Jihad and Political Change: A Perspective Based on Quranic Sources

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In 2011, I argued that the emerging trend of political protests as witnessed so spectacularly in Tahrir Square, Cairo, would make violent extremist groups such as al-Qaida extinct, but history has proven me wrong with the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Muqtedar Khan 2011). The jihadi group has not only proven to be more cruel and extreme than even al-Qaida, it has also been more active. Where as al-Qaida merely attacked, ISIS captures and holds territory and has even declared an Islamic Caliphate. It is the failure of peaceful efforts to bring about political transformation in Syria without even minor changes as in Morocco and Jordan, that has led to the civil war and the subsequent rise of ISIS. This chapter, while inspired by these events, is, however, not about the region’s geopolitics. Instead, it examines the theology of the use of force for political change in Islamic sources. It is about jihad and political change.¹

The most pressing problem of the contemporary Islamic world is how to bring about fundamental political, social and economic restructuring while maintaining 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 in weapons accumulation and this environment undermines the stability that is necessary for a flourishing economy based on the rule of law and private property. The states in most Muslim countries seem to have a raison d’être independent of the interests of the people. Except in oil-rich Gulf states, where consent is bought through welfare and economic concessions, Muslim states, particularly in Asia and Africa, have very little to offer for their people. Some states, such as Syria and Egypt, even cause great misery for their own people. Given these dire conditions,

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¹ For a systematic study of jihad, see Afsaruddin (2013) and Muqtedar Khan (2004).
the absolute necessity of systemic change in the Muslim world has to be recognised (see Esposito and Muqtedar Khan 2000).

While many of the problems in the Muslim and Arab world appear to be political and religious in nature, as people demand democracy and more freedom for religion in the public sphere, one cannot escape the reality of economic underdevelopment. The most stable states are either democracies (for example, Malaysia and Turkey) or monarchies (for example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar). However, it can be argued that the source of their stability is not regime type but rather economic development, as all those four countries have a reasonably high income and quality of life.2

Colonialism and post-colonialism

The countries of the Muslim world have yet to recover from the post-colonial moral crisis that they have all experienced (Mitchell 1991). 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 cultural and value invasion of the West. Indeed the new regimes, often led by ultra nationalists (such as Atatürk of Turkey and Nasser of Egypt), sought to rapidly transform or even Westernise the societies they inherited. They never gave themselves the opportunity to collect themselves and resuscitate the moral fabric of their societies, which had been ravaged by foreign domination. Once free from foreign intervention, 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, but this time against internal colonialism in pursuit of an authentic identity and society (Muqtedar Khan 1998). This second 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 (Mansfield and Pelham 2013; Kabir Hassan and Lewis 2014).

Peace, non-violence and the difficulty of meaningful change

Enduring poverty, unemployment, absence of democracy and human rights and the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Muslim Middle East has made the political status quo unviable (Muqtedar Khan 2007). That economic and political change is necessary in the Middle East is incontestable. The issue that public intellectuals, community leaders, political movements and parties and opinion formers must contemplate is whether this change can be engineered peacefully or whether it will have to be violent. Before we can reflect on any substantive issues regarding the impulse for change and the form this change will take, we must examine the idea of peace and non-violence itself. What is the intrinsic value of peace and non-violence? Are they to be valued in themselves to such an extent that the fear of violence and instability in the process of change compels us to defer change indefinitely?

The key challenge that newly democratised regimes in Egypt and Tunisia faced after the Arab Spring was the daunting task of bringing social equality and economic development to their population. In both Egypt and Tunisia, the Islamist governments sought to make symbolic gains without genuine material transformation and eventually failed. The Arab Spring was driven by economic despair and the search for dignity, not by a desire for political participation. Democracy was a means to realise those

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2 See also Wilson (2012). Of course, it could also be argued that regime stability helps promote economic growth.
goals but, ultimately, the rebellions were driven by a desire for economic well-being. Political change without economic change will not solve the problems in Muslim societies and will simply lead to counter-revolutions (Muqtedar Khan 2013) and recurring violence (Amin 2013).

If we regard peace and non-violence as desirable values with intrinsic worth that carry an absolute priority over everything else, this inevitably leads to the politics of status quo. If existing authoritarian regimes and ruling coalitions are not willing to relinquish power, even in the face of popular opposition such as in Syria, then doing nothing other than maintaining peace and stability would become an effective defence of the status quo, however bad the status quo is or however much a ruling regime lacks legitimacy. However, the need for change should not be taken as a licence to resort to egregious violence that destroys the social fabric, historical monuments and any hope of reconciliation between different segments of the society.

