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C O N T E N T S
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## EDITORIAL NOTES

Constructing Terror Capsules Role of Religion	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	1
Human Rights Regime Challenge and Opportunity	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	5
Kashmir: A Fresh Layout	<i>Riyaz Punjabi</i>	8

## ARTICLES

Violence: Not An Islamic Deal	<i>Noor Ahmad Baba</i>	11
Religion as Quest for the Impossible	<i>M. Maroof Shah</i>	20
How Islamic are Islamist Revivalist Movements?	<i>M. Maroof Shah</i>	25
Conflict Resolution in Yemen: The Role of External Powers	<i>Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui</i>	32
Federal Framework and Organizational Culture of the Indian Police	<i>Ajay K. Mehra</i>	55

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## Violence: Not An Islamic Deal

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Noor Ahmad Baba\*



God's conceiving of man as vicegerent thereby allowing in him with a certain degree of initiative and autonomy to operate in the world inherently carried within it possibility of mischief and conflict (potentially a bloody one) in the abode of its living. That was the apprehension that the Angels expressed when Allah declared to them that He was creating a vicegerent on the earth. It must have been this inherent nature in man that prompted Adam's son Cain to kill his own brother Abel. In His response to the Angels, Allah did not dispute their apprehension. Instead he tacitly acknowledged their contention about the quarrelsome nature of man by not addressing the issue directly. While doing so He had demonstrated human potential to name things i.e. to understand their nature (2:30-33). Abdullah Yusuf Ali in the explanation of the relevant verse in Qur'an says that according to commentators naming means grasping "the inner

nature and qualities of things, and things here would include feelings. The particular qualities or feelings which were outside the nature of angels were put by Allah into the nature of man". Man was thus able to feel and understand and "thus plan and initiate", as these were required of him in his role as vicegerent.

In its broadest sense it implies grasping the nature not only of mundane and manifest but also abstract and subtle aspects of the realities. According to Poet-Philosopher, Mohammad Iqbal the faculty of naming things would mean "forming concepts of them and forming concepts of them is capturing them". Capturing and forming concepts would indicate the reasoning faculty of human mind. Qur'an contains so many verses calling man to 'observe' the signs in the universe and within one's own self), apply 'reason', 'reflect', 'ponder', 'understand' and draw

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lessons from these. Thus, Islam does not restrict legitimate pursuit of knowledge only to the revealed texts. The essence of the belief in the unity of God is that everything in the Universe is from God, "Allah" and that there is nothing outside his command, scope and jurisdiction. If revelation is from Him, everything else in the Universe is also His creation and therefore reflects 'His wisdom'. That is what is clearly indicated in Qur'anic references, calling Man to observe and ponder the signs of Allah within him and around him.

### **The Human Faculty**

Together, all this allows human society to gain, gather and grasp information, learn through experiencing, develop perception, secure understanding and critical thought, about the issues and evolve accordingly. This intrinsic human faculty for the development of knowledge enables mankind to decipher and design its own mechanisms to regulate human conduct morally, culturally and institutionally. Islam values human wisdom gained through centuries of experience with the mundane world. That is why the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in the face of various challenging situations sought consultations with his companions and many a time acted on

their suggestions based on worldly wisdom. Studying the relevant Qur'anic passages indicating human capacity to name things and decipher their nature (2:30-33) in tandem with the earliest revealed verses (96:4-5) declaring it was God who 'taught man the use of pen and taught him that he knew not' vindicates this understanding of the holy book.

### **Importance of Pen**

Importance of pen for Almighty is testified by the fact that Qur'an contains a chapter under the title 'Pen' that begins with a verse in which Allah swears in its name and of 'what is written with it' by men (68:1). God stresses the significance of the pen because it is the skill of writing that has allowed man to benefit from the experiences, knowledge and wisdom that he gained from the beginning of the recorded history and transmitted it towards posterity in a systemic and organised fashion. Man's capacity to know and understand was a precondition for his creative role along with a degree of autonomy and freedom that he enjoys. This is how human society was/is destined to gradually evolve from its impulsive crooked existence to a more informed, culturally refined, ethically righteous and institutionally regulated conduct.

