
Nonviolent Jihad

The Framework of Nonviolent Action in Islam

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The role of Islam in advocating nonviolence and nonviolent methods of achieving sociopolitical reforms has been scarcely studied. The intersection of Islam and nonviolence is an ostensible paradox, as Islam is perceived by many as conducive to violence or authoritarianism. Muslim-majority countries have disproportionately higher rates of authoritarianism. Additionally, most wars since the turn of the twenty-first century have occurred in Muslim-majority countries (Kuru 2019; Gleditsch and Rudolfson 2016). Some intellectuals have attributed the overrepresentation of violence and authoritarianism to Islam itself, stating that it inherently poses boundaries against democratic values (Huntington 1996; Lewis 2003). An extensive corresponding literature has emerged critiquing violent perceptions of Islam. This literature has illustrated Islam's treatment of the sanctity of life, nonviolence, and nonviolent action and has offered alternative explanations for excessive conflict in Muslim-majority countries (E. Said 1981; Esposito 1992;

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Abu-Nimer 2001, Jackson 2002; AbuKhalil 2004; Tabassum 2019; Kuru 2019; Akyol 2021).

Western academic scholars typically study Islam from a historical lens, in terms of interpreting both Islamic text and Muslim behavior. The historical lens allows us to study the evolution and diversity of Muslim interpretations and political arrangements as they have occurred. Specifically, they reveal the abundance of peaceful interpretations and fundamentalist manipulation of Islam for ideological purposes (Esposito 2002; Goodman 2003; Hafez 2003). Additionally, they present various cases where Muslims utilized nonviolent methods and nonviolent action in seeking sociopolitical reform (see, for example, Stephan 2009; Kurtz 2011; Halverson 2012). The problem with the Western academic approach is that it has a limited effect in persuading current Muslim scholars and laypeople to revise their thinking because it does not directly engage with what Islamic text *really means*.

We work within the traditional stream of scholarship on nonviolence, building on the work of two Muslim intellectuals, Jawdat Said and Said Nursi (J. Said 1993; Abu-Nimer 2001; Sayilgan 2019). Abu-Nimer (2001) stated that the Islamic tradition is full of potential resources addressing social and political conflicts that have not yet been realized. These resources emphasize the importance of peace and nonviolence and require astute scholars familiar with the tradition to extract their insights properly. We have accepted his charge. We offer *traditional* theoretical foundations for nonviolent action by extensive reference to the Quran and authentic Prophetic tradition, as one of the authors, Muhammad Al-Ninowy, is a traditional Islamic scholar. Nonviolent action is a broad category of behaviors that can result in political, economic, or social change through peaceful actions (Sharp 1973, 1994, 2005, 2013; Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Despite the potential for an Islamic model for nonviolence in the Quran and in the *Sunnah*—authentic Prophetic tradition—voices pushing the nonviolence narrative are marginalized. We seek to fill the gap and offer an Islamic model of nonviolent action.

We proceed as follows. The next section discusses the theoretical foundations of nonviolence in Islam from Quranic verses and the authentic tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. We then discuss the definition of jihad in the Islamic tradition, highlighting that nonviolent action fits the definition and is encouraged over violent defensive methods barring direct existential threats. The following section explores why nonviolent action is superior to violence according to the Islamic framework, emphasizing the social benefits of nonviolence. The fifth section concludes.

Foundations of Nonviolence in Islam

The Quran offers five foundations for the principle of nonviolence in Islam. The first foundation is set at the very beginning of humanity, when God informs the angels that He is creating Adam (Quran, 2:30): “Behold, Your Lord said to the angels: ‘I will

create a successor on earth.’ They said: ‘Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood while we do celebrate Your praises and glorify Your holy (name)?’ He said: ‘I know what you know not.’” The first warning against violence is given to humankind even before its creation. Although the warning came from angels, God inscribed the warning eternally in the Quran, making it a transient principle.

