing to provide adequately for their citizenry and pushing them even more vehemently towards an uprising against those in power.

The Muslim World has yet to recover from the post-colonial moral crisis that they all have experienced.[6] The colonial domination precipitated a gradual but systematic erosion of the institutions of Muslim civil society. The decline of traditional institutions of justice, social welfare, education, and social affiliations has left a huge moral vacuum. The end of the colonial era did not give Muslim societies any respite from the culture and value invasion of the West. Indeed the new regimes often led by ultra nationalists (like Ataturk of Turkey and Naser of Egypt) sought to rapidly transform and even Westernize the societies they inherited. They never gave themselves the opportunity to collect themselves and resuscitate the moral fabric of their societies which were ravaged by foreign domination. Once free from the foreigners, these leaders rushed to emulate their former oppressors. Thus after fighting foreign colonialism, the already debilitated Muslim society had to fight another war of independence, this time against internal colonialism in pursuit of an authentic identity and society.[7] This second wave of anti-colonial upsurge has come primarily through the resurgence of Islam, which in many ways is an effort to resuscitate and revive the *authentic* moral fabric of Muslim societies.[8]

Authoritarian regimes in the Muslim Middle East have caused widespread poverty, unemployment, and human rights violations, which have made the political status quo unviable.[9] That change is imperative in the Middle East, both political and economic, is an incontrovertible reality. The issue that scholars, Muslim intellectuals, community leaders, political movements and parties, and opinion makers must deliberate is whether this change can be precipitated peacefully or if it will have to be brought about violently. Before we can reflect on any concrete issues regarding the impulse for change and the form this change will take, we must examine the idea of peace and nonviolence itself. What is the intrinsic, inherent, and moral value of peace and nonviolence? Are they to be valued in themselves to such an extent that the fear of violence and instability (*fitna*), division and discord, in the process of change compel us to indefinitely defer change? Traditional Muslim scholars have tended to privilege order from fear of dsicord (*fitna*) to such an extent that they were willing to tolerate institutionalzied tyranny and injustices. Should we in the name of peace continue that same old tradion or can we advocate for change but also find ways to do so peacefully. But more

importantly, can we find in our divine sources pahtways to change through peaceful means?

The key challenges that newly democratized regimes in Egypt and Tunisia faced after the Arab Spring was the daunting task of bringing social equality and economic devlopment to their population. Social equality is an economic reality not a political strategy or policy. In both Egypt and Tunisia the Islamic governments sought to make symbolic gains without genuine material transformation and eventually failed. The Arab Spring was driven by economic despair and a search for dignity, not political participation. Democracy was a means to realize those goals but ultimately it was about economic well being. Political gains without economic gains are not a solution, and this situation was unsustainable, leading to counter-revolutions[10] and recurring violence[11].

The Muslim world is prennially beset with political struggles accompanied with violent conflict. At one level the Muslim World is still locked in an ideological, political and sometimes violent struggle with states which are non-Muslim in character. At another level, Muslim states are involved in conflict against each other. These are internal conflicts between Muslim states which have led to foreign and civil wars. Even democracies like Pakistan face both peaceful and violent challenges from within while being engrossed in conflcits without.

Then there is conflict between state and society as in Syria and Iraq. This type of conflict has attracted the most attention as it pits the Islamists against usually non-democratic but secular and sometimes pro-Western regimes. These conflicts inspire great fear in the West because most analysts in the West assume all potential Islamist states, if the Islamists succeed, will be like Iran, virulently anti-West and anti-Israel. Finally we have the civil conflict between the secularists and the Islamists[12]. The state is inevitably involved in this struggle as it is often pressed into the service of one or the other party as in Turkey, Pakistan and Algeria. All these struggles have resulted in a lot of violence raising questions such as *can Muslims resolve their differences peacefully?* Do they have a tradition for tolerance and peaceful resolution of conflict? Can we find some philosophical foundations for peaceful resolution of conflict in Muslim mores whose revival may help introduce regimes that can facilitate peaceful conflict resolution and peaceful socio-political change? Search for answers to these questions will entail an analysis of Islamic sources for injunctions on peace and a cognition of barriers to peaceful processes. I shall limit my arguments to the Quran, for today the Quran alone remains an

uncontested source of moral authority in almost all sections of the Muslim world.

