

Islamic Peaceful-Action

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The energy required for transforming Muslim thinking and action must arise from within Islam itself. Jihad is one of Islam's most potent concepts having a complex history and tradition. The challenging task of re-conceptualizing Jihad is a matter of great urgency. *Islamic Peaceful-Action* is offered in humility and with an awareness of its possible perceived inadequacy among many Muslims. This is a sketch demanding more refined comprehensive treatment, and testing in different Muslim societies. Yet there is utility in this example of re-conceptualization if it helps to provoke other attempts at re-appropriating critical concepts. *And God knows best.*

[The preliminary Bahasa Indonesia draft of this document was employed in several peace training workshops for university student groups and NGO leaders in 1999 in Banda Aceh (capital of Aceh in Sumatra, Indonesia); see our assessment of conditions in Aceh after the bloody period of the DOM (1991–1998) when the Indonesian military perpetrated numerous abuses: “ACEH–‘Special Territory’ in North Sumatra,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, v.20/1 (2000). An Acehnese language version of this document appeared in Medan early in 2000, in issue No. 2 of a short-lived underground journal *Su Aceh* (editor: Jafar Siddiq Hamzah). A differing English draft later appeared in Mindanao in *Capital Journal on Culture and Society* [the Graduate School, CAGAYAN CAPITAL COLLEGE in Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines] v.XII No.2 (2000–2001) p.11–20. It is now revised and expanded into its present form.]

Islamic Peaceful-Action *

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An Approach to Justice & Freedom in Muslim Societies

ISLAM provides a set of powerful teachings and practices with universal relevance for humanity. These retain the potential to make a great contribution for reformation of societies and world peace. Islam also clearly possesses a comprehensive set of values and methodology for ‘Peaceful-Action’/*al-Jihād al-Silmī*. The greatest challenge now facing Muslims is to present Islamic values in authentic terms for the 21st/15th century. Thinking Muslims must search for ways to realize and make these values relevant and effective in our world today. This search requires a critical attitude to the legacy of the past as well as a creative response to our present conditions. As Muslims seek to harmonize the Islamic spirit of *Ummah* ‘Community’ with changing conditions in their own societies, they may contribute effectively to the betterment of all peoples.

The influence of organized religion in fomenting violence is nothing new. Yet religious teachings may also guide people to restrain or neutralize violence, may encourage people to transcend national and religious boundaries and to express solidarity with people of differing races and traditions, and guide them in their struggle for justice and peace. Faith-commitment may **empower people** to engage in effective social and political action promoting meaningful change. The highest Islamic values are in harmony with a courageous peaceful activism that liberates and empowers. If the essence of the Faith of *al-Islām* is **Peace** and **Security** (*al-silm*) in obedience to God’s purpose for creation, then Muslims must creatively meet the challenges of the present and future with wisdom and intelligence.

* Sacred to the memory of JAFAR SIDDIQ HAMZAH – friend, lawyer & human rights worker – whose mutilated body was recovered in September 2000 near the city of Medan in North Sumatra, the skin stripped off his face to prevent identification.

ISLAMIC VALUES

Islamic Values have the potential to shape a more compassionate and tolerant future. This requires a path different than violent bloodshed, a path marked by intelligence and faith supporting **bold action for change through peaceful conduct**. By ‘Islamic Values’ we mean those moral-ethical attitudes and spiritual ideals that sincere faith implants into humans through their upbringing and character formation, growing into interior motivating impulses. Values operate by the inner willing of conscience, and are expressed in praiseworthy character traits and admirable models for behavior. Islamic values, when sensitively understood and practiced, make a more powerful contribution to peace and reconciliation than to war and bloodshed.