The second foundation is set right after the creation of Adam, when God commanded the angels to prostrate to Adam. All of them did except Iblis, or Satan, who said, “I am nobler than he. You created me from fire and created him from clay. God commanded, ‘Then get out of Paradise, for you are truly cursed’” (Quran 38: 76–77). The result of Satan’s essentialist judgment of his own superiority over Adam based on the material they were created from, along with his stubborn rejection of God’s order, was banishment from God’s mercy. A critical point from these verses is Satan’s opinion that fire is superior to clay, even though clay constructs and fire destroys. The verses above point to the human ability of construction as what uniquely sets them apart from other creations, not their ability to engage in violence and destruction.

The third foundation of nonviolence is provided in the story of Abel and Cain. The verses below display the origin of the violent logic, born out of envy and greed, that was humankind’s debut in sin:

Relate to them in truth the story of Adam’s two sons—how each offered a sacrifice [to God]: Abel’s offering was accepted while Cain’s was not. So, Cain threatened, “I will kill you!” His brother replied, “God only accepts [the offering] of the sincerely devout. If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise mine to kill you because I fear God—the Lord of all worlds.” (Quran 5:27-28)

The logic of “I will kill you!” starting with Cain is the motto of tyrants and criminals of every age. So much so that the world has become a prisoner of the logic of power as opposed to the power of logic.¹ The verses contain the appropriate way to respond to the logic of power, with the power of logic, as Abel reasons with his brother, as if to say: “Why would you want to kill me? God’s acceptance of my sacrifice is not my fault; it was merely my sincerity.” Abel also explains that he would not reciprocate threat with threat or violence with violence, stating that he fears God and implying that reciprocation is evil. His belief in a hereafter barred him from the exchange of even a threat of violence. The story presents that nonviolence is not passive, as the Quran does not teach passivity and submission to evil or violence. It teaches reciprocating destruction with construction, and resistance through seeking to *change people’s attitudes* without shedding blood.

1. By *logic*, we do not mean the systematic use of symbolic and mathematical techniques to determine the forms of valid deductive argument but, broadly, sound reasoning.

The fourth foundation of nonviolence follows Abel's response, citing how prophets responded to their people's threats. The prophetic approach to reform has always prioritized appeals to moral faculties. Prophet Abraham's monotheistic call was met with threats from his father to stone him (Quran 19:41–46). In response, Prophet Abraham said: "Peace be upon you! I will pray to my Lord for your forgiveness. He has truly been Most Gracious to me" (Quran 19:47). Similar violent threats were faced by Prophet Abraham on other occasions (Quran 29:24), Prophet Noah (Quran 26:116–18), Prophet Lot (Quran 7:24, 26:167), and Prophet Shu'aib (Quran 7:88–89), all of whom responded with nonthreatening appeals to reason. Prophet Moses's call to Pharaoh, a tyrant who had slaughtered many men, women, and children among Moses's tribe, was also characterized by gentleness. Relating the story of Moses, God said to Moses in the Quran (20:44–47):

Speak to him gently, so perhaps he may be mindful [of Me] or fearful [of My punishment]." They both pleaded, "Our Lord! We fear that he may be quick to harm us or act tyrannically." God reassured [them], "Have no fear! I am with you, hearing and seeing. So go to him and say, 'Indeed we are both messengers from your Lord, so let the Children of Israel go with us, and do not oppress them. We have come to you with a sign from your Lord. And salvation will be for whoever follows the [right] guidance.

Prophet Joseph was unjustly thrown in prison for many years based on a lie. When he was released from prison and gained enormous power in Egyptian society, he never sought to use his ability to get revenge on those who oppressed him, as vengeance is incompatible with Islam.

