An Islamic Conception of Change

It is always refreshing to witness Muslim scholars debating one of the most important phenomena of the modern Islamic revival: the question of the "use of force." There is no doubt that this issue is deeply misunderstood and indeed misused by Islamists and non-Islamists alike. Any attempt to shed light on the subject is therefore highly appreciated and welcomed. As Muslims witness the transformation of the international political and economic systems, questions and expectations are raised regarding its possible impact on the Muslim world. In this context, the article which occasioned this response (AbūSulaymān, 'AbdulHamīd, "Guiding Light: The Qur'an and the Sunnah on Violence, Armed Struggle, and the Political Process," *AJISS* 8, no. 2 [September 1991]:xi-xxxv) and the debate it is likely to generate (including the proposed World and Islamic Studies Enterprise's symposium on the subject in early 1992) is not only timely, but also highly fitting.

From the outset, I would like to emphasize that I approach this topic with a great deal of academic interest and open-mindedness. Only an objective and detached analysis by, and debate among, Muslim scholars can yield a better understanding of the Islamic conception of the "use of force." The following are some remarks that may, I hope, contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon under discussion.

On the Structure of the Debate

There is a need to restructure the debate about the "use of force," sharpen its focus, clearly define its vocabulary, and place it within its proper context — the Islamic conception of change. This is not a debate about "power" and "power relationships," but rather one of change and the Islamic political theory (and practice) of change. In this context, the debate is three-dimensional, for it seeks to provide answers to the following three groups of questions: a) What is the *nature and definition* of change? How can we recognize change when we see it? What is the "normal" or "ideal" model which we seek to emulate and institute?; b) What *instruments* of change are Islamically permitted, pragmatically affordable, and most cost-effective given the nature and constraints of domestic and international politics?; and c) What *means and strategies* of change are most appropriate and effective and, above all, not prohibited by the Shari'ah?

Specifically, we seek to determine the nature of the Islamic order, its norms, principles, laws, and codes of conduct as well as its boundaries and the rules governing its transformation. The Islamic order consists of the recognized patterns of individual, societal, and governmental behavior. But these patterns are never static, for they undergo continuous change and may also be transformed. The purpose of defining the Islamic order's norms, principles, laws, and codes of conduct is so that one can determine when a change has taken place and distinguish between a change within the order and a change of the order. Only the second change transforms an Islamic order into an un-Islamic one.

As the article under review fails to articulate the argument in this context, it ignores one fundamental justification for the violent use of force by Islamic movements and activists. Indeed, since the article sees the issue in terms of "power relationships" rather than change, the essence of the argument becomes one concerning "individuals . . . tak(ing) the law into their own hands," thus aborting the debate from the start. Yet, to most participants in this debate, the question revolves around the "reconstruction" of the Islamic order and not its management, as the article implies. Most participants, from Ibn Taymīyah to Abū al A'lā al Mawdūdī, Sayyid Quṭb, Muḥammad 'Abd al Salām Faraj, and Jawdat Sa'īd Muḥammad make the distinction between the Islamization or non-Islamization of state and society the cornerstone of their arguments. The question of the existing order's nature cannot be resolved by assertion alone; it must be proven in light of evidence from the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

The article's emphasis on "power relationships" leads it to embrace the notion of "political stability." But if we were to see the question from the perspective of change and transformation, stability becomes irrelevant. Indeed, one may argue that the idea of "stability" may stand in opposition to the Islamic idea of a continuous and eternal struggle between right and wrong, good and evil. In and by itself, stability may not be a value worth protecting, except for those who benefit from it. Those who proclaim the *kufr* of the existing order pay little attention to the benefits of its stability. The *substance* of the order, not the nature of its arrangement (stable or unstable), becomes the subject of concern.

The second dimension concentrates on the instruments of change. It is here that the author most excels. The article's emphasis on distinguishing between the "use of force" by the individual or the group on the one hand, and by the state or the legitimate authority on the other, is very well placed. It is here that the question of "power relationships" becomes most crucial. Many participants in the debate have tended to underestimate, sometimes deliberately, this distinction. Included in this dimension one also finds other issues, such as the role of the "Muslim group" (*al jamā'ah al muslimah*),

its *amīr*, and the individual in bringing about the desired change. How can we distinguish between the duties of the state and those of the individual? Can individuals or Muslim groups undertake to perform certain state functions when the state fails to carry out these functions? For example, can they institute the *ḥudūd* (Islamic punishments) when the state replaces Islamic laws with British or French ones? What about the collection of zakah, the defense and protection of Islamic territory, the enforcement of moral codes, the jihad to liberate occupied Islamic land, and so on? Does the state have a monopoly over the execution of all of these functions even if it consciously and deliberately abdicates that role? What role, if any, is there for the individual or the group? When, if ever, and how? What should be the criterion for inclusion or exclusion in the domains of the state and the individual?

