Reclaiming the Prophet's Jihad

A Primer on Islamic Nonviolence

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Dedication

We begin in the name of Allah - All-Compassionate, Most Merciful, the Just, the Beautiful, the Subtle, the Patient, the Teacher, the Guide, the Friend....

And peace and blessings of unbounded grace and light upon our Messenger Muhammad al-Amin, rahmatan lil-`alamin, leader of the caravan of service, humblest of the humble, wisest of the wise.

Pray for the planet – and reader, include this author, too!
Islamic nonviolence?

Nonviolence is one of the most misunderstood words in the English language, and one of the most misunderstood ideas in the world. This confusion is not surprising, since the word means two things at the same time. And the one idea behind both meanings, though very simple, is not easy. It goes against the way many people think.

Here are the two different meanings of nonviolence.

1. **Nonviolence** is the life decision to live in harmony with the order of creation by giving up the domination of other people or the planet. Many wise instructions in this greatest of arts have been received by human beings over the millennia, under many names. Today, when put into community practice, the life decision for harmony is often called culture of peace or peacebuilding.

2. **Nonviolence** is the method of pursuing necessary social change by relying upon the real long-term spiritual power of justice rather than the apparent short-term political power of injustice. Injustice having become so universal in conflicts as to be taken entirely for granted, the principles for avoiding it apply to more situations now than they did in earlier times. Today, when put into community practice, the method of justice is often called unarmed struggle.

The idea behind both these meanings is that the universe is a seamless whole from which people are not separate. The order of creation is ethical and spiritual as well as physical. Ethical and spiritual laws have necessary effects, just as physical laws have necessary effects. We can rely on these causes to produce their effects. Reality is not a chaos: something is in charge. By understanding, affirming, and moving with that which is in charge, we can reach whatever goals we have that are worth having.

The Qur’anic term for nonviolence as a life decision is *islam*.

The Qur’anic term for nonviolence as a method is *jihad*.

The Qur’anic term for the principle underlying both aspects of nonviolence is *tawhid*.

The Qur’anic term for that which interferes with our seeing the obvious is *shaytan*.
And the Qur’anic term for that which is truly in charge in the world, upon which nonviolence depends, is ALLAH.
Nonviolence is not a Hindu or a Christian concept...

Because of the tremendous influence of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. on the course of 20th century liberation efforts, many people assume that nonviolence must be a Hindu or a Christian concept. That's not true. In fact, it's a kind of trick that keeps us from thinking clearly about nonviolence.

It is true that choosing nonviolence as a method often (but not always) follows from adopting nonviolence as a life decision, and that adopting nonviolence as a life decision often (but not always) follows from a strong religious faith. And it is true that Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu and Dr. King was a Christian.

However, Gandhi’s great colleague in the struggle for the freedom of Indian peoples from British colonial rule was ʿAbdul-Ghaffar Khan, who developed his nonviolent understanding independently of Gandhi, through reading the Qur’an in jail. Abdul-Ghaffar Khan raised an army of 100,000 unarmed soldiers, the Khudai Khidmatgar, from the same villages that today yield many fewer young men up to the Taliban. His arguments must have been much more convincing. We don’t hear enough about Abdul-Ghaffar Khan because he opposed the partition of the Indian subcontinent, and was vilified for it afterwards. But it is past time to reconsider his work.

Later, the great counterbalance to Dr. King, the “bad cop” to Dr. King’s “good cop” in the interrogation of racial injustice in the United States, was Malcolm X. And Malcolm famously accepted the potentials of unarmed struggle for the first time through a vision of human unity that reached him as a result of the hajj. That al-Hajj Malik al-Shabazz was martyred soon after this affirmation has only increased its power.

Muslim Peace Fellowship holds that nonviolence is the core social teaching of all of the prophets.
...but an Islamic approach to nonviolence will differ in important ways.

Every religious community takes its distinctive quality from the Messenger who founded it. It follows that the community of Muhammad (s) is perfumed with the perfume of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. And Muhammad (s), like all of us, possesses both a worldly and an eternal dimension. The worldly passes; the eternal continues forever. In both dimensions, the prophets are always teachers.