If non-violent or violent means are sometimes to be used, then there must be clearly identifiable values, the intrinsic worth of which must be greater than that of peace. It is only when such values are identified that peace can be compromised in pursuit of these values, which are more precious than peace itself. I wonder how many would challenge my contention that justice, equality and freedom are more valuable than peace? I am not willing to give up my freedom, or allow myself to be treated as inferior 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 order?

I believe that we cannot. However, despite this, we can appeal to the oppressed and the downtrodden to give 'peaceful change' a chance. We can at least defend peace as an instrumental value even if we cannot defend peace as an inherent value worth more than all other values. Particularly in a region where change is necessary, the engineering of peaceful, gradual and systematic change will preclude violent and revolutionary transformations. We can develop a discourse based on Quranic principles of peace to advance Islamic ethical theories of international and interfaith relations (Muqtedar Khan 1997).

Jihad for change

وَعَلَّهُمَا فِي سِبْلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يَفْتَرُونَ
وَلَا تَعْتَدُواَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعَتَّرِينَ

And fight in the Way of Allah those who fight you,
but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors.

Quran 2:190

The Quran offers a very sophisticated view of peace (Khan 2013). In many verses it promises the believer peace as a final reward for a righteous life (5:16). It also describes the house of Islam as the abode of peace (10:16). At the behest of the Quran, Muslims greet each other every time they meet, by wishing peace for each other (6:54). However, the Quran does not shy away from advocating military action in the face of persecution and religious intolerance. The strongest statement is in the chapter al-Baqarah (191):

'And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places from where they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter.'

The presence of this verse in the Quran clearly precludes a complete prohibition of violence. The verse is important because, in spite of the enormous significance 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' (2:217). Elsewhere
the Quran states: ‘And fight them until persecution is no more’ (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. Thus it seeks to balance the absence of conflict with the absence of injustice. However, in order that there be peace, there must be change, and this change is not necessarily peaceful. But, perhaps we can minimise areas where violence is legitimised by the Quran.

In al-Baqarah, the Quran says: ‘And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrongdoers’ (2:193). This verse is interesting because it limits retaliation against all except those who are directly responsible for wrongdoing and also suggests that persecution could mean religious persecution. In other words, it is when the practice of Islam is prohibited that fighting persecution with violent means is justified. This could have implications for conflicts among Muslim states and between Muslim states and Islamic groups. Where Muslim citizens are allowed to practise their faith freely, as in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran, violence is not an option.

The Quran makes a profound pronouncement in 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 injunction further reduces the scope for violent response against persecution by granting an amnesty to those who stop persecution. One of the reasons that tyrannical regimes persist in the Muslim world is due to the fear of retaliation. Regimes are resisting change and democratisation for fear of being persecuted for past crimes by new regimes. A promise of a general amnesty for past deeds by potential challengers may create an atmosphere where existing regimes may permit gradual change.

Thus, philosophically, we may not be able to completely eliminate the revolutionary option for instituting change, but there is enough meat in the Quran to suggest that a violent response should be limited to egregious cases of religious persecution and repression. The Quran also makes a strong case for forgiveness and for peace as soon as hostilities are ceased. It also does not permit the use of force against those who do not use force.

Conflicts in the Islamic world

The Muslim world is today beset with political struggles which have the potential for violent conflict. At one level the Muslim world is still locked in an ideological, political and sometimes even violent struggle with states which are non-Muslim in character. At another level, Muslim states are involved in conflict against each other as well as in internal conflicts and civil wars. Even constitutional democracies such as Pakistan face both peaceful and violent challenges from within while also being involved in conflicts outside their borders.

In addition, there are problems of conflict between state and society, for example, in Syria and Egypt. This type of conflict has attracted the most attention because it pits 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 turn out to be like Iran – virulently anti-West and anti-Israel. Finally, we have the civil conflict between the secularists and the Islamists (Muqtedar Khan 2001).

