

Peace and War: The Islamic Perspective

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I believe that in any current discussion on the issues of war and peace, it is vitally important to introduce the Islamic perspective since it is in the regions which are predominantly Muslim that the greatest danger of war exists in today's world.

The Qur'an is the Revelation on which Islam is founded. To the Muslims the Qur'an is the actual Word of God transmitted by the Angel of Prophecy, Archangel Gabriel, to the Prophet Muhammad who transmitted it to the first Muslims without change or error. The over-whelming majority of the Muslims in the world, therefore, regard the Qur'an as absolutely authoritative and binding. The concepts of peace and war presented or projected by the Qur'an are, hence, of central significance in understanding the Islamic perspective regarding these issues.

Let us first talk about peace. The Qur'an describes Allah as "*As-salaam*": the Being who is the Source of Peace and Concord.. Another name of God is "*Al-Mo'min*"; the Being who shelters and protects all and bestows peace on all beings in every sphere of life. The basic meaning of "*Islam*" is peace and the true "*Muslim*" is described as a "*Mo'min*" whose life exemplifies peace. In Surah 5:16, the Qur'an refers to itself as the means by which the paths of peace are made wider. In Surah 10:25, it summons humankind to the house of peace. And in Surah 6:128, it states that the reward for living in accord with its tenets is the abode of peace. Not only does the Qur'an consider peace to be the ideal state, the Muslims in their daily lives also speak of peace constantly. The traditional Muslim greeting is "*salaam o 'alaikum*" which means "Peace be unto you" and "*alaikum as salaam*" which means "Peace be unto you also."

Peace is undoubtedly a central Qur'anic concept, but an analysis of the words relating to this concept (e.g. "*aman*", "*mo'min*", "*amanat*") shows that according to Qur'anic teaching, peace does not mean a mere absence of war. Peace is a dynamic rather than a passive state. Its precondition is justice. Peace is to be found in a society from which all forms of inequity, inequality or injustice have been eliminated, where all persons feel secure and have access to the means whereby their human potential for growth may be actualized.

If a society suffers from oppression and injustice, it is incumbent upon Muslims to engage in "*Jihad*", i.e., to strive with all their means to create a just order without which peace cannot exist. It is the moral and religious responsibility of every Muslim to seek and promote justice and peace at all times and under all circumstances. Islam does not permit a renouncing of the world and Muslims are not theologically or psychologically oriented towards accepting the idea that the human condition is one of sinfulness, frailty or failure.

"*Jihad*" is frequently translated as "holy war." The concept of "*Jihad*" does not, however, refer primarily to a physical war, but rather to the idea of striving "for the cause of God." It is the effort that each Muslim is required to make – internally and externally – to create a reality that corresponds to the ideals projected by the Qur'an. In some situations, war becomes necessary as a means to the end of establishing justice and peace (This sounds ironical, but human life is full of ironies). Let us now look at some Qur'anic passages (translated by A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*) which relate significantly to the subject of war:

Surah 2	190	Fight in the cause of God
		Those who fight you,
		But do not transgress limits;
	191	And slay them,
		And turn them out
		From where they have
		Turned you out;
		For tumult and oppression
		Are worse than slaughter;
		But fight them not
		At the Sacred Mosque
		Unless they (first)
		Fight you there,
		But if they fight you,
		Slay them
		Such is the reward
		Of those who suppress faith
	192	But if they cease
		God is oft-forgiving
		Most merciful
	193	And fight them on
		Until there is no more
		Tumult or oppression,
		And there prevail
		Justice and faith in God;
		But if they cease,
		Let there be no hostility
		Except to those
		Who practice oppression.
Surah	217	They ask thee
		Concerning fighting
		In the Prohibited month
		Say: "Fighting therein
		Is a grave (offence);
		But graver is it
		In the sight of God
		To prevent access
		To the path of God,
		To deny Him,
		To prevent access
		To the sacred Mosque
		And to drive out its members."
		Tumult and oppression
		Are worse than slaughter.
		Nor will they cease
		Fighting you until
		They turn you back

From your faith
 If they can
 And if any of you
 Turn back from your faith
 And die in unbelief,
 Their works will bear no fruit
 In this life
 And in the Hereafter;
 They will be
 Companions of the Fire
 And will abide therein.

Surah 4 75

And why should ye not
 Fight in the cause of God
 And of those who, being weak,
 Are ill-treated (and oppressed)? –
 Men, women, and children
 Whose cry is “Our Lord!
 Rescue us from this town,
 Whose people are oppressors;
 And raise for us from thee
 One who will protect;
 And raise for us from Thee
 One who will help!”

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Those who believe
 Fight in the cause of God
 And those who reject Faith
 Fight in the cause of Evil
 So fight ye against the
 Friends of Satan: feeble indeed
 Is the cunning of Satan.