In the world, Muhammad (s) was the civilizer of the Arab tribes, and his heart was with all oppressed people everywhere. His historical mission was no more, and no less, than the establishment of peace and justice where cruel custom and tyranny had reigned. He worked in, and with, the substance of his times, toward a goal far beyond the horizons of his times. He used extraordinary spiritual means toward equally extraordinary political ends. Through his labor and insight, a great world culture emerged out of a fractured landscape of petty tribal wars. He showed us it could be done. *Muhammad (s) is the master strategist of nonviolence.*

In the spirit, Muhammad (s) has three major characteristics, according to the deepest traditional observers.

The first characteristic is absolute servanthood: all his being was fully given over to the presence and work of God. There was no room in him for anything but truth.

The second, deriving from the first, is all-encompassing perfection. He was as human as we are, but in him, every single element that constitutes human nature and experience, without exception, found its true balance and rightful place. Nothing was made greater or less than it really is; nothing was excluded. All the most difficult experiences that we tend to reject, in him were transformed. Among those difficult human experiences is warfare. Not all prophets were required to take such an integrated holistic approach.
His third characteristic is to prefer what God prefers: **all-embracing compassion** for the plight of creatures. Allah, sublime and exalted, said in a hadith qudsi, “*When I created the creation, I inscribed upon the Throne, ‘My mercy overpowers My wrath.’*” And He said of Muhammad {s} in the Qur’an, “*We have not sent you save as a mercy to the worlds.*”

For Muslim peacebuilders, this example translates into three aspirations:

- we aspire to the conscious service of God,
- we aspire to harmonious integration of being, including the peaceful integration of conflict,
- we aspire to the manifestation of mercy toward all,

and we seek to make all this a reality in the broken world that we live in every day.

To do so requires struggle. The Prophet’s {s} example teaches us how to struggle.
The Prophet calls to necessary social change

Muhammad \{s\} began his mission by alerting his people to an imminent danger more serious than invasion: a massive ethical breakdown that put the whole community at risk. His first hearers were skeptical of this risk. Today, when global ethical failure has led us to the edge of economic and ecological collapse, it should be clearer to us what he was talking about. Insha’Allah, there is still time to listen.

The greatest Qur’anic warnings are against tyranny (zulm), against spreading corruption in the earth (fasad), against willfully obscuring the truth (kufr), and against worshiping competing narrow interests (the true meaning of shirk). All of these can bring down whole societies. So can more specific sins, depending on circumstances. The Qur’an mentions the “overthrown cities” and their warners so that we may take lessons.

- The house of Pharaoh, though warned by Moses, was destroyed by exploitation of the helpless.
- The people of Salih were destroyed by theft of common resources.
- The people of Lot were destroyed by abuse of strangers.
- The people of Shu`ayb were destroyed by commercial fraud.

The mechanism may not have been clear to them, but their fate was not arbitrary, and they were warned well in advance. “I do not tyrannize people” says Allah, sublime and exalted, “but they tyrannize themselves.”

Most communities do not listen to their warners, and eventually perish of moral failure. “To every people is a term appointed.” But the people of Jonah listened, and the people of Muhammad \{s\} listened...for a while.

The particular opponent of Prophet Muhammad \{s\} was jahiliyya – violent ignorance. And wherever violent ignorance manifests, his struggle continues.
Reclaiming the Prophet's Jihad

Reclaiming jihad

Jihad, struggle for justice – and particularly the special form of jihad that involves fighting – is too central to the Prophetic example for us to be able to ignore it, no matter how distorted the word has become through centuries of misuse. For it is not just in recent times that low motives have baited traps with high ideals. Whatever the apologists for past empires have said, the great body of hadith on this topic simply do not apply to struggles for political power, for vengeance, or for glory, whether or not there is Arabic writing on one's flag. Sadly, fighting “for Islam,” as it is commonly understood, almost always means nothing more than fighting for political power, vengeance, or glory. In Qur'anic terms, it does not qualify as jihad.

Fighting may only be undertaken in self-defense against religious persecution (“in the cause of God”) or for the benefit of oppressed people who yearn for assistance.