Finally, the fifth foundation represents a broad emphasis on eradicating violence and encouraging the principles that call for peace and nonviolence. In Islam, God is the caller to peaceableness: "And God calls [all] to the abode of peace and guides whomever He wills to the Straight Path." The call is practical as God commands believers to enter peace in all physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions: "O believers, enter the peace entirely and do not follow Satan's footsteps; he is a clear enemy to you" (Quran 2:208). He commands believers to agree to peace as soon as it is offered: "So, if they refrain from fighting you and offer you peace, then Allah does not permit you to harm them" (Quran 4:90) and "if the enemy is inclined toward peace, make peace with them. And put your trust in Allah. Indeed, He [alone] is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing" (Quran 8:61).

The tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, or the Sunnah, is entirely in line with the teachings of the Quran, reinforced by the Quran itself: "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a *mercy* to the worlds" (Quran 21:107). The prophet consistently taught nonviolence and worked to avoid war except when facing an existential threat, as will be made clear. His tradition is that of persistence in perfecting the moral character of previously warring societies and turning them into integrated, peaceful societies:

And hold firmly to the rope of God and do not be divided. Remember Allah's favor upon you when you were, then He united your hearts, so you—by His grace—became brothers. And you were at the brink of a fiery pit, and He saved you from it. This is how Allah makes His revelations clear to you, so that you may be [rightly] guided. (Quran 3:103)

Peace making was paramount to the new Muslim identity, such that the Prophet defined a Muslim specifically by his peaceful traits: “A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his tongue and hands” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 10), and “the Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one from whom the people's lives and wealth are safe” (Sunan An-Nasa'i, 4998, 4999).

A consistent theme of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings, noted by many scholars, is the emphasis on gentleness. He says: “God is gentle and loves gentleness, and rewards for gentleness that which he does not grant for violence of anything else” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 6927; Sahih Muslim, 2596). He also advised his wife, 'Aisha, saying: “Be gentle and calm, O 'Aisha! Be gentle and beware of being violent and of saying evil things,” making him the first person to call threats and aggressive verbiage violence (*unf*) in the Arabic language (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 6401).

The Prophetic teachings additionally explicitly prohibit resorting to violence or aggression. Consider the following traditions of the Prophet Muhammad:

- “Whoever takes up arms against us, is not from us” (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 6874, 7070).
- “A faithful believer remains at liberty regarding his religion unless he kills a person unlawfully” (6862).
- “The first cases to be judged among the people [on the Day of Judgment] will be those of bloodshed” (6864).

Yet, as mentioned before, Islam encourages positive contributions to society and active participation in challenging evil and creating a civilization of peace and prosperity. To achieve the goal of a peaceful and more prosperous world without violating Islam's foundational teachings on nonviolence, we must seek a better alternative than violence and militarism: nonviolent *jihad*.

Jihad and Nonviolent Action

Jihad is defined in the Arabic language, with its root used in the Quran, to mean the act of exerting one's effort to achieve a goal. Conventionally, it means the struggling to command oneself to be virtuous. In extremely constrained contexts, it entails exerting one's effort on the battlefield, called battle jihad or *jihad qitali*. However, battle jihad is not the norm or standard of jihad. Consider that according to an authentic tradition of the Prophet Muhammad, the best form of jihad is a just

statement to an oppressive ruler (Jami' at-Tirmidhi, 2174; Sunan Abi Dawud, 4344), which is not a form of “battle jihad.” Additionally, the fact that jihad can occur in the form of regular self-command, as words to a tyrant, and in the battle against violent opponents should not obscure that in the Quran and authentic Sunnah, jihad, in all of its forms, is nonaggressive. The categorically nonaggressive character of jihad is evident when we study the golden standard set by the Quran and Sunnah and the constrained context where the use of any violence was justified in them.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Prophet Muhammad entered Madina as a peace maker between its conflicting tribal factions. Among the first institutions he established was the Constitution of Madina (Yildirim 2006), which explicitly states: “the Jews of Banu ‘Awf shall be considered as one community (Ummat) along with the believers—for the Jews their religion, and for the Muslims, theirs, be one client or patron. But whoever does wrong or commits treachery brings evil only to himself and his household” (Lecker 2004). It then lists all the Jewish communities in Madina and guarantees them the same rights.