Religious commitment gives an effective basis for recruiting people, for nurturing a strong identity and discipline, and motivating them for direct action. Muslims rooted in traditional cultures may be inspired by their religious tradition to act boldly and peaceably for justice and peace. People are capable of developing the motivation, organization and leadership to engage in forceful action to achieve self-determination, social and economic justice, democratic political expression, and to oppose corruption and waste—while adhering to peaceful means of struggle in the face of violent provocation by oppressors. But this requires courage and conviction, unity and firm purpose, and intelligent organization and strong discipline. These values are exemplified in the character and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) and the lives of great Muslim individuals in the past and today.

Values are essential for revitalizing the universal, rather than the national or particular, dimension of religious identity. The highest values mediated by Islam implant a religious consciousness affirming the unity and sacredness of all human life. Implementing Islamic Values operates at several dimensions: they help sustain a sense of personal security in our past identity and religious roots; they fortify courage and sacrifice when acting for justice and peace; and they offer guidance and support when responding to the forces and pressures being exerted upon Muslims by modernity. Islamic values build the foundation for realizing the goals of serving

others, implementing social, economic and political reforms, and ultimately of transforming human society in harmony with the order of divine wisdom.

This requires a fresh interpretation of ‘force’ and ‘power’, and a creative appropriation of Islamic Values as an antidote to violent conflict. It demands an original use of traditional precepts and teachings to communicate the need for change in thinking and deeds by using language capable of motivating people to act in the best manner for the highest purpose.

WHAT IS PEACEFUL-ACTION?

Peaceful-Action is the primary essential form of *Jihād*—an **active technique of struggle**. Conflict is inherently part of human nature, and some conflicts can only be resolved through struggle. These are conflicts involving fundamental principles of a society or community: dignity and self-respect, freedom of faith and practice, freedom from foreign oppression or usurpation of land and property, equitable sharing of wealth and resources, and a people’s ability to determine their own future. People employ the threat or use of violence when they feel that their choice lies between either passive surrender or violence—and their success requires the employment of violence.

It is **not** true that violence is the only effective means of action in conflict situations where these important principles are at stake. The technique of **Peaceful-Action** is based on the understanding that the exercise of power depends on **the consent of the ruled**, and people may neutralize or even control the power of their opponent by withdrawing their consent. Peaceful-Action is a method of action or a strategy intended to counter the opponent’s power by a peaceable exercise of power. **Peaceful-Action does not seek to avoid or ignore conflict**, but provides one way for people to act together effectively for a common purpose. Actually, Peaceful-Action has always been one of the basic ways humans pursue and settle their conflicts throughout their history.

In Islamic terms Peaceful-Action may be termed in Arabic *al-‘Amal al-Silmī* or *al-Jihād al-Silmī*. (Parallel terms employed recently by a variety of thinkers and practitioners are: *al-‘amal al-islāmī* ‘Islamic action’, *al-muqāwamat al-madaniyyah* ‘civil resistance’, as well as *al-jihād al-madani* ‘civil struggle’, or simply *al-ṣabr* ‘patient steadfastness’) It **does not attempt to avoid conflict**—unlike well-known methods of ‘conflict resolution’ that seek to transform the conflict relationship in ways that prevent conflicts between opponents, primarily through negotiation and mediation. Rather, Peaceful-Action is a **technique whereby people who reject passivity and submission and who view struggle as essential, can wage conflict without recourse to illegitimate force, violence or bloodshed**. Peaceful-Action was employed by the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions throughout his mission in Mecca, and after his migration to al-Madīnah until the Battle of Badr—namely, during the first fifteen out of the almost twenty-three years of Muḥammad’s prophetic mission.



As a method of calling to truth and justice, of heeding the imperatives of revealed guidance, as an effective technique of action for waging conflict, and as a powerful method for resisting injustice and oppression, Peaceful-Action may include the following activities :

- **Individual Example** by peaceably inviting to and urging righteous conduct, and by drawing attention to falsehood, oppression and injustice, involving heeding the dictates of conscience and readiness to consciously suffer persecution or injury to one’s own person—without recourse to violence.
- **Public Protest and Persuasion**, through speeches, demonstrations and petitions, as well as **Symbolic Acts**; genuine symbolic acts draw energy and effective impact from deeply seated religious and cultural values & teachings possessing the efficacy of moving people and conveying one’s message to the widest extent possible.

