

# Peace and War: The Islamic Perspective

**Riffat Hassan**

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.

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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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