The authentic document of the Constitution of Madina represents the Prophetic gold standard in Islam, of tolerance with all faiths. Comparatively, there are ten passages on battle jihad in the Quran that describe commands to proper action when facing foreign aggression. Verses on battle jihad may seem like they contradict the standard of nonaggression set in the constitution and the aforementioned verses. Yet, when read in the historical context of the developing Madinian nation, the Quranic verses on battle reinforce the values of nonaggression, explain the justification of constrained use of violence in strenuous circumstances, and provide guidance on ethical responses to foreign threats against the new Madinian nation. Consider the following passage, which was revealed before the Battle of Badr, the first battle Muslims faced:

Fight in the cause of God [only] against those who are waging war against you and do not transgress, God does not like transgressors. Kill them wherever you come upon them and drive them out of the places from which they have driven you out. For persecution (*Fitna*) is far worse than killing. And do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they attack you there. If they do so, then fight them—that is the reward of the disbelievers. But if they cease, then surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Fight against them [if they persecute you] until there is no more persecution, and [your] devotion will be to Allah [alone]. If they stop [persecuting you], let there be no hostility except against the aggressors. (Quran 2:190–93)

These passages are conventionally thought to be exceptionally violent, but a closer look offers four principles for violent conflict.

First, the passage says: “Fight in the cause of God [only] against those who *are waging war* against you,” not those who *waged* war against you, emphasizing that

war is only permitted when a direct military threat is present. Waging war against those who do not present a living threat is illegitimate and would fall under seeking revenge, which is prohibited in Islam. In contrast to revenge, the passage reiterates: “But if they cease, then surely God is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful” and “if they stop [persecuting you], let there be no hostility except against the aggressors.” Second, the verse follows, “and do not transgress, God does not like transgressors,” establishing nonaggression as a foundational principle for warfare. Third, “kill them wherever you come upon them” means wherever you come upon them *on the battlefield*. The verse emphasizes the new permission to engage in battle after years of explicit prohibition when they lived as citizens alongside their oppressors in Mecca. Indeed, Islam does not direct the oppressed to submit to their slaughterers. Instead, it permits engaging in battle for defensive purposes to drive oppression away.

Finally, the passage explains the very objective of battle jihad: “Fight against them [if they persecute you] until there is no more persecution (*Fitna*), and [your] devotion will be to Allah [alone].” Battle jihad was only legislated and permitted for the specific cause of deterring *Fitna*, or religious persecution. *Fitna* is coercive compulsion against freedom of conscience, whether religious or otherwise, which dehumanizes the compelled by stripping them of their most basic God-given freedom. Facing *Fitna* is so evil a dehumanizing experience that it is “far worse than killing.” Other verses reinforce the justification of defensive warfare to deter *Fitna*: “Fight against them until there is no more persecution (*Fitna*)—and [your] devotion will be entirely to Allah. But if they desist, then surely Allah is All-Seeing of what they do” (Quran 8:39).

The interpretation of the justification of battle above is parallel to that of other verses that explain the justification:

They question thee (O Muhammad) with regard to warfare in the sacred month. Say: Warfare therein is a great (transgression), but to turn (men) from the way of Allah, and to disbelieve in Him and in the Inviolable Place of Worship, and to expel His people thence, is a greater [transgression] in the reckoning of Allah; *for persecution (Fitna) is greater than killing. And they will not cease fighting against you till they make you revoke your religion if they can* (Quran 2:217).

Additionally, the Quran says: “Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, *because they were oppressed*. And indeed, God is capable to give them victory” (Quran 22:39). Once again, the command to fight is to deter oppression and injustice broadly, and religious persecution and deprivation of freedom of conscience specifically.

An implication of the four principles cited above is broad support of deterrence strategies, which Islam explicitly supports as an interim strategy to drive away possible aggressors while seeking peace:

And make ready against them all you can of power, *including steeds to threaten the enemy of God and your enemy*, and others besides whom, you may not know but whom Allah does know. And whatever you shall spend in the Cause of God shall be repaid unto you, and you shall not be treated unjustly. *And if they incline to peace, then incline to it [also] and rely upon Allah*. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing (Quran 8:60–61).