- A variety of forms of social, political and economic **Non-Cooperation, Withdrawal** or **Renunciation**; such as economic strikes, refusal to pay taxes or obey unjust laws, and boycotts of services and institutions in order to improve conditions and gain greater recognition; this was manifested first in Islam by migration (*hijrah*).
- **Direct Intervention** against specific abuses, policies or institutions (Intervention often relies on Symbolic Acts); also reliance on independent cultural and political institutions beyond state control or manipulation; as well as creating and establishing alternative parallel institutions serving educational and social needs and for economic self-aid, assisting the most disadvantaged, and for quick response to a specific crisis.

In other words, Peaceful-Action does not seek to resolve or do away with conflict; instead it seeks to **engage in conflict without violence or bloodshed** by adhering to divine imperatives and permanent values. It is a bold committed approach that understands conflict as a struggle among contenders for power and loyalties. Peaceful Struggle is an active method for matching forces with one's opponent, and it has the greatest capacity for bringing real freedom and justice and eliminating economic and social injustice through a transformative cultural and political strategy. When we study the historical examples where Peaceful-Action was applied effectively in Muslim societies, this truth becomes very clear.



PEACEFUL CHANGE: Islamic Applications

Definite points springing from essential principles taught by Islam strongly support the validity of Peaceful-Action as an authentic Islamic practice and legitimate method of striving:

◆ Islam's vital emphasis on **active struggle** and the readiness to engage in spiritual and physical combat is one essential element. Historically, much Muslim political and spiritual practice is colored by a martial spirit of selfless action and sacrifice in opposing injustice and defending freedom of faith and conscience. This

reflects the valorization of the heroic ‘warrior ideal’ transposed onto the spiritual plane.

♦ Another element is the overriding commitment in Islam to **social equity** and **political justice** (*qist* and *‘adl*) in promoting humane values and in the construction of an ethical social order through opposing injustice, corruption and repression. ‘Combating wicked-tyranny (*al-tāghūt*)’ is prominently featured in the Qur’ānic recounting of prophetic history: *We did raise among every people a Messenger (with the teaching), ‘Worship God and shun wicked tyranny’* [Q *al-Nahl* 16:36]. In Islamic religious teachings this commitment is viewed as harmonizing with the Divine purpose for creation and the imperative to make sacred the profane. Coupled with this stress on equity is an equally emphatic concern to safeguard the stability of social order and temporal authority to preserve the interests of faith and of life and property. Thus, *fitnah* (‘civil dissension’ & ‘sedition’) is actively discouraged in the wider interests of community peace and stability.

♦ Complementing this emphasis on justice and an equitable social order, Islam propounds specific ideals and practices for **active reconciliation** between individuals and groups. Islam thereby seeks a balance between the dictates of justice and equity, and those of human clemency, harmony, and selfless love embraced by the notion of *al-ihsān* ‘surpassing goodness’:

Surely God enjoins justice and the ‘doing-good-to-others’ (al-‘adl wa l-ihsān), and giving (to others) like unto (one’s own) kin, and forbids indecency and manifest evil and unjust oppression [Q *al-Nahl* 16:90].

The Qur’ān renounces the use of forceful coercion in favor of active goodwill and persuasion in order to elicit intentional assent or compliance. *There is no coercion in faith-obedience* [*al-Baqarah* 2:256], is a keynote of the Qur’ānic appeal to human conscience, intelligence, and motivation. The very name of the faith *al-Islām*—‘submission-security’—derives etymologically from the noun *al-silm* — ‘peace-making’ or ‘conciliation’ between conflicting parties.