To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are oppressed; and verily, Allah is most powerful for their aid. (They are) those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right, (for no cause) except that they say, “Our Lord is Allah.” Did not Allah 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 Allah is commemorated in abundant measure. Allah will certainly aid those who aid his (cause); for verily Allah is full of Strength, Exalted in Might. (22:39-40)

And why should you not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated? 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!" (4:75)
In such cases of emergency injustice, fighting is necessary. But not all forms of fighting are acceptable to Allah. **Even if the motive is correct, if the means are abominable, that fighting is not jihad.**

**If a manner of fighting slaughters the innocent, ravages the sources of life, and sows corruption in the earth, it is abominable.** Such fighting is merely jahiliyya, even if blasphemously undertaken in the name of God.

The chivalry of earlier eras has vanished from the world. The devastation caused by even a simple handgun cannot be limited to the combatant at whom it is aimed. **All modern weapons are weapons of mass destruction, therefore haram.** There is only one remaining form of fighting that is halal: the unarmed struggle.

Ultimate victory is never won by employing the haram. Our telling ourselves that the forbidden is permitted does not change the deep structure of creation. What goes around, comes around.

**Only the unarmed struggle now qualifies as jihad. And jihad is the special responsibility of the followers of Muhammad {s} until the end of time.**

Nonviolence as a method is a form of warfare.

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Muslim Peace Fellowship holds that if Muslims wish to regain our spiritual station, we must reclaim the nonviolent jihad.
The object of jihad is not to destroy your opponent

Whoever seeks the destruction of the opposition is fighting the wars of jahiliyya. That which whispers in our ears, when our passions are aroused, and suggests that the enemy must be destroyed is the shaytan. The shaytan is the enemy of all human beings and would like to see us all destroyed, without exception. Obeying the shaytan always leads further in that direction. Obeying the shaytan leads the obedient to final disaster along a road of ugly small satisfactions.

The shaytan that whispers in your ear is a graver enemy than your opponent. It is even a graver enemy than the shaytan that whispers in your opponent's ear, since that shaytan will bring your opponent down.

Only resisting the shaytan establishes humanity, or any group, in dignity in the earth.

The object of jihad is the restoration of wholeness. Its strategic goal is to induce a lasting change of behavior in the opponent. Every human being can change, whether willingly or unwillingly. If we aim to induce such change, then wisdom, patience, and subtlety are as necessary as courage.
How to fight

“Seek knowledge, even if it be in China.”

The masters of the martial arts have a great deal to teach us about the conduct of unarmed combat. So do the veterans of all the nonviolent liberation struggles of the past century—and there have been many. So do the scholars of peace studies and conflict transformation who have labored for deeper insight over the past fifty years. To deny ourselves the use of this treasure out of a misplaced sense of religious specialness is pure folly—precisely the sort of folly for which Allah, sublime and exalted, in the Qur’an, criticizes the People of the Book. Muslims are muslims because we are commissioned to learn from Allah’s present action in creation. And though the line of the prophets is ended, Allah never ceases to teach indirectly: “Every day He is about some business.” Though we may not immediately grasp all the meanings we are shown, the test of the common good allows us to sort the true from the false, for “that which is for the good of humanity remains in the earth.”

That being said...of all the guidance that exists in the world, the most important for us is the guidance embodied in Muhammad (s). He is our prophet, and we are his people. And he has left us a great inheritance. If we drop from our hearts the veil of fascination with domination, the sickness of jahiliyya and empire alike, we will find a comprehensive case study of successful nonviolent action in the development of the Prophet’s mission. Drop domination, and it is instantly clear that the bloodless conquest of Makka is the centerpiece of the work.

The highest pinnacle of success is to turn enemies into friends. Any combat strategy at any time in history, whether armed or unarmed, that allows no room for such a breakthrough, cannot possibly be jihad.

Highest success is never guaranteed. Nonetheless, highest success must always be our goal.

How can we fight so as to allow for such a breakthrough, and in fact encourage it? The Prophetic example gives us a consistent principle, summarized in Qur’an:
The good and the evil are not alike. Repel (evil) with that which is better – then the one who was at enmity with you will become like an intimate friend. (41:34)

In practice, it works like this: Take your opponent's behavior as a baseline. Never sink below it. Retain at all times the clear awareness that your opponent is a human being. Study what your opponent respects, and find there qualities that are also approved by Allah. Then in terms that your opponent understands, which are also divine qualities, behave better than your opponent.