The verses above command Muslims to prepare conspicuous symbols of power, like steeds, to deter the warring disbelievers from attacking, insofar as the disbelievers are determined to attack Muslims. It also suggests that if adversaries of Muslims incline toward peace, Muslims should also incline toward it. Every one of the thirteen verses permitting and commanding Muslims to engage in battle, some cited previously in this section, conforms to the four principles outlined in the verses above (Quran 2:190–194; 8:39; 8:60–61; 9:5; 9:29; 9:36; 9:123; 22:39; 47:4–5).

Interestingly, critics of Islam claim that Islam is divided into two periods, the Meccan period, where Muslims were an oppressed minority in a pagan polity, and the Madinian period, where the Muslims emigrated and established their polity. They claim that Islam specifically called for violence in the Madinian period. However, all the practical commands of peace from the four principles that apply to all battle verses to Abel's nonviolence were revealed in the Madinian context, emphasizing that Islam's emphasis on a peaceful and nonviolent culture is a constant across the Prophet Muhammad's life. So, while the principle of responding to evil with kindness to transform enemies into friends is first revealed in the Meccan period (Quran 41:34), it is reinforced in Madina with the story of Abel's principled nonviolence.

The Prophet Muhammad's biography represents the practice of the four principles above and an approach to transforming violent conflict into nonviolent conflict and nonconflict. Ibn Daqiq Al-Eid (1222–1302), an Islamic jurist and Hadith scholar, addressed this issue, saying that the command of battle in the Quran does not necessarily entail killing the enemy (Al-Eid 1987). A great example of engaging in strategic planning to avoid killing violent opponents while challenging them is presented by major milestones of the Prophet Muhammad's movement: the emigration (*Hijra*) to Abyssinia and Madina, the Hudaibiyyah Treaty, and the Liberation of Mecca.

First, faced with severe repression, torture, and religious persecution, Muslims could have resorted to violence in defending themselves against the Meccan pagan elite. Yet, the Prophet Muhammad prohibited violence and permitted the Muslims to make *Hijra* or emigrate to Abyssinia, where a just Christian king could grant them refuge, transforming a conflict of one-sided violence into a nonviolent one. Meanwhile, the Prophet Muhammad stayed in Mecca and had his entire clan and allies boycotted and barricaded until the Prophet managed to facilitate Hijra to

Madina. Gene Sharp (1973, 211) notes Hijra, or protest emigration, as one of the 198 methods of nonviolent action and explicitly mentions the Prophet's flight from Mecca to Madina "instead of submission to the tyranny in Mecca" as the original example of the method.

Second, in the sixth year after emigration to Madina, and after several defensive wars against the Meccan elite, the Prophet Muhammad signed the ten-year peace treaty of Hdaybiyyah. The treaty was one of the most conspicuous manifestations of Islam's nonviolent approach. The Muslims signed it on their way to performing Umrah (ritual pilgrimage in Mecca), wearing Umrah's ritual dress. The Meccans perceived the Muslim ritual of pilgrimage as challenging their authority, so they blocked their path to Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad suggested a peace treaty, where he conceded to so many of the Meccans' demands that many of the Prophet's companions were disappointed (Sahih Al-Bukhari, 2731, 2732). The Prophet's companions saw the terms of the ten-year treaty as humiliating and excessively unfair to them. Among the conditions the Prophet accepted for securing nonconflict was rejecting and returning any Muslim who fled to Madina from Mecca without the permission of the Meccan elite while allowing any Madinian to emigrate to and ally themselves with the Meccan elite. Additionally, the Muslims had to leave without performing their rituals at Mecca that year and brokered a ten-year peace treaty. Unbeknownst to the disappointed companions, the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah granted them time to call neighboring tribes and clans to Islam. Converting neighboring groups to Islam yielded a fruitful long-term strategy for the Muslims, as new Muslim tribes were more likely to boycott Meccan goods (Mamun 2019). Sharp (1973) notes that economic boycotts are incredibly effective nonviolent methods for social change. Once again, the Prophet transformed a situation with the potential for violent conflict into nonconflict in the short term and utilized a strategy of nonviolent conflict in the long term.