77

Hast thou not turned
 Thy vision to those
 Who were told to hold back
 Their hands (from fight)
 But establish regular prayer
 And spend in regular Charity?
 When (at length) the order
 For fighting was issued to them
 Behold! a section of them
 Feared men as -
 Or even more than -
 They should have feared God:
 They said: “Our Lord!
 Why has Thou ordered us
 To fight? Wouldst Thou not
 Grant us respite
 To our (natural) term,
 Near (enough)?” Say: “Short
 Is the enjoyment of this world:

		78	<p>The Hereafter is the best For those who do right Never will ye be Dealt with unjustly In the very least! Wherever ye are, Death will find you out, Even if ye are in the towers Built up strong and high!”</p>
Surah 22	39	40	<p>To those against whom War is made, permission Is given (to fight), because They are wronged; – and verily, God is most powerful For their aid, – (They are) those who have Been expelled from their homes In defiance of (for no cause) except That they say, “Our Lord Is God? Did not God Check one set of people By means of another, There would surely have been Pulled down monasteries, churches, Synagogues, and mosques, in which The name of God is commemorated In abundant measure. God will Certainly aid those who Aid His (cause); for verily God is Full of Strength Exalted in Might, (Able to enforce His Will)</p>
Surah 22	60		<p>And if one Has retaliated to no greater Extent than the injury he received, And is again set upon Inordinately, God will help Him for God is One The blots our (sins) And forgives (again and again)</p>
Surah 57	25		<p>We sent aforetime Our Apostles with Clear Signs And sent down with them The book of the Balance (Of Right and Wrong), that men May stand forth in justice;</p>

And We sent down Iron,
 In which is (material for)
 Mighty war, as well as
 Many benefits for mankind,
 That God may test who
 It is that will help,
 Unseen, Him and His Apostles:
 For God is Full of Strength,
 Exalted in Might
 (And able to enforce His Will)

An analysis of the Qur'anic passages relating to war indicates that whilst the doing of good in return for evil and forgiving of wrongs is considered to be a higher morality than the seeking of retribution, yet under certain circumstances engaging in war is not only justifiable but required. War in defense of one's beliefs and what one owns rightfully is justified. War in defense of those who are oppressed and who seek relief from injustice and tyranny is a "*jihad*" that must be undertaken by all true believers. The Qur'an does not glorify war, but it points out that "tumult and slaughter" are worse than war and that those who persecute others for believing in God and destroy or desecrate holy places are to be opposed. The Qur'an upholds the spirit of the Mosaic law according to which "retaliation" must not be in excess of the injury received and also reiterates in many contexts that the cessation of hostilities and any peace initiative on the part of the enemy is to be accepted in good faith and reciprocated. The Qur'anic teaching on the subject of war has been summarized by a noted Muslim scholar:

"The Muslims fight in the cause of Allah against cruelty, tyranny and injustice. Their purpose is to make justice prevail in the world. The unbelievers fight to subdue other people and exploit their own ends. The Qur'an tells us in simple and direct language when war is justified and when it is not. For example, people, if they are really persecuted, have a right to rebel against the government of their country. However, they would be acting directly against the Qur'anic principles if they magnified any petty grievance and called it persecution. They may be said to be the victims of persecution only if the basic rights, defined by the Qur'an, are denied to them. The *Mo'min* will take up arms only to defend these rights, and he will hasten to help the oppressed, Muslim or non-Muslim". (Parwez, G.A., *Islam, A Challenge to Religion*, Lahore, 1968, pp.291-292).

Finally, in the context of war I would like to say that, in a sense, Islamic theology and ethics does not distinguish between "war" and "nuclear war." If a particular war is an "unjust" war it is unjust regardless of the kinds of weapons employed in it and the number of people who die as a result of it. The Qur'an has upheld the sanctity and absolute value of human life, e.g.,

Surah 6	151	Take not life, which God Hath made sacred, except By way of justice and law
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It has also pointed out graphically that, in essence, the life of each individual is comparable to that of an entire community and, therefore, should be treated with great care:

Surah 5	35	We ordained For the Children of Israel
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That if anyone slew
A person – unless it be
For murder or for spreading
Mischief in the land —
It would be as if
He slew the whole people:
And if anyone saved a life,
It would be as if he saved
The life of the whole people.

But though the nature of the weapons involved in a particular war does not determine the basic rightness or wrongness of that war, yet it seems to me that a distinction needs to be made – particularly in the case of what may be described as a “just war” – between a war which is nuclear and one which is not. The ultimate end of a just war as described by the Qur’an is the restoration of justice and peace amongst humankind. A war which may lead to the annihilation of our species and our planet is not very likely to lead to the realization of such an end. Therefore, it would seem – ethically and theologically – to follow that no segment of humankind must become so zealous in its pursuit even if those goals which are considered to be morally and religiously of the highest import that it appropriates the right to inflict irreparable damage upon God’s earth and God’s creatures and well-nigh eliminates the possibility of just and peaceful living for all human beings.

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