Preference for peace and nonviolence as preferable to destabilizing changes leads to the privileging of status quo. If authoritarian regimes and ruling coalitions are reluctant to relinquish power, as they often are, even in the face of popular opposition like in Syria, then advocacy of peace, stability and nonviolence becomes a defense of status quo even in the absence of legitimacy. Decades of stagnant politics with no development, no progress, and no political reforms as in Egypt under the rule of Hosni Mubarak and in Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, can engender deep resentment and create tipping points that can unleash revolutionary violence and sustained conflcit as in present day Syria and Iraq. However, the need for change should not be taken as a licence to resort to egregious violence that destroys social fabric, historical monuments and any hope of reconciliation between different segments of the society.

Alternatively if peace and nonviolence are to be deemed as instrumental values then there must be other recognizable values whose intrinsic worth is perceived as more than that of peace itself. It is only when such values are identified that peace can be risked in pursuit of these values which are perceived as more precious than peace. Some Muslim thinkers and activists consider, pursuit of justice or the establishment of an Islamic order as definitely values that must be fought for. This view is the reason why we see the proliferation of armed non-state actors across the Muslim World, indulging in violence and justifying their actions as purusit of jsutice and Islamic order. We on the other hand contend that justice, equality, and freedom are values more valuable than peace. We are not willing to give up our freedom or allow ourself to be oppressed or be treated unjustly without a fight. Can we demand that people give up their rights, their freedoms and accept injustices in the interest of maintaining flawed orders?

Certainly not! But we can appeal to the suffering and the marginalized to give "peaceful change" a chance. We can atleast defend instrumental peace if not peace as an inherent value worth achieving above everything else. Particularly with respect to a region where change is necessary, the engineering of peaceful, gradual and systematic change will preclude violent and revolutionary transformations. We believe, we can develop a discourse based on Quranic principles of peace to advance the cause of peace both between nations and within nations.[13]

Jihad and Salam for Change

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ

"And fight in the path of Allah those who fight you,
but violate not his limits. Truly, Allah likes not those who transgressors".
(Quran 2:190).

The Quran advances a very sophisticated view of peace (Al-Salam)[14]. In many verses peace is presented as a final reward for a virtuous life (Quran 5:16). It also describes *dar al-Islam*, the house of Islam, as the abode of peace (Quran 10:25). Quran teaches Muslims to greet each other everytime they meet, by wishing peace for each other (Quran 6:54). However the Quran does not shy away from use of force to deter and end persecution and religious intolerance. The strongest statement on the use of force agaisnt oppression is in the second chapter of the Quran al-Baqarah (verse 191):

"And kill them wherever you find them, and expel them out of the places from where they expelled you, for persecution is worse than slaughter."

This verse in the Quran clearly precludes a complete prohibition of use of force by Muslims. The verse is important because despite the enormous impotance that the Quran attaches to peace and harmony, it is categorical in its assertion that persecution is worse than killing. There is nothing allegorical in this verse, it is clear: *"persecution is worse than killing"* (Quran; 2:217). The Quran also states: "*And fight them until persecution is no more*" (Quran 8:39). The Quranic preference for struggle against persecution and its promise to reward those who struggle in the path of Allah (4:74) means that the only way violence can be eliminated from the Muslim World is by eliminating injustices and persecution. But the Quran also demands that violence cease as soon as persecution ceases and thus it seeks to balance the absence of conflict with an absence of injustice. At the risk of sounding circular one is back at square one, in order for there be peace, there must be change, but can this change be peaceful? Can this change happen without causing persecution? Perhaps we can minimize areas where violence is legitimized by the Quran.

In Surah Baqarah, The Quran says: "*And fight them until persecution is terminated, and religion is for Allah. But if they stop, then let there be no hostility except against the wrong-doers*" *(Quran 2:193)*. This verse is an ethical standard for it limits retaliation against all except those who are directly responsible for wrong-doing and also suggests that persecution could mean religious persecution. Meaning that when the practice of religion is prohibited it is a condition that can be deemed as persecution and therefore fighting this persecution is desired. The standard set by this verse has implications for

conflicts among Muslim states and between Muslim states and Islamic groups. Where citizens are allowed to practice their faith freely, as in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran, violence cannot be an option.

