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ISLAM – VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE

Asghar Ali Engineer

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Media loves to project Islam as most violent religion, and certainly more violent than any other religion in the world and certainly so compared to Christianity, if not any other religion as far as western media is concerned. Journalism, even scholarship is not always pure journalism or scholarship with truth as a value. It is often motivated or imitated blindly or results of ignorance.

Before we proceed further we must answer one question which is very fundamental. Is absolute non-violence possible? Yes, as far as vision and philosophy is concerned. However, in practice the most non-violent religion has failed in this respect to bring about absolute non-violent society into existence. As the word 'non-violence' itself indicates violence is more fundamental and we negate it by adding 'non' to it. The word peace is more positive in this respect. But the concept of peace is much more complex than that of violence. Of peace is accompanied by violence or violence is sued to bring about peace. Islam, being more practical than theoretical, prefers to use the word 'salam' (peace) than non-violence.

Jainism is the most non-violent religion one can think of in human history. In Jain theology even killing of bacteria a non-visible life germ, is sin. One cannot think of greater degree of non-violence than this. But again this is theory, a vision. In practice and in history Jain society has also been faced with violent acts. But one must say that since Jainism was embraced by a small minority in India and never became religion of rulers except in certain pockets of South India, one does not find rampant violence in Jain history.

One should remember one thumb rule that greater the involvement of a religion or an ideology in political power, greater will be possibility of violence. This is proved, if any proof is needed, both from history of Jainism and early Christianity the first 300 years of Christian history is history of peace and hence it attracted lot of people to its fold, especially the weaker sections of society. But the moment when Roman Emperor embraced Christianity and Christianity became the religion of rulers. Since that moment history of Christianity is full of violence. Christianity as a religion though its vision and values remained the same.

Thus violence is a function of struggle for power and never integral to religion. The problem with Islam is that though it is as peaceful as Christianity in terms of values but it got involved in power struggle right from beginning and later its theologians even developed a doctrine that in Islam religion and politics cannot be separated. This doctrine is not integral to Islamic teachings. Far from it. Qur'an does not mention anything about it. This doctrine was product of the situation then prevailing in the Arabian Peninsula.

All the violence we witness in Islamic history was result of struggle for power between different tribes and clans and nothing to do with Islamic vision and values for society. The Sufi Islam, on the other hand, remained quite peaceful as it withdrew itself from power struggle as it negated the very values of Islam as propounded in Qur'an. Many eminent companions of Prophet or their followers opted out of this struggle.

Also, nature of society in which a religion emerges influences its practice and history. Arabia had a tribal structure and inter-tribal warfare was integral part of this structure. The tribe of Quraysh was the dominant tribe, especially in Mecca and had been playing dominant role in religious as well as economic affairs. Quraysh chiefs had also accumulated lot of wealth and had become even more powerful.

However, there was political vacuum and there was no state structure. Only tribal chiefs dominated. In Medina, on the other hand, various tribes existed and two tribes Aus and Khzraj were engaged in warfare and it was Prophet (PBUH) who brought about reconciliation between them and established peace. There were also various Jewish tribes who dominated local trade. Thus the Prophet was welcomed in Medina as a peacemaker.

However, the Prophet of Islam could not escape violence as the tribal chiefs, especially those of Quraysh felt threatened by his teachings. The Prophet, through Qur'anic revelations taught justice and equality as well as brotherhood thus challenging leadership of Quraysh and its dominance and also privileges of wealth through doctrine of equality of all faithful. This was simply not acceptable to the tribe of Quraysh. Islam negated their domination and privileges.

Thus it was not enough for Quraysh that Prophet (PBUH) left Mecca. His teachings remained great threat to Quraysh and so they wanted to pursue him and wage war to wipe him and his followers out. The privileged sections of society, as we know from human history, fight back any attempt to create a just and egalitarian society. Even exploited and weaker sections take to violence when gross injustices are perpetrated by the powerful and privileged sections of society. Qur'an is on the side of weaker sections referred by it as *mustad'ifun* and against the powerful referred to by it as *mustakbirun*.

The *mustakbirun*, the powerful and the privileged would certainly hit back to perpetrate their own privileges and powers. The Naxalites in India are fighting back for their rights and privileged sections represented by the state discriminate violence to put down their revolt. But Prophet and his followers were victims of violence by vested interests and fought back only when their very existence was threatened. And Qur'an also lays down a doctrine that fights against those who fight against you and do not commit excesses as Allah does not love those who commit excesses.

Thus Qur'an advocates defensive violence and all philosophers and votaries of non-violence agree that one can use violence in defense or when ones existence is threatened. You can talk of absolute non-violence only when there is absolute justice in society. Since Islam's priority was justice and upholding the rights of *mustad'ifun* the privileged

sections resorted to violence to maintain their privileges and Muslims had to resort to defensive violence.