♦ Islamic scholars maintain that the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) set the primary precedent for using peaceful-action during his mission, particularly in the Makkan stage of his career from 610–622. Many Muslim thinkers have asserted that sacred history demonstrates that most of the Prophets dispatched to guide humanity practiced forms of peaceful-action in their historical missions (Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Yūsuf, Yaḥyā, ʿIsā), and this paradigm stands as the ideal human pattern. From the very first

homicide when Cain slew Abel, the first son of Adam set the paradigm for peaceful-action by refusing to employ violence against his brother's aggression when he told Cain that he refused to “*stretch out my hand against thee to kill thee*” [see Q *al-Mā'idah* 5:27–32].*

♦ The Prophet Muḥammad strongly and unequivocally forbade Muslims taking the life of other Muslims, while also specifying certain legitimate exceptions (capital punishment for adultery, intentional murder, & apostasy). Key teachings of *ṣulḥ* ‘conciliation’, *‘afw* ‘forgiveness’, and *ḥusnā* ‘what is best’—all related to the higher Islamic ideal of convincing and eliciting consent—are based on the reverence for human life, the inherent self-worth of the individual, and the possibility for individual and communal change; or in traditional religious discourse, for God to ‘guide them aright’. Self-correction and personal uprightness are basic to inducing a change in others and to regenerating society and transforming human relationships from within outwards.

♦ The Islamic ideal of **freedom of conscience** and the promotion of **pluralism** and **tolerance** is another crucial component. The Qur’ānic imperative addressed to the different religious communities, *fa-stabiqū l-khayrāt* / *Vie, then, with one another in doing good works* [*al-Baqarah* 2:148, *al-Mā'idah* 5:48], requires humans of all faiths to compete in ‘hastening to the good’. This forms the basis for harmonious inter-religious relations, while implicitly rejecting all notions of religious exclusivity or ethnic election. Islam perceives a wisdom and divine purpose in differences or dissimilarities among people, without denying each their own distinctiveness and specificity.

PEACEFUL-ACTION : Islamic Tactics

The following elements specific to Islamic religious teachings and practice qualify as part of an arsenal of techniques or strategies for pursuing Peaceful-Action:

* In the prescient study by the Syrian peace philosopher Jawdat Sa‘īd, *Madhhab Ibn Ādam al-Awwal: mushkilat al-‘unf fī l-‘amal al-islāmī* / *The Doctrine of Adam’s First Son: the problem of violence in Islamic action* (Damascus, Maṭba‘at Zayd b.Thābit al-Anṣārī, 1966; 5th ed. Beirut, Dār al-Fikr al-Mu‘āṣir, 1993), he was perhaps the first thinker to conceive and employ the term *al-‘amal al-silmī* / Peaceful-Action (ibid p.151). *Ustādh* Jawdat Sa‘īd has since expanded and amplified his understanding of this essential Islamic teaching in a number of works and public discussions since 1966.

- *jihād* ‘Peaceful Striving’—not merely as defensive in repelling hostile aggression, but as a technique of **pro-active intervention**; also serving as individual and communal purification and sacrifice to solidify striving and induce discipline, education, and social commitment. Ultimately, ‘peaceful striving’ is to be pursued purely for the sake of God’s approbation and good-pleasure, and it demands purity of motive and immaculate inner activity—the ‘Major Combat’.
- *ṣawm* ‘fasting’—as protest, boycott, symbolic action; and as conscious suffering to strengthen communal determination and clarity of goals.
- *zakāt* ‘alms-tax’, and *waqf* ‘charitable endowment’—to secure the material means for social engagement, redistribute wealth for communal benefit, insure the integrity of wealth, and to encourage social conscience and ensure material equity.
- *mawā’iz* ‘exhortation’, ‘warning’—to chastise and correct leaders by speaking truth to power, awaken conscience, and revivify ideals as part of active reconciliation.
- ‘*afw* ‘forgiveness’, *ḥusnā* ‘what-is-best’, and *iḥsān* ‘surpassing goodness’—to heal ruptures, rectify imbalances, and to exemplify the higher human mode of conduct [see Q *al-Shūrā* 42:40].
- the *khutbah* or Friday prayer sermon, in its function for education, persuasion, correction and moral example; as well as for mobilization, reminder, and guidance.
- *ḥisbah* or *iḥtisāb* ‘oversight of public welfare and safety’—for promoting municipal good, preventing corruption, vice, and enforcing public morality; also as ‘oversight of commerce’ to deter fraud, commercial abuses, and ensure market equity. Recall that the classical office of the *muḥtasib* ‘market supervisor’ exercised economic and moral supervision through remonstrance as well as mild coercion, intervening of his own accord & dictate of conscience without waiting for a complaint.
- *hijrah* ‘emigration’—as both ‘withdrawal’ and ‘non-cooperation’ for the purpose of protest and example; to gain freedom of faith and practice by escaping repression and persecution; as well as for cultivating self-reliance and active initiative.
- *ṣulḥ* & *iṣlāḥ* ‘conciliation’ & ‘peace making’ (*yusliḥu baynahum*)—in resolving conflicts between individuals or groups to ensure the harmony of the wider community. This springs from the key Qur’ānic teaching on ending conflict: *aṣliḥu*