Third, the liberation of Mecca, a nonviolent invasion of Mecca two years after the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah was broken by the Meccans' allies, is another unique example of the Prophetic nonviolent approach to conflict. According to Sharp (1973, 382), nonviolent invasion is the deliberate and open entrance into a previously "forbidden" area to demonstrate a refusal to recognize the right of the controlling regime to exercise control over that area or use it for a particular purpose. After the evident breach of the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah, despite Muslim compliance with the costly terms of the agreement, Muslims resolved to return to Mecca and take back their property and free Muslims forced to live under Meccan pagan governance as per the conditions of the Treaty of Hdaybiyyah. However, as the invasion concluded and the Muslims in Mecca were liberated from the control of the Meccan elite, the Prophet Muhammad declared complete forgiveness of all the Meccan pagan elite who exiled, tortured, and waged war against Muslims over almost two decades. The Meccans could keep their property and only had to return what was stolen from Muslims. Moreover, new Meccan converts to Islam, categorized as "Mu'alafat Al-Nas," were

offered many resources to facilitate their transition to living in a new culture and polity. The way the Prophet Muhammad dealt with his Meccan oppressors after the liberation of Mecca is an excellent example of the political-economic benefits of forgiveness, including preserving human capital, the rule of law, and political stability (Boettke and Coyne 2007). In this milestone achievement, the Prophet used nonviolent action to liberate an already weakened Meccan political system and then transformed the nonviolent conflict into a nonconflictual relationship between the Muslims and the Meccans, who later converted to Islam.

It is a profound error to regard Hijra, the signing of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, and the liberation of Mecca outside the scope of jihad. Instead, the Sunnah shows that in all situations where costly conflict can be avoided, it ought to be, and where it cannot, nonviolent conflict is prioritized. Indeed, the Prophet's practice mirrors the verses in that he engaged in violent conflict only when facing existential threats.

Why Is Nonviolence Superior in the Islamic Framework?

If engaging in violent or nonviolent conflict is permissible under defensive conditions or the protection of rights, why prioritize nonviolent action when seeking sociopolitical change? The Islamic tradition offers us many reasons to prioritize nonviolent action over violence, even when both are permissible.

First, Muslims pride themselves on being followers of a pragmatic religion, with an entire field called *Maqasid Al-Shari'ah*, or the objectives of the law, detailing the goals that Islamic law is meant to accomplish and the rights it seeks to protect. Although Islamic texts offer a strong ethical presupposition against violence, as mentioned in the previous two sections, there are pragmatic and instrumental reasons for using nonviolent methods to seek social change. Sharp's work opened the academic study of nonviolent action, effectiveness, and welfare-enhancing consequences (Sharp 1994, 2005, 2013; Ackerman and DuVall 2000; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Celestino and Gleditsch 2013; Lambach et al. 2020). The pragmatic approach should guide Muslims in selecting the most effective method to reach a social movement's ends. Empirical research shows the higher effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns: "Over 50% of the nonviolent revolutions from 1900 to 2019 have succeeded outright—while only about 26% of the violent ones did" (Chenoweth 2021, 14).

