Editorial

Peace among Muslims: Religious Obligation or Political Expediency?

Peace is seen as a sociopolitical value whose permanent realization keeps eluding humanity, despite constant efforts (at least for the past century) for it to prevail permanently. For Muslims, peace[1] is not just a sociopolitical imperative; it is also a religious obligation. So any attempts to achieve it at anytime (be it among Muslims, or between them and their non-Muslim enemies) must be considered an act of obedience to God, who enjoined them, on several occasions in the Qur'an (for example, 8:61), to strive toward peace. In this editorial, I will highlight only peace among Muslims.

Significance of Peace among Muslims

Imagine two groups getting into fist fight in Madina: one group led by ʿAbdullāh Ibn Ubayy Ibn Salūl, well-known for its hypocrisy, and severally rebuked in the Qur'an for sabotaging Islam and Muslims and betraying the Prophet; the other group led by ʿAbdullāh Ibn Rawāhah, known literally as the true "supporters" (*anṣār*) of the Prophet, and praised in the Qur'an for its unwavering loyalty and support for the Prophet and the Muslim community. And the Qur'an, considering both groups as "believers" (*mu'minūn*), actually commands both to reconcile and make peace as "brothers" (*ikhwat*). Such, in fact, was the situation during Prophet's time, according to Tafsīr Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687),[2] that prompted the revealing of the most direct commands on peace among Muslims:

> If two groups of the believers fight, you should try to reconcile them; if
> one of them is oppressing the other, fight the oppressors until they sub-
> mit to God's command, then make a just and even-handed reconciliation
> between the two of them: God loves those who are even-handed. The
> believers are brothers, so make peace between your two brothers and be
> mindful of God, so that you may be given mercy. Qur'an (49: 9–10)

First of all, the groups I described above were diametrically opposed groups
in their intensions and habits—one of them was conspicuously presented
in a negative (evil) light, the other was highly praised. Yet, the Qur'an
still considers them "brothers." Second, the fact is that the group that was
clearly on the wrong side and tagged as hypocrites (*munāiqūn*) was, none-
theless, considered in these verses as part of the community of "believers."
Third, despite numerous condemnations in the Qur'an, the hypocrites still
deserved the chance to be made peace with. These scenarios speak vol-
umes about either the preeminence of peace in Islamic worldview or the
high priority accorded to tolerance—or, possibly, both.

In modern era, the identity of the groups, as intended in these verses,
will extend to Muslim organizations and nation states.[3] So Islamically, no
peace among any Muslim groups or nations (for the purpose of advancing
peaceful relationships and harmonious coexistence) should be rejected or
even ridiculed for religious grounds, let alone for political reasons. Like
the hypocrites of Prophet's time, previous intentions, activities, and hab-
its of people—even if proven with certainty as negative (and who deter-
mines what is negative here is crucial)—do not weaken the significance
of peace.

On practical terms, insisting on peace among Muslim groups or na-
tions nowadays seems to be political naiveté. Lately, there are signs that
things could change in a positive direction. The question is, "Why does
it look like Muslims, on the whole, seem reluctant about seeking peace
among themselves?" First of all, this question is only true in the case of
some governmental relations on national levels. It is not true for individual,
ordinary Muslims.

Nonetheless, the hopelessness or ambivalence toward exacting peace
observed among some groups and nations has to do with several factors.
First, strategic interests of some Muslim groups and nations may dictate
that they not enter into peace alliance with another group or nation. This is
usually based on geopolitical considerations. As sinister as it may sound,
a peace pact or negotiations may deny people some political leverage (if
they are to be bound by certain logical relations that do not allow them the

freedom to act unilaterally in their interest alone)—and if high price or priority is accorded this leverage and its future consequences, peace may be conveniently and unabashedly ignored or sabotaged. Islamically, this is unacceptable. Yet, geopolitics usually takes precedence.

Second, domestic and foreign policies of some nations may compel governments to maintain and consider some Muslims as foes and enemies (perceived or real). Internally, religious and sectarian constituencies are usually the targets of domestic conflicts. And some governments embark on divide-and-rule policies by promoting enmity and conflicts among Muslim groups. Similarly, foreign policies of some Muslim nations benefit by making enemies of other nations. By ignoring the Islamic commonality, they allow geopolitical and internal socioreligious factors to fuel the situation.

Finally, appeasing foreign allies for economic and political gains over and against some Muslim nations is another important factor. In this case, Muslims have allowed themselves to be divided and ruled by foreign allies. Curiously, this fact partly challenges one of the important aspects of the popular theory of "clash of civilizations" advanced by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s (where international conflicts will be along the lines of civilizations, with Islam being considered as a monolithic civilization).[4] For the foreseeable future, it would be hard to see all Muslim nations united on one side on the basis of Islamic solidarity, against their non-Muslim allies, or vise versa. Political and economic interests will always determine where loyalties of nation states (Muslim or non-Muslim) lie, even if that requires, as it has been proven time and again, not making peace with a fellow-Muslim nation. Sadly, leaders of Muslim nations seem to care more about political expediency (even if unpopular with average Muslims) than socioreligious imperatives.