Defensive violence, as mentioned above, is permissible but not obligatory. If someone chooses not to resist, it is his/her will. But where there was a question of survivor as a group (not as an individual) the Qur'an instructed Muslims to kill kafirs wherever you find them as they broke the treaty and committed aggression. The whole group of Muslims cannot be allowed to be wiped out. And also it has to be seen in the perspective of tribal ethics which were social ethics of that society. In tribal society a treaty is to be honoured meticulously. It was considered to be great offence and only punishment was retaliation. Thus the Qur'an kept in mind the tribal context and ordered retaliation.

Thus one of the factors to be taken into account to understand violence in the Arab society of Prophet's (PBUH) time was the tribal ethics. Another factor to be taken into account is the victors writing the history. Many events which we find in Ibn Hisham's Sirah (biography of the Prophet) are far from authentic and seems to either exaggerated as generally victors do or outright forgery to brag about the strength of Muslims. They go totally against the normative Qur'anic ethics.

It is important to note that though at times Qur'an did keep tribal context in mind it prescribed normative ethics of its own which is very fundamental to Qur'anic vision of society. According to this vision of society, peace and compassion are the norms. But these events described by Ibn Hisham in Sirah violate his ethic. For example the story of Asma bint-e-Marwan in which the Prophet (PBUH) orders her assassination and a blind companion assassinates her is a total forgery, at best a boast by a victor writing history same is the case of four others supposedly ordered to be assassinated at the instance of the Prophet (PBUH). How a prophet described as 'mercy of the worlds' have acted so ruthlessly because these persons incited people of Madina to rise against Muhammad or kill him. He even pardoned a Jewish woman who threw garbage on him and went to inquire about her well-being when she fell sick.

The Prophet of Islam was Prophet of peace and the present generation of Muslims owe it to their Prophet to do thorough research and demolish such stories which are grossly misused and quoted from Muslims own sources to portray Prophet as Prophet of violence. We must wipe out this disgrace by establishing the truth. The Arab historians like Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa'd, Waqidi and others unfortunately deeply influenced by their own Arab tribal norms than Qur'anic vision of individual or social ethics and saw things in their own perspective. Also add to this their arrogance born of being victors and you have the kind of history they wrote. This kind of history initially born of Arab oral tradition (hadith narrative) rather than written one is really problematic and only way out is to compare it with Qur'anic norms and reject if it violates those norms.

II

WARS OF CONQUESTS

After the death of the Prophet (PBUH) many tribes revolted and refused to pay zakat the only state tax then existed. Before Islam there was no tax system of any kind among Arabs as there was no state in existence at all. It was only when Islam abolished tribal senates and forged unity among all Muslims that a state structure became necessary and institution of khilafat came into existence. The state naturally imposed zakat which was something new for these Arab tribes and they refused to pay.

Since no state could function without collection of taxes, and refusal to pay amounted to rebellion against state, it had to be put down with force. It is known as war of riddah (a abandoning Islam and going back to earlier religion) in Islamic history. The tribes who rebelled were defeated and had to agree to pay zakat which is part of Islamic belief. This was first major outburst of violence after the death of Prophet (PBUH)

However, after death of Abu Bakr, the first caliph Hazrat Umar took over as 2nd Caliph (successor) to the Prophet. He was strict administrator and stern ruler. He took several measures to maintain law and order in his regime. One major decision was to launch wars of conquest. Could these wars of conquest be justified according to Islamic teachings? I think not. These wars had nothing to do with Islamic teachings which stress justice, peace and compassion as central values.

The decision by Umar to launch wars of conquest was based on several factors, all non-religious in nature. There were three major factors: one, war of riddah had necessitated it. It was necessary to direct internal aggression to external one. With all tribes embracing Islam there was radical social change in Arabia. Internal tribal warfare as means of survival came to an end and question of economic stability became important. Thirdly, destruction of Ma'arib Dam in Yemen, to the South of Mecca destroyed the irrigation system and hordes of Yemenites began to migrate towards North in search of livelihood. It was difficult to absorb them in Mecca and Madina.

The Northern area including the Palestine was known as Fertile Crescent and produced lot of fruits and grains. Thus wars of conquest became an economic necessity for the Arab Muslims. Some of them would be absorbed in the army and some could settle in the Fertile Crescent area permanently cultivating land. However, Hazrat Umar took a wise decision not allowing Arabs land ownership keeping needs of future generations in mind.

Arab forces also invaded Iran which was also very fertile area and a land of ancient culture. Conquest of Iran brought lot of riches as it was very rich country. We are told by historians like Tabari and others that most of the Arabs had never seen such wealth and even could not count beyond hundred. But these riches accumulation of which was strongly condemned by Qur'an caused severe problems ultimately triggering civil war.

But these conquests had nothing to do with spread of Islam as often alleged by western historians – sword in one hand, and, Qur'an, in the other. In fact Iran and parts of Roman Empire conquered by Muslims like Palestine, Syria and Egypt, remained non-Muslim for number of years after conquests. In some cases it took centuries for these people to be converted to Islam. If we examine the treaties entered into by Muslim armies with local

people mentioned by noted historians Baladhuri, no treaty mentions conversion to Islam as a condition for cessation of war. All these treaties mention number of slaves to be given and amount of food grains to be supplied to Muslims.