Additionally, one manifestation of the welfare-enhancing characteristics of nonviolent regime change is the empirically demonstrated relationship between nonviolent regime change and government responsiveness to citizens' interests. Democratic regimes that came about as a result of nonviolent resistance survive longer than elite-led or violent regime change (Bayer et al. 2016). Moreover, because of nonviolent regime change, democracy is characterized as being of higher quality than elite-led or violent democratization on the following margins, based on the Polyarchy Index:

(1) an elected executive, (2) free and fair elections, (3) freedom of expression, (4) associational autonomy, and (5) inclusive citizenship (Bethke and Pinckney 2019). The positive effect of nonviolent regime change on democratic institutions occurs through several mechanisms. First, nonviolent campaigns are characterized by large-scale popular civil participation (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Chenoweth 2021) that usually includes people from different parties and political perspectives. Such a political environment is conducive to multiparty competition. Second, nonviolent regime change, characterized by higher levels of civilian participation, protects against the overrepresentation of military personnel, who would otherwise get overly involved in political decision making and limit democratic governance. Third, nonviolent campaigns change the political culture by pushing the people to regard themselves as the source of legitimacy and enshrining their ability to produce an actual political change in their memory. Past achievements of nonviolent regime change likely embolden citizens in their efforts to protect democratic institutions, as activists can refer to those successes to remobilize.

Second, nonviolent methods create a healthy environment for discourse. Nonviolence has instrumental value in that it creates an environment where social reformatory ideas can see the light of day. The use of nonviolent methods against violent opponents conveys to people that dissenting voices will not be met with brute force. It prepares people to engage in political discourse without relying on violence with an appeal to public reason instead. The Quran calls for creating an environment characterized by peaceful discourse so that we can search for truth carefully and counsels that inevitable conflict does not lead to bloodshed. In fact, it affirms the necessity of discourse based on evidence and public reason as opposed to violent conflict. When engaging with the arguments of Christians and Jews, the Quran says: “And they say, ‘None will enter Heaven unless he is a Jew or a Christian.’ These are their wishes. Say, ‘Produce your proof, if you are truthful’” (Quran 2:111). Given that human ends inevitably differ, a society that abides by Quranic teachings is characterized by reciprocating advice, guidance, and argumentation based on positive regard for one another, as opposed to incrimination and accusations of malintent.

Third, nonviolent methods offer a healthy environment for intellectual and scholarly challenge, which is ideal for *Ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* can be defined as independent scholarly legal reasoning through the exertion of mental faculties in finding a solution to a legal question. Many scholars note that the painstaking and conservative character of *Ijtihad* in the Muslim world over the past couple of centuries has driven part of the Muslim world’s widespread authoritarianism and underdevelopment (Kuran 2010; Kuru 2019). *Ijtihad* is necessary when facing novel situations, and an environment of free discourse allows the truth to emerge more effectively than one where ideas cannot be challenged.

Fourth, nonviolent methods offer their users the power of openness and lack of secrecy (Sharp 1973, p. 481–92). The transparency of nonviolence eliminates the fear factor that dictators use to maintain their dominance. When citizens willingly

and openly internalize the punishments of dictators, sanctions lose their strength as a source of power, and fear of sanctions is no longer sufficient to keep people from civil disobedience. The most potent objection to secrecy, which characterizes most violent rebellions, is that it is not only rooted in fear but also perpetuates the culture of fear that dictators use as a source of power. Nonviolent action depends to a large degree on rejecting that fear and publicly challenging oppression. That effrontery encourages members of the nonviolent group, or even third parties, to shed their fear and live truthfully, not duplicitously. Regardless of the motivation, the secrecy of violent groups, whose leaders frequently hide to avoid arrest, may be interpreted or propagandized as exploitative: the leaders are avoiding prison and suffering and leaving their group to face dangers alone. The lack of a leadership's daring can strongly discourage those in lesser positions from facing risks like prison or torture. Violent groups fear infiltrators, informers, and spies since they operate under the utmost secrecy and may have to reduce their numbers to maintain confidentiality. Comparatively, openness makes the job of informants and infiltrators useless since nothing can be gained by spying. It also eliminates the constraints on building a larger movement since keeping secrets is not a concern. Removing restrictions on building large campaigns is particularly important because the most significant advantage and success predictor of nonviolent movements is their ability to attract larger groups of society to their cause (Chenoweth 2021).