The state is inevitably involved in this struggle as it is often pressed into the service of one or the other party as has happened in Turkey, Pakistan and Algeria. All these struggles have resulted in a great deal of violence, raising questions such as ‘can Muslims resolve their differences peacefully?’ and ‘do they have a tradition for tolerance and the peaceful resolution of conflict?’
This leads to the specific question, which is a challenge to Muslims, of whether we can find some philosophical foundations for peaceful resolution of conflict over Muslim mores whose revival may help to introduce regimes that can facilitate peaceful conflict resolution and peaceful socio-political change. A search for answers to these questions will entail an analysis of Islamic sources for any injunctions relating to peace and an understanding of barriers to peaceful processes. The arguments below will be limited to Quranic sources given that the Quran alone remains an uncontested source of moral authority in almost all sections of the Muslim world.

The Quran and the way to peace

The value of peace is clear in the message of the Quran. It treats peace as the desired path in life as well as a value or reward for righteousness. In chapter al-Maidah, the Quran states that God guides all those who seek his pleasure to ways of peace and security (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 Surat al-Maidah is positing the transition from Jahiliyyah to Islam, from darkness to enlightenment, from being misguided onto the sirat al-mustaqeem (the straight path) as a way to peace: ‘Whereby Allah guides him who seeks His good pleasure unto paths of peace. He brings them out of darkness unto light by his will, and guides them unto a straight path’ (Quran 5:16).

In the verse cited at the beginning of this chapter, 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 meaning peace. Muslims greet each other by wishing or praying for peace for each other – as-salamu ‘alaykum (may peace be upon you). This is not based on a tradition or a convention: it is a practice based on the injunctions of the Quran. The Quran states that the
greeting of those who are righteous and who have been admitted to the heavens is 'Peace!' (14:23). It is quite amazing the degree to which Muslims have lost their self-awareness about being Muslim and its significance in terms of being bringers of peace. If they were to become more self-conscious about their faith and the elements of their faith that they practise, it would help to 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 other communities too. The Quran forbids Muslims from initiating aggression or causing fitna (mischief or rioting) on earth and exhorts them to make peace with their enemies if their enemies incline towards peace. For example:

- 'Wrong not humanity in their goods, and do not do evil or make mischief on earth' (26:183).
- 'Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loves not aggressors' (2:190).
- 'If they withdraw from you but fight you not, and (instead) send you (guarantees of) peace, then Allah has opened no way for 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).

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 demand guarantees of peace and impose 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 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 realisation of peace.

**Conclusion**

The Quran forbids Muslims from initiating or perpetuating violence except in self-defence and to fight persecution. Persecution is a complex phenomenon and the meaning of the term is often contingent on contemporary realities. But, broadly, it can be considered as a condition in which people are deprived of the freedom to practice their beliefs and their property, their land and their lives are constantly in jeopardy. The Quran is a strong advocate of peace, but it does permit Muslims to fight to protect their faith, freedom and lands and property.

But, in the interests of peace and to avoid the inevitable persecution and misery that comes with violence, Muslim scholars and intellectuals can argue that violence should be the last resort. They can 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 guarantee of peace. The task of translating these Quranic principles into concrete reality remains one of the biggest challenges for Muslim scholars and Muslim intellectuals. The importance of this cannot be overstated. A peaceful society is a necessary precondition for a flourishing economy. If property is under threat and violence common, and if the ownership of resources is determined by violent conflict rather than through peaceful cooperation in a free economy based on private property and the rule of law, it is almost impossible to envisage a flourishing economic life. In the same way, a stable society requires that political power is transferred peacefully through largely democratic means.

**References**


8 ISLAM AND POLITICS TODAY: THE REASONS FOR THE RISE OF JIHADISM

Hasan Yücel Başdemir

The problem

Today, political unrest and violence dominate in the Islamic world. In almost every corner of the Middle East, governments are in power that do not allow basic rights to those who are in peaceful opposition. The search for a life of peace is thwarted either by bombs, unknown assassins and military coups, or by jihadi (Islamic militant) groups, and the destructive and aggressive attitudes of Islamophobic secularists. Certain terrorist groups consider this an opportunity and are trying to realise their political objectives under the name 'Islamic State', justified by 'Sharia' (Islamic ecclesiastical law) and using violence as a tool. Outside the Islamic world, the majority of Muslims are integrated within the societies in which they live; however, some of them are experiencing problems of integration. In short, Muslims are facing serious social problems all over the world.

Of course, there is no single reason for these problems. The world conjuncture, the global economic situation, local factors, struggles between religious sects and the tension arising from a lack of strategy over oil and natural resources, all cause their problems. However, perhaps the overriding problem is that Muslim people cannot produce a way of living on which they can fully agree. The intelligentsia and academics cannot properly analyse what is going on or foresee the future because the problems are