### **Application of Violence**

Therefore, despite the mischievous nature of man (as *Malaika or Angels* indicated), *the violence has nowhere been indicated as a desirable element of the human conduct that God enjoins man to adopt as an ideal* (emphasis added). Instead violence per se is an act of condemnation as indicated by the example of Cain killing his brother. Allah indicates *His dislike for disorder* (2:20) and enjoins the faithful so many times in the Qur'an, to seek divine blessing and help (in response to provocations) through patience and perseverance. It is because patience gives capacity to regulate impulse to react in rage, transgression and even remain restrained to provocations which is a manifestation of that impulse. In other words, it means that while impulsive reaction or revulsion and revenge is inherent in the base nature of man, through patience he or she controls this impulsive passion and acts through reason and informed understanding guided by ethical imperatives and concerns for long term objectives even in situations of conflict. Better understanding and higher moral positioning are at the core of patience and perseverance that Allah so much and so many times indicates in Qur'an as one of the highest virtues. This reality is best

demonstrated in the conduct of the Holy Prophet vis-a-vis immensely serious challenges. On large number of occasions and in situations of extreme provocation he stood firm in his restraint while many of his companions including the prominent ones would have tended to react in kind.

The most authentic example of the best conduct for Muslims is that of the Prophet. In Allah's own image the cardinal feature of the Prophet is the "Mercy for all the creations." (21:107). In the words of one of the prominent Muslim scholars in contemporary times, "Islam (even in its name) is a call to peace." Its greetings are a blessing for peace and security. The Holy Qur'an at numerous occasions emphasises the compassion, grace, mercy and forgiveness in superlative terms, as virtues of the God compared to other of his attributes. So, in a way without precluding the possibility of conflict and violence in human situations, Islam does not make it a necessary human condition or an ideal for human conduct. God values human life and declares it as 'sacred' (17:33) and to be safeguarded. He has decreed that 'killing of an innocent person is equal to the killing of the whole humanity' (5:32).

Therefore, in pursuit of truth God values life and enjoins the faithful to

tread with caution. The apt illustration of this can be found in the conduct of His messengers in relation to their divinely ordained mission of calling people to the righteous path. Whatever account of their pursuance of the noble prophetic mission we get in *Qur'an* is that they, with extremely high degree of perseverance and determination, exhibited immense patience against all types of persecution and oppression. All of them treaded the divinely ordained path with caution and resisted any temptation of reacting to provocations with any angry or violent response lest their powerful adversaries draw a justification to inflict greater harm on them and their followers in their situations of physical and numerical weakness. This is indicated in the conduct of all the Prophets. It was in rare cases, when some of these succeeded in constituting a politically constituted community that they would be allowed to fight as and when situation demanded.

In his thirteen years of prophetic life in Mecca, Prophet Muhammad (SAW), despite all the persecution that he and his followers had to bear with, always guarded against his companions getting provoked. During these years of extreme tribulation, Quran always stressed on patience. The Prophet also stressed

the same. In all the circumstances his priority was security of life and honour of his companions. So much so that in situations of extreme difficulty he persuaded his companions to leave their homes and migrate to places that could be safer for them. In the 7<sup>th</sup> BH (Before *Hijra*) he sent a small group of 12 companions to the Christian Kingdom in Abyssinia (Ethiopia). After learning about the safe atmosphere for Muslims in that country next year (6<sup>th</sup>H.1) he sent a larger group of 100 followers to stay there. The Prophet remained grateful to its Christian King, Negus for this kind gesture of his.