Fifth, nonviolent methods collapse opponents' arguments that those seeking social change are brutal rebels or terrorists, which is the usual reaction of governments when faced with large-scale protests. Although violent methods of resistance may be just in specific contexts and constrained ways, they frequently lead to collateral damage. Innocent people who are not involved in the conflict may die as an accident by those fighting for their rights violently or may die due to the oppressor's reaction. Additionally, violent conflict leads to a significant loss in physical and human capital, impoverishing a country. The negative consequences of violent conflict are frequently blamed on those who initiate resistance by demanding their rights violently, making the truth of a situation unclear. Comparatively, nonviolent methods expose the great contrast between the peaceful methods of those who seek positive social change and the unique brutal methods of the oppressors. The obvious difference between truth and falsehood of oppression is a manifestation of the following verse: "Rather, We dash the truth upon falsehood, and it destroys it, and thereupon it departs" (Quran 21:18). By exposing the true character of oppressors, their legitimacy is further lost, and those who seek positive social change can more effectively call for truth against falsehood and evil.

Conclusion

In Islam, the highest objective that God demanded of humans, that all the prophets of God have sought, is the establishment of a culture of life. In a culture of life,

humans are enabled and permitted to be positive contributors to their best capacities. The Quran and Prophetic tradition emphasize the culture of life to such an extent that they even reframe martyrdom in the cause of God as a form of life: “And say not of those who are slain in God’s cause, ‘They are dead,’ nay, they are alive, but you perceive it not” (Quran 2:154). And again, “Think not of those slain in the way of Allah as dead. Indeed, they are living, and with their Lord, they have their sustenance” (Quran 3:169). The martyred in Islam do not “die for God.” As the Quran frames it, the passing away of a martyr is only a passing to more life. Islam does not encourage seeking death, only seeking an honorable life.

As we have underlined in this paper, violence in Islam is permissible *only* to deter aggression and maintain the culture of life when a society faces *existential* threats: threats to a people’s existence or survival. And even then, violence is permissible *only* to the extent that it averts existential threats, and never for aggression. The ethical principles laid out above have been followed by many Muslim leaders, with one of the best manifestations in Imam Husayn bin Ali (626–680), the Prophet Muhammad’s direct grandson. When the tyrants of the Ummayyad Empire shut the doors for an honorable life, such that humans could no longer freely act upon their conscience and be positive contributors to society, he insisted on an honorable life by refusing to give allegiance to the Ummayyad tyrant. As a result, he and his followers faced a war of extermination. To Imam Husayn bin Ali, “living” under tyranny was equivalent to spiritual death since all human agency is lost. Thus, Karbala, the site of the mass extermination of the Prophet’s descendants and their followers, represented a preference for life with God, in the form of martyrdom, over spiritual death by living under tyranny. And it inspired resoluteness in seeking an honorable life.

A critical takeaway is that militarism, defined as an ethos that elevates violence as the primary tool for conflict resolution, perpetuates a culture of violence and death and subdues the culture of life. It is decisively at odds with the objectives that God revealed and sent the prophets to guide people toward. It is neither conducive to an honorable life nor more effective at replacing tyranny with justice, as contemporary literature on regime change demonstrates. In the face of the overwhelming evidence about the futility and harms of violence and warfare, the duty of Muslims, and humanity in general, is to organize alternative methods of conflict resolution and threat reduction—methods that do not lead us to spiral down a culture of death, as humanity frequently has. Nonviolent action is one such example of an effective and superior alternative to violence.

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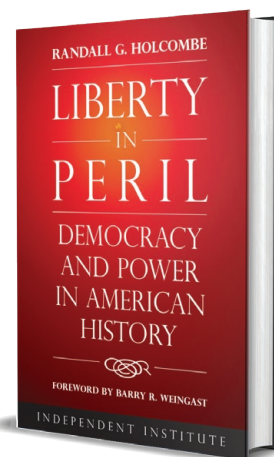
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