If the object is transformation, it is not sufficient that your opponent should fear you. You need your opponent to admire you, even if grudgingly. That is the beginning.

“Those people understand nothing but violence” is never true. Finding out what they do understand, however, may require some study. And the powerful never just roll over: contest is required.

Unarmed struggle is not about “making nice.” It is about earning, requiring, and obtaining respect.
The battle worth winning

The desire to go forth into the fray, to find out who wins and who loses, to try to be a winner, is a reliable dimension of human nature, and one that gives zest to the lives of many people. Any attempt to suppress something so sturdy and intrinsic is bound to produce problems, and simple derision is only the first of these. But the calling of Muhammad {s} was not suppression or domination in any form. He was a transformer, a balancer.

In his own time, his enemies had trouble understanding this about him. Those who finally grasped it found their lives completely changed.

If we Muslims today do not understand this about him, we are unlikely to find our circumstances changed at all. For we will not then be able to understand his cause, which is the cause of Allah.

So much goes wrong when we do not understand that cause, that sometimes it seems to come from all directions. For tyranny and repression are linked errors, both in the world and in the soul. Allah is not a tyrant. His servants therefore cannot be tyrants either. “We do not tyrannize them, but they tyrannize themselves.”

What, then, can we properly do with our natural desire to be the best? The Qur’an tells us clearly. We can aim to make our team the best servants of the goodness of Allah, and trust to the Judge to make the call.

If Allah had so willed He would have made you a single community, but He tests you (all) in what He has given you, so compete with each other in good works. To Allah is your return altogether, and He will certainly inform you concerning those matters wherein you differed. (5:48)

Violence is not a good work. Whoever competes in it is sure to lose the real race.
This world will never be perfect

Until the end of days, there will always be injustice somewhere, and the struggle with injustice will always be necessary. But though the world cannot be perfect, there is nothing to prevent its being better than it is. The change does not depend on our opponent: to claim that it does, merely hands our opponent our power. The change depends on us.

And we depend on Allah. *la hawla wa la quwwata illa bi-Llah il-‘ali al-‘azim.*

If we long for the end of injustice so that peace may come, we'll be waiting a very long time. Peace cannot be postponed until after the moment of victory. Peace is now. Prophet Abraham {s} found a garden in the midst of the fire, and his garden is always available. A paradox: until we find peace, we will be unable to make peace.

*Our God, You are peace, and peace is from You.*

That mujahid is utterly useless who does not act humbly, with a compassionate heart and a constant keen awareness of the likelihood of error. The Qur'an advises, “Speak humbly and softly.” Only a person who lives in balance can remove injustice.

*Taqwa, rahma,* and the greeting of peace: this is the inner meaning of islam.

**To find peace, choose peace.** There is no other way.

Nonviolence is the authentic heritage of Muslims and our missing key to the service of Allah.
About Muslim Peace Fellowship

In the Generous Qur’an, God commands *la ikhrâha fid-dîn*: “Let there be no compulsion in religion.” (2:256) We hold that the beauty of Islam can only reach fruition in a conscious and voluntary global harmony – a world worth living in for everyone. We believe this is more than a dream: we have a chance.

A chance, not a certainty. Realization rests with Allah, not in human hands. Yet acting with intention is a form of prayer, and prayer may be accepted.

**Our objectives:**

- To work against injustice and for peace in ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world.
- To affirm the commitment to peace on behalf of all Muslims.
- To explore and deepen our understanding of Islamic teachings about peace and nonviolence.
- To expose and transcend the vicious circle of religious stereotyping and false identity.
- To develop faithful and authentic nonviolent strategies for the establishment of sustainable social balance and the redress of wrongs.
- To reach out to people of other religious traditions to further mutual understanding and respect, and to build solidarity in the service of the planet.
- To work together with all people of good will to keep open the Straight Path between human conscience and the creator of the worlds.

Muslim Peace Fellowship pursues its goals through conferences, publications, service projects, teaching in academic and grassroots settings, speaking engagements, coalition building, and interreligious social action. And, of course, through interior work and prayer.

If you would like to become a member of MPF, please send a note to mpfrth@gmail.com.