The Quran sets another profound ethical standard in Surah al-Anfal:

> "*Tell those who disbelieve that if they cease (from persecution of believers) that which is past will be forgiven them" (8:38);*

This commandment further reduces the scope for violent response against persecution by granting amnesty to those who desist from induging in persecution. One of the reasons why tyrannical regimes persist in the Muslim World is due to their fear of retaliation. Regimes are resisting change and democratization for fear of being prosecuted for past crimes by new regimes. A promise of general amnesty for past deeds by potential challengers could create an atmosphere where existing regimes may permit gradual change.

In a philosophically sense, we may not be able to completely eliminate the revolutionary option for precipitating change, but there is enough probative content in the Quran to limit use of force to only egregious cases of religious domination and repression. Force thus can only be used to preserve freedom of religion. The Quran also makes a strong case for forgiveness and for peace as soon as hostilities are ceased. It also does not permit use of force against those who do not use force.

The Quran on Peace

The significance and desriability of peace is manifest in the message of the Quran. It treats peace as a desired way as well as a value or reward for righteousness. In the fifth chapter Al-Maidah, The Quran states that God guides all those who seek his pleasure to ways of peace and security (Quran 5:18). The same verse draws a profound parallel between the ways of peace and the movement from darkness to light, onto the straight path. There can be no doubt that this verse of Surah al-Maidah is positing the transition from *Jahiliyyah* to Islam, from darkness to enlightenment, from being misguided onto the *siratul mustaqeem* (straight path) as a way to peace!

> "*Whereby Allah guides whoever seeks His good pleasure unto paths of peace.*
> *He brings them out of darkness unto light by his will, and guides them unto the straight path*" (Quran 5:16).

In the verse cited at the beginning of this paper, the Quran describes Islam as the abode of peace (10:25). Indeed the word Islam, which means submission, is a derivative of the word *salam* which means peace. Muslims greet each other by wishing/praying for peace for each other -- Assalamu `Alaykum

(may peace be upon you). This is not based on a tradition or a convention. It is a practice based on the injuctions of the Quran. The Quran states that the greeting of those who are righteous and have been admitted to the heavens is "Peace!" (Quran 14:23). It is quite amazing the degree to which Muslims have lost their self-awareness about being Muslim and its significance. If they only become more self-conscious about their faith and the elements of their faith that they practice as a matter of fact, it would help bring more social harmony and peace to the Muslim World.

Peace as an important goal is not limited to relations within the Muslim community. It is desired with the "other" too. The Quran prohibits Muslims from initiating aggression or causing *fitna* (chaos, violence, instability, rioting,) and encourages them to make peace with their enemies if they incline towards peace.

"Do not wrong humanity in their goods, and do no evil or mischief on earth (26:183).
Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not initiate hostilities. Indeed Allah does not love aggressors" (2:190).

"If they withdraw from you and stop fighting you and (instead) send you peace, then Allah does not permit you (to war against them)" (4:90).

"But if the enemy incline towards peace, you too should incline towards peace, and trust in God: for He is One that hears and knows (all things)" (8:61).

This verse (8:61) has direct contemporary relevance. One of the biggest hurdles to peace today is insecurity stemming from distrust of potential partners in peace. Parties are demanding guarantees of peace and imposing preconditions for peace which in themselves have become barriers to peace. But the Quran addresses these insecurities and advises Muslims to go ahead and make peace if the enemy shows even the slightest inclination and to do so with trust and faith in Allah who knows and hears everything. Clearly Allah supports those who make peace and they need not let uncertainties preclude the realization of peace.

Two Pillars of Islamic Peace

In this section, we identify two verses from the Quran that in our opinion can serve as the scaffolding for a new discourse on peace. Indeed, these two verses capture the fundamental relationship between Islamic teachings and peace. We believe if they are emphasized and repeatedly widely by Muslim

preachers and teachers the very idea of Islam as an empire that conquers and spreads, can be superseded by the vision that Islam is a civilization that seeks to bring peace to humanity and Islamic values and ethos are directing the believers towards submission to the divine rather than exhorting them towards domination over others. The Islamist and politicized conceptions of Islam are about global domination and hence the glorification of empires and conquerors in Muslim historiography. But Islam itself means submission, the mystical side of Islam, Sufism, seeks *fana'a,* annihilation not assertion of the self[15].