### **Response to provocations**

The lesson in all this is that in their divinely guided wisdom Prophets valued the life of their followers. They understood that how provocation to violence would jeopardise their mission in its infancy. Therefore, even God in his absolute wisdom did not permit the faithful to get into violent campaign or resistance even in self-defence. As indicated above, *Qur'an* always stressed the virtues of patience and perseverance in the face of extreme provocations and persecution. During the thirteen years of prophetic mission in Mecca, although they suffered worst kind of

oppression and persecution, Muslims remained calm and composed in their suffering. In response to abuses they were told to "have patience with what they say, and leave them with noble (dignity)." (73: 10). They were not permitted to take recourse to violence even in self-defence. As we understand in terms of human psychology it is because the discourse of violence creates more problems, generates more hatred, hardens attitudes, blocks communication, hinders understanding, precludes the possibility of continuing dialogue and as our present day experience indicates, it afflicts those involved, socially, economically, culturally, physically and psychologically. Therefore, for Muslims at a time when they were in their weakest in an atmosphere vitiated by violence, spreading the message of God would have become even harder. Instead the faithful are advised that while preaching they should be most courteous and the most gracious. "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious..." (16:125). Even where Muslims were (in position) to punish the culprit they were told that "let your punishment be proportionate to the wrong that has been done to you:

But if you show patience, that is indeed the best (course) for those who are patient." (16:125)

This extraordinary character, commitment and moral discipline reflected in conduct of the Prophet and his followers against all odds did not go unnoticed within the length and breadth of the Arabia. Thus, Muslims began to develop pockets of empathy, influence and a constituency of Muslim converts across in far off places like Yathrib (about 500 km away from Mecca). This made a new opening of contacts between the suffering Muslims in Mecca and the delegations visiting Mecca during the Hajj. The Prophet had success in dealing with the delegations coming from the Yathrib. It gradually began to change atmosphere in the city for Islam and Muslims. The atmosphere became so favourable only within a couple of years in Yathrib that the Prophet was formally invited to migrate and settle in the city.

Thus, the Prophet immigrated to Medina in the 13<sup>th</sup> (H. 1) year of his Prophethood under a plan and understanding with a representative delegation of tribal leadership from the city. At Yathrib, (which became Madinatul Nabi after Prophet's arrival and is known as Madina)

Prophet of Islam began his mission by making peace in the city among the warring tribes and all communities living there and founded a polity patterned on a sort of *social federation*. He convened a general meeting of representatives from different communities and tribes, both Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The participants in the meeting unanimously agreed to a framework of mutual relationship and the provisions according to which the newly formed city-state was to be run. The agreed provisions were reduced to writing and it constituted (according to one of the prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim Scholars Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah, 1908-2002) “the earliest written- Constitution of a state promulgated by its head in the world”. This led to the formation of a political community in Madina under the leadership of the Prophet. This allowed a secure atmosphere for Muslims to live in relative peace and practice and propagate their religion internally and in the neighbouring areas helping them to expand their mission and influence. Even thereafter, God (in his absolute wisdom) did not grant permission of *Qital*(fight/war) for another year till Muslims settled down properly in Medina and had established a polity relatively within the safe zones of the town.

But even after the emigration of the Prophet to Madina, the Meccans did not end their enmity to Muslims. Under the leadership of the holy Prophet, the political community in Medina began to stabilise, and migrant destitute Muslims dislocated in Mecca were rehabilitated by establishing a unique mechanism of *Muakhah* (brotherhood of sharing). The Meccans knew that they had not only persecuted Muslims, forced them to seek refuge away from the comfort of their homes, rendering them homeless destitutes, occupied their properties, created difficulties and continued their hostilities. So, it was not only because of the continued hostility toward Islam, they were also apprehensive about Muslims having settled and stabilised at a place that was strategically vital for their trade to outside world (Sham, now Syria, in particular). Soon after Hijrah, the Meccan Quraish began to conspire against the nascent political community and did not want Muslims to consolidate in Madina. It was in this context, when the community in Madina had relatively stabilised that Muslims, one year after Hijra (H.2) i.e. in the 14<sup>th</sup> year of the Prophethood, were allowed to fight to defend themselves.