The third dimension concentrates on the question of means and strategies. It is surprising, and indeed disturbing, to see an Islamic academic paper shying away from the use of appropriate terms when such use might be unpopular or undiplomatic. Means of change can only be violent or nonviolent. The paper resorts to surrogate terms such as "use of force" to mean the *violent* use of force, and nonviolence is replaced by terms such as *shūrā* and *peaceful* means. While there is nothing wrong with these terms, they do, however, remain imprecise and inadequate when it comes to providing the full meanings and implications which we seek to convey. For example, use of power and force may occur peacefully, i.e., by nonviolent coercion; and nonviolence is most effective when it involves the manipulation of power and force, i.e., the power of the word, idea, masses, money, organization, and so on.

In discussing means of change, the author from the outset indicates his emphatic preference for the "peaceful" and the "political." "*Shūrā*," argues the author "is the only legitimate way of addressing the issue of public order in Islam" (p. 5). He bases his conclusions on two criteria: the laws of the Shari'ah and the ineffectiveness of violence. The first criterion requires a detailed analysis beyond the limits of this review. The second criterion, which postulates the efficacy of nonviolence, deserves a quick rejoinder. I share the author's devotion to nonviolence as a means of struggle. But I would like to caution that it is exceedingly difficult to bring about fundamental changes in existing orders even under the best of circumstances. Change not only requires great adjustment and assimilation on the part of masses but also the destruction of existing order and the fostering of new behavior patterns. Given the extent and severity of conflicts of interest in any state, it is fair to assume that such changes can hardly come by *shūrā* alone. This is true not only at the legislative or constitutional level (i.e., the legal institution of Islamic norms and principles), but even more so with respect to the behavior of the individual who is expected to abide by these laws and codes of conduct.

The purpose of these comments is not to postulate the efficacy of violence;

rather, they seek to suggest that any naive hopes concerning the effectiveness of *shūrā* or *da'wah* alone constitute a serious, albeit common, failing among Muslim activists and scholars alike.

On Defining and Operationalizing Nonviolence as a Strategy for Action

Discrediting violent means of change without providing a nonviolent alternative is not very constructive. Those seeking to learn something about the strategy of nonviolence will have to look elsewhere, as the proposed article fails to provide even a simple definition of nonviolence. Indeed, the term nonviolence is never mentioned in the whole article. Muslim activists will find it hard to appreciate the value of nonviolence until they understand its meaning, forms, and techniques. Just how does a Muslim scholar propose to promote nonviolence when he or she sees no need to define and operationalize it and to demonstrate its efficacy?

Understanding the meaning, nature, and requirements of nonviolence is essential to its success. From the outset, it should be clear that nonviolence is not synonymous with pacifism. It is a form of resistance and a means of change. It has great power potential and is a means of wielding even greater power if applied cleverly and fearlessly. It uses psychological, social, economic, and political weapons. It demands resolve, determination, and discipline in the face of likely state repression. It may take several forms: a) *da'wah*, such as the use of mosques, the *hajj*, schools, universities, electoral participation; the use of parliaments (when feasible) to institute Islamic legislation; the publication of books, journals, and periodicals to spread ideas and preach *īmān* and *taqwā*; and the building and educating of individuals and families; b) *symbolic*, such as demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, hunger strikes, vigils, raising banners and flags; c) *active intervention*, such as blockades, stopping traffic, nonviolent occupation of public buildings; d) *noncooperation*, such as economic boycotts, labor, commercial, and student strikes, social boycotts; e) *civil disobedience*, such as refusing to obey orders, pay taxes, resigning from public posts; and finally f) the creation of *parallel or alternative institutions*, such as educational, health, and economic systems. Muslim activists and scholars will find *The Politics of Nonviolent Struggle* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973) by Gene Sharp (director of the Program for Nonviolent Sanctions at Harvard University's Center for International Affairs) highly instructive. For those who can read Arabic, a translation of the book (a lousy translation, I am afraid) has been published in Jerusalem by the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence under the title *al Muqāwamah bi lā 'Unf* (Resistance without Violence) in 1986.

Contemporary Islamic movements have utilized one or more of these forms of nonviolence. The Muslim Brotherhood has generally tended to emphasize some types of the first form, that of *da'wah*, particularly the educational and reformist aspects; the Islamic revolution in Iran relied on the other forms as well, with emphasis on noncooperation and civil disobedience; the Jordanian, Tunisian, and Algerian Islamic movements chose to enter the political life of their countries through the democratic process. This is another type of *da'wah*, but it does not exclude the resort to other forms (as the Algerian and Tunisian experiences show).