Thus it will be seen that these wars of conquests also had nothing to do with Islam or Islamic teachings. They were undertaken for earthly reasons and to divert, as pointed out, internal aggression to external one. These wars not only internal peace but great deal of prosperity to Arabs. They became a great regional force and all power equations and geo-political situation radically changed.

These were political decisions nothing to do with Islam as a religion. Whether these decisions were right or wrong can be debated and one may even criticize it as unwanted and uncalled for and not even in conformity with Islamic values. But that criticism too would be more on political grounds than on religious one. Nevertheless now it is history. But, as pointed out above, these conquests were not without internal consequences. The Muslims had to pay heavy price for these conquests and it ushered in another phase of violence.

III

CIVIL WAR

These conquests brought about radical change in political as well as economic scenario. Religious scenario also began to change slowly. Immediately political and economic scene was completely transformed. These conquests brought to the Arabs unparalleled amount of wealth. We read in *Tabqat Ibn Sa'ad* that some of the companions of the Prophet accumulated great deal of wealth so much so that on their death gold and silver had to be collected with the help of spade. There were thousands of horses in their stables and number of male and female slaves. Ibn Khalladun has quoted these figures from the *Tabqat*. The gap between the rich and poor increased which Qur'an had attacked and condemned strongly.

Also, in the conquered countries weaker sections began to embrace Islam especially because it emphasized equality and justice which is what these sections want. However, in practice they found that Arabs remained a dominant force and equal opportunities were not available. On the other hand, Ansars who had helped the Prophet (PBUH) when he migrated to Madina, were too left out of the power structure and Quraysh continued to dominate. Very few Ansars were appointed to higher governing posts during the first three caliphs' time.

Thus it led to great discontent among these deprived sections of society. On top of it Hazrat Uthman, the third caliph who belonged to the clan of Bani Umayyah, appointed his close relatives to all top posts and now conditions were ripe for what Dr. Taha Hussain, the noted historian from Egypt describes as *Fitnah al-Kubra* (great insurrection). Thousands of Muslims were killed by Muslims in this insurrection figure reaching up to seventy thousand.

Hazrat Uthman was assassinated in this insurrection. His head was severed in the lap of his wife Hazrat Naila by the rebels. The unrest continued during the time of Hazrat Ali whom the Shi'ahs believe to be the first legitimate successor to the Prophet. By the time Hazrat Ali took over Islam had spread right up to Central Asia and was one of the greatest empires in the world.

Now it was even more tempting to capture political power and Umayyads who were rivals of Hashimites (the clan to which Prophet and Ali belonged to) were conspiring to capture political power. The Umayyads ultimately managed to capture power from Hazrat Ali through shrewd manipulations. Hazrat Ali was also assassinated by a Kharijite Ibn Muljam. He was one of those who had seceded from Ali's army and vowed to kill him. Thus three of the 4 Caliphs after the Prophet (PBUH) were killed.

All this violence, it would be seen, was neither result of Islamic teachings nor inspired by it in any sense. It would be unfair to blame Islam or Islamic teachings for such violence. It was result of either struggle for justice or political power or personal vendetta. It is easy to talk about social justice but is very challenging to establish a just society. Also, a religion should never be involved in struggle for political power.

Those Muslims who were not involved in struggle for power among them were many companions of the Prophet and their followers remained quite peaceful and sincerely followed teachings of Islam. Imam Hasan and Husain, both grandsons of the Prophet, though did not aspire for political power but paid for with their lives because they were not ready to endorse the unjust Umayyad rule. Imam Hasan was elected as Hazrat Ali's successor but he was very peace loving person and abdicated power in favour of Umayyad oligarch Muawiyah. Still he was poisoned at Muawiyah's instance and Imam Husain refused to endorse Yazid, Muawiyah's son's caliphate and was martyred in Karbala along with his 72 supporters. The Muslims all over the world observe his martyrdom as Husain made supreme sacrifice of his and his supporters' lives which included his sons, nephews, brothers and others.

Islam itself is peaceful religion but got embroiled in political situations and Muslims had to cope up with so much violence. We have discussed above violence that took place up to the end what is called in Islamic history as period Khilafat-e-Rashidah. In fact much more violence followed when Umayyad's tried to consolidate their power and various people challenged it until it was overthrown by the Abbasids. Both Umayyads and Abbasids perpetrated great deal of violence to put down rebellions from time to time and when Abbasids overthrew Umayyad dynasty.

There is ample violence in history of religious communities when they are embroiled in struggle for power be it Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism and so on but Islamic community is singled out because there is so much oil in Middle East and Israel has been created by America and its allies for keeping Arabs under control. Middle East is Islamic and what is more, contains sources for energies vitally needed by the highly industrialised west.