dhāti baynikum / and do you rightly dispose-order the case that is between you and be of one accord in unison—or simply ‘Peace Making’ [see Q *al-Anfāl* 8:1, *al-Nisā*’ 4:35, 4:114, *al-Ḥujurāt* 49:9–10, ...]. Muslims must be of one accord after divisions over spilt blood, disputed property or rivalries, and act reciprocally with justice and equity (*al-muqṣiṭūn*).

- A related concept is *maṣlahah* ‘public interest’ serving the welfare of the community as a whole, and overriding all formal legal aspects of human relationships in favor of public utility and compassion. Several classical jurists developed this notion of *maṣlahah* to the extent that the *ri‘āyat al-maṣlahah* ‘protecting of public welfare’ could override explicit revealed Qur’ānic text (or the absence of text), in light of the Prophetic tradition: “*lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār / no injury should be imposed nor an injury to be inflicted as a penalty for another injury.*”

(The spirit of *maṣlahah* was at times extended to embrace indemnity exacted on the group for failing to fulfill communal obligations, as with the Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazm’s *fatwā* that an entire neighborhood was responsible to pay the blood-money when a beggar was found to have starved to death on their street.)



It is appropriate in this context to recall Islam’s stress on individual and collective duties within the unity of the Muslim *Ummah* ‘Faith Community’ as a human collectivity charged with a universal moral mission: upholding justice and integrity, calling people to the good, and providing by means of the example of its own unity a living witness to the Oneness of Allāh (*tawḥīd*). The experience of ‘Community’ in Islam is basic to social identity, and encompasses important ideals of solidarity with oppressed against oppressors, the need to realize the political and legal framework for embodying religious imperatives, and the unitary impetus for equality, common purpose, and the brotherhood of all humanity.

Today the significance of the trans-national *Ummah* ideal is increasingly centered in its potential of supporting *trans-national paths for communal co-operation and civil mobilization* without having to oppose the state, and in its ability of facilitating ways of making nation-states more responsive and more participatory, less corrupt, and more willing to tolerate change from below. Furthermore, the ideal of

‘Community’ also retains the power of evoking and mobilizing united Muslim action for a Combative Jihad employing legitimate force against external opponents. However, without legitimate authorization, intelligent preparation, and conscious direction this power is liable to be abused instead of rightly used. While the combative or martial Jihad is generally viewed as a ‘collective obligation’ not incumbent upon every individual, the Jihad of Peaceful-Action may have wider applications and broader requirements. Perhaps it should be understood today in terms of an ‘individual obligation’ incumbent upon all thinking Muslims who pursue legitimate Islamic-Action.

Muslims must actively seek to extract the spiritual paradigm of purpose and meaning at the core of Islam, and implement it in action guided by intelligence, wisdom, and loving-mercy. It is a certainty that all those who selflessly commit themselves to this sacred activity with all they possess of material and spiritual means, shall find the necessary guidance and divine support.



و لله الحمد و له عاقبة الأمور