Islamic mystical understanding lays great store by the names of God and in the work of Ibn Arabi we can see the best articulation of this view that the entire creation is nothing but the manifestation – *tajalli* – of the various attributes and essence of Allah[16]. In that tradition, understanding the name Allah as *Al-Salam* (Quran 59:23), becomes the key to the development of an understanding of peace itself. Al-Salam means peace. Thus, peace itself is a divine essence and a divine attribute. Therefore, for those who believe peace can come only from the source of peace, Al-Salam. Bringing peace in this world requires us to make peace with Al-Salam, to submit to Al-Salam and through this submission to Al-Salam we first internalize peace, then through our now divinely guided actions, politics, we manifest peace to create a peaceful world.

مَن قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا

"He who has killed an innocent soul is as if he has killed all of humanity"
(Quran 5:32)

The first verse is the thirty second verse of Surah *Maidah*, that has been so widely used in the West particularly after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 on the United States. The verse was revealed in the context of the Quran's narration of the story of the sons of Adam, Cain and Abel, and the murder of Abel by Cain. The verse suggests that the killing of an innocent person is like killing all of humanity, because in Cain's case it was the first murder ever and therefore as the one who taught humanity to kill he has a share in every killing that occurs since and hence the killing of one innocent is like killing all of humanity. This verse also states that the saving of one soul is also akin to saving all of humanity.

Apart from the context of its revelation, in the past two decades this verse has taken a great significance for the Muslim discourse on peace and against terrorism. The meaning that is now drawn from this verse is that the Quran specifically forbids the taking of human life, except in pursuit of justice, as punishment for murder and terrorism (*fisad fi alard*). Not only does Quran forbid the killing of innocent people, but it treats this act so egregiously as to

equate the killing one innocent person with that of universal genocide. The point is that the Quran teaches Muslims to value human life very deeply and this verse is now becoming the go to verse for scholars of Islam to assert the fundamental peaceful nature of Islam[17].

<div dir="rtl">يَاأَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ادْخُلُوا فِي السِّلْمِ كَافَّةً</div>

"O you who believe, enter peace without reservation" (Quran 2:208).

While Quran 5:32 has gained significance in the contemporary discourse as a pillar of Islamic conception of nonviolence and peace, the verse 208 from Surah *Baqrah* is very clear in its meaning. O you who believe enter the state of peace without any reservation. Sometimes commentators mistranslate this verse to state "enter Islam" without reservations or completely, but the verse is clear in stating that the believer should enter *fi al-silm, peace.* As one considers this verse on the pure merit of its text, without the interpretive corruption from commentators who may or may not have ideological axes to grind, it is clear that the verse is commanding believers to enter into a state of peace, the state can be either mystical (*maqam al-silm*) or political (*dar al-silm*). This verse is the statement of the Quran which equates belief with a complete commitment to peace[18].

Conclusion

To conclude the Quran forbids Muslims from initiating or perpetuating violence except in self defense and to fight persecution. Persecution is a complex term and the meaning of the term often is contingent on contemporary realities. But broadly one may consider it as a condition where people are deprived of the freedom to practice their beliefs and wherein their property, their land and their lives are constantly in jeopardy. The Quran is a strong advocate of peace but permits Muslims to fight to protect their faith, their freedom, and their lands and property.

But in the interest of peace and to avoid the inevitable persecution and misery that comes along with violence, Muslim scholars and intellectuals can argue that violence be made the last resort and demand of all agents of change that they pursue all avenues of peaceful change before they resort to revolutionary tactics. This brief discussion of the Quran is indicative of the value of peace for Muslims both within the community and outside. However the mere presence of divine injunctions for peace is not a gaurantee of peace. The task of translating these Quranic principles into concrete reality remains one the biggest challenges for Muslim scholars and Muslim intellectuals.

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