## The Concept of Jihad

One concept that is being generally misunderstood and misrepresented is the term *Jihad*. In common discourse it is wrongly seen something like free for all kind of a holy war. As we will see below the concept in its linguistic sense, in terms of the Qur'anic references and the Prophetic practices it carries much broader and considerably nuanced meanings. In literal sense the word means striving and struggling. Thus, in its broadest sense it implies striving for pursuing good. The good within Islamic tradition includes the pursuit of knowledge, helping the weak, and standing by truth in trying situations and times and bearing with persecution in the cause of faith, righteousness and justice with patience and perseverance. All this and much more in a civil and peaceful manner is always required of a good Muslim. Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b.1926), one of the widely acknowledged contemporary Islamic scholar on the authority of Ibn al-Qayyim (2102-1350), (student of Ibn Taymiyya, 1263-1328), *enumerates 14 forms of Jihad out of which 13 relate to peaceful, non-fighting types*. All these forms are discerned from their mention in Quran, tradition of the Prophet or both. According to one such tradition the first and foremost is *jihad al-nafs* (jihad of the self) resisting one's own tendency to drift from the right

path. "A struggle against one's own base impulses...." Similarly, Prophet is also reported to have said the best Jihad is stating and standing by word of truth and Justice in front of an oppressive ruler (*Musnad Ahòmad* 18449).

Thus, Islamic concept of *Jihad* is fundamentally different from the holy war used in the context of crusades under the authority of the holy Church. *Jihad* has wider connotations and is not restricted only to a violent interface. While *Jihad* in its broader sense of day to day striving/struggling/exerting in the righteous path, with a degree of perseverance, is without an exception an all-time obligation for all Muslims. In the sense of Qital (fighting) it is contextual and it has certain prerequisites and applies under certain conditions with variation in its applications and within specified norms (rules and regulations) that are defined in Quran, within the traditions of the Prophet and clearly codified in Islamic Law of War. The Prophet (SAW) and his companions strived with dignity, patience and resilience in the face of tremendous odds in their unwavering commitment to their faith right from the day of the initial declaration of the prophethood made in Mecca. The Muslims in Mecca were told to "...listen not to the Unbelievers, but

strive against them with the utmost strenuousness, with the Qur'an (25:52). It is *jihad* of preaching. Striving with God's word is taken to imply "using beauty, power and persuasive eloquence of the Qur'an to win people to faith". The 'command to engage in *Jihad* has remained a constant theme of revelation all through from its beginning in Makkah. But there was no permission for them to undertake *Qital* (fighting) even in self-defence.' It was not permitted to Muslims for initial 14 years of the prophetic mission. Therefore, there is a 'clear distinction between *jihad*, striving as a civil peaceful/nonviolent effort/movement and *jihad as Qital*, fighting in a violent encounter necessitated under certain conditions. God, in His absolute wisdom, did not grant permission of *Qital* (violent action/fighting/war/fight back) till Muslims migrated to Medina, established a polity relatively within the safe zones of the city and had consolidated their position and resources. The Prophet and his followers suffered oppression with dignity, perseverance, without compromising their mission, and under the divine command remained patient to all provocation from the hostile Meccans. In Islamic understanding it all is *Jihad*, in the

path of God, all through a peaceful but with sustained perseverance.

### **In Conclusion**

The Prophet would never unnecessarily risk the life and property of his people. The telling example for this has been the Prophet entering a peace treaty at *Hudaibiyah* with Meccans on terms that many of his colleagues' thought were unfavourable (even humiliating) to them just to avoid risking a bloodshed. Greatest example of the Prophet's generosity, compassion, tolerance and unwavering commitment to peace, mercy and nonviolence could be seen on the occasion of Muslim conquest of Mecca whose inhabitants had oppressed him and his companions, forced them to leave their homes, conspired to kill him and not allowing him to live in peace in his new home in Madina, preventing Muslims from performing the pilgrimage of Ka'ba even unarmed and finally breaching the truce that they entered in with Muslims at *Hudaibiyah*. In spite of their unending hostility towards Muslims, the Prophet with ten thousand strong force on triumphant entry into the city issued strict orders to his commanders entering Mecca from different directions not to use

their arms except in self-defence when attacked. There were loud declarations made across the city that:

“Whoever remains shut in his house will be safe so also one who

goes to the courtyard of the Ka’ba or deposes his arms, or takes refuge in the house of Abu-Sufyan (leader of Meccans)”. Thus the town was overwhelmed and occupied without any bloodshed. ■