Due to the Islamic brotherhood expressed in the Qur'anic quotation above, Muslims must give priority to peace and reconciliation. Thus, religious considerations must supersede political expediency. As Muslims, it is not naïve to bring God's directives into the political equation if that is accompanied by prudent political maneuverings. After declaring a total submission to God as Muslims and believers, it is not only hypocrisy to undermine religious teachings with the claim that these principles are impotent and irrelevant in political affairs; it is also a wasted opportunity. After all, people have the choice not to believe in God and to render religious considerations baseless. Muslims chose not to take that choice.

Political expediency does not necessarily have to be devoid of socioreligious values, especially when these values permeate all other sectors

of society. In fact, from an Islamic perspective, God's supportive role in successful political outcomes is as crucial, if not more so, as any effective political strategy. It is high time that Muslim leaders begin to do what is morally, socially, and politically right for the interests of their people and for humanity at large—and then, instead of political advisors, rely on God by carrying out His injunctions. They will be doomed to failure if they don't. For when the time comes for the real political reckoning, no savvy personal advisor or brilliant foreign consultant—or, even, a powerful international ally—can be of any use. Imam Muḥammad al-Būṣīrī (d. 1296) was on target when he declared in his *qaṣīda* of *al-Burda* that:

> God's protection (*wiqyat Allāh*) is more effective than any layers of armor (*muḍā'fat min al-durū''*), or the highest of fortresses (*'ūlin min al-uṭam*).[5]

The second issue of this year's *AJISS* opens with "Discursive Constructions of the Israel-Hezbollah War: The Struggle for Representation," written by Ursula Lau, Mohamed Seedat, and Victoria McRitchie. These fine scholars examine a section of the local South African reports of print media on the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in order to reveal the supporters-of-the adversaries main discourse themes, their hidden ideological positions, and their legitimation through specific textual devices. The authors maintain that what they call "discursive war" has some ideological effects on ordinary people of South Africa, for which they propose "discursive interventions" for the sake of peace in the media.

Next is Imran Mogra's "On Being a Muslim Teacher in England: The Role of Faith and History in Educational Reflections." Using his interviews with Muslim primary teachers in England, Mogra attempts to explore themes in the context of education, which are related to the evolving relationship between faith and professionalism. He also examines the dynamics of teacher identity and the role of faith in schooling. He concludes that although faith is important to these teachers, their foremost concern is teaching, and successful teaching is achieved by maintaining their integrity and that of the children they teach.

Om Prakash, the author of "Undermined Syncretism: Origin and Consciousness of Muslim Separatism in Colonial South Asia," looks into the aspect of what happened during the colonial period in India, which undermined the rich syncretic tradition and subsequently fragmented the Indian subcontinent along religious lines. Prakash further explores how Muslim

separatism was fed by various reactionary elements, including colonial and imperial forces.

Finally, Fatimah Abdullah presents us with her "Human Behavior from Islamic Perspective: Interaction of Nature, Nurture, and the Spiritual Dimension." Abdullah attempts to highlight the importance of the Islamic belief system as an integrated and comprehensive way to dealing with human behavior—especially by means of the interaction of nature, nurture, and the spiritual factors in the formation of human behavior.

Khaleel Mohammed's "Wissenschaft des Judentums as a Paradigm for New Muslim Approaches to Islam" is best suited for our Forum section for its courageous suggestions. Khaleel examines some early aspects of Wissenschaft des Judentums (what may be understood as Jewish Studies), considering the perspectives of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) as guides for reformist Muslim scholars in the Western world. Although this may be resisted by some Muslims, Khaleel feels that the parallels between the circumstances of Jews in nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Europe and that of Muslims in the Western world today are strikingly similar—demanding, therefore, similar intellectual paradigms.

I am confident, as usual, that *AJISS* has brought together a diverse array of thought-provoking articles, which will engage our readers on a high intellectual plane and stimulate their curious minds with useful and substantial information.

Endnotes

1. Peace here includes all attempts for reconciliation, for cooperation, and for truce—and all ways to stop animosity, hatred, and fighting among Muslims.
2. Also narrated by ʿAlī ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī (d. 468/1075) in his *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*. See Tafsir Ibn ʿAbbas, "Tanwîr al-Miqbâs min Tafsîr Ibn ʿAbbâs," trans. Mokrane Guezzou, www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=2&tTafs irNo=73&tSoraNo=49&tAyahNo=9&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&Langu ageId=2; www.altafsir.com/WahidiAsbabAlnuzul.asp. "Al-Tabari also narrates other versions of this verse that involve actors different from those mentioned above." These versions seem to underscore that there was no armed conflict, just a fist fight—a point probably intended to sneer at any armed conflict among Muslims.
3. Though it is highly tempting to use specific names of modern Muslim groups and nations, and this may also help contextualize the editorial, I have avoided using names in order to maintain neutrality and shift emphasis from the actors to the Islamic worldview on peace.

4.   Samuel P. Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
5.   Muhammad ibn Saʿeed al-Būṣīrī, *Qaṣīdah Burdah Sharīf: The Mantle Ode* (Gujranwala, Pakistan: Abbasi Publications, 2002).

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