On the Historical Perspective

Devoid of its historical setting, the discussion of change (and particularly its means and strategies) cannot be fruitful. The article under review lacks the historical depth which would give it a solid foundation. Without the benefit of our past Islamic experience, we might find it difficult to provide evidence in support of the inevitability different interpretations. The violent rise against Mu'āwiyah, the endemic resort to violence by contenders during much of the Abbasid caliphate, the internal violent strife in the Muslim world prior to and during the Crusades, the continued violent attempts by some Islamic *vilayet*s to gain a measure of autonomy from the Ottomans, are only some of the examples that must be examined for lessons and insights. Furthermore, modern Islamic experiences such as those of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s, the radical Egyptian Islamic groups in the 1970s, the Jordanian brotherhood since its inception and entry into Parliament in 1989, the Iranian revolution in 1978-79, the Syrian revolt in the early 1980s, the Algerian entrance into local government in 1989, and the Sudanese use of the national army in 1990 all provide invaluable case studies which need to be investigated and evaluated. To pass judgment on the efficacy of violence or nonviolence based on current local and international circumstances, but without the benefit of such evaluation, deprives us of a wealth of knowledge and experience which can be gained from the historical perspective.

On an On-going Debate

The reader of the article under review is not told much, if anything, about the on-going debate among Muslim scholars and activists concerning change and the violent and nonviolent uses of force in Islamic theory and practice. For a scholarly paper, this is a serious and unforgivable defect.

To provide an informative, balanced, and objective analysis and to avoid accusations of engaging in polemics, the author needs to trace the evolution of Muslim scholars' thinking about the issues under discussion. One might not need to go back to early Muslim thought, or even to Ibn Taymīyah, but modern writings (i.e., those of al Afghānī, 'Abduh, al Bannā, Mawdūdī, Quṭub, al Hudaybī, and the leaders of Islamic groups and movements, such as Faraj, Sirrya, Muṣṭafā, Ghanūshī, and Madanī, and Muslim activists and scholars such as Jawdat Sa'īd Muḥammad, Khālid M. Khālid, Sālim al Bahnasāwī, Muḥammad 'Ammārah and others) have already made major inroads into this important issue. The author needs to place his own contribution to the debate into its proper place in light of and along with the contributions of others. Needless to say, proper documentation and footnoting would be greatly appreciated by the serious reader.

On Prejudging the Issue

Making the violent use of force synonymous with the "illegitimate, criminal, and immoral act of murder and bloodshed," as the article under review does, is tantamount to aborting the debate in its early stages and to leveling serious accusations against men like al Ḥusayn in the early Islamic period and al Islāmbūlī in the present period. Only after a serious and an in-depth investigation, taking into account Islamic principles, norms, and historical experience, can a final judgment be passed, if ever.

On Causal Relationships

The article also clouds the issue under discussion by resorting to unverified, and indeed spurious, causal relationships. For example, the paper finds that a major cause of "political instability and political decline of contemporary Muslim societies . . . (and) the authoritarian tendencies in the structure and approaches to Muslim political and social system as well as organizations including the family, political parties, voluntary societies and governments" (sic) in "the lack of clear understanding and proper handling of the issue of power and power relationships by Muslim societies and groups." (p. 2) The author provides no evidence to support both assertions: the existence of a "lack of understanding" of power and the causal relationship between that and Muslim problems. The same criticism applies to the author's assertion of similar causal relationships between "sh(ying) away from studying political issues, . . ." and "confusion between the political, the legal, the legitimate

and between the internal and the external," and "apathy and lack of intellectual analysis . . . of these issues," and "loss of ummatic (nation-building) movements and aspirations," and the "tendencies to fragmentation and the lack of public concern and spirit in the Muslim ummah and societies" (p. 2). The author's pessimistic tendency should not have been allowed to cloud his scholarly judgment. The author's tendency to resort to assertions and to express his views in law-like statements comes out loud and clear.

And a Final Word

One more thing comes out loud and clear from reading this paper: the author's great sincerity and his overwhelming concern for the future of the Muslim nation and the sanity of its intellectuals and activists. His desire to encourage scholarly debate on this issue and his insistence on systemic and comprehensive analysis prompted me to demand the same from him. The author's scholarship is demonstrated by his insistence on seeking evidence from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. His conclusions are not unreasonable and should provide an incentive to others to seek to confirm or challenge. By raising this issue at this juncture, the author has done us all a big favor indeed.

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