

well-being and promote progress”. Every “struggle” in this regard is “jihad” – be it academic achievement, medical treatment, running successful businesses, teaching students, pursuing reform in society, etc. Jihad in this sense, the author notes, is “a holy struggle [that] lasts for one’s whole lifetime”. As the prophet has said: “The most excellent jihad is that for the conquest of self.”

The Quran also has very precise prescriptions relating to jihad as “holy war”:

- “Permission is given to those who have been attacked to take up arms, because they have been wronged.”
- “Fight for the cause of God those who wage war against you, but do not attack them first. God does not like transgressors.”
- “And why should you not fight for the cause of God and for those oppressed men, women and children who say: Rescue us Oh Lord from the oppressors of this city.”

Jihad, in the eyes of God, is self-defence and its purpose is the protection of the oppressed. In this context, Aziz firmly asserts that “the way jihad is being carried out by Muslims today is contrary to the Quran, Sunnah and Hadith”.

The ideal Islamic state

Following a careful reading of the Quran and Hadith, Aziz asserts that the Islamic state envisaged in the faith’s foundational texts is a democratic state. Not only do these texts give a central place to justice, equality and tolerance, but they also assert the importance of consent, consultation and public welfare in the functioning of the political order.

As God has instructed in the Quran: “Consult them [the people] about matters, and, when a decision has been taken, put your trust in God.” Again, the prophet said in a Hadith: “My nation will not unite on misguidance, so if you see them differing, follow the great majority.” The prophet has approved the Muslim’s right to oppose an unjust ruler; he said: “... Obedience [to the ruler] is only with regard to what is right and proper.”

Continuity and change in Islam

Aziz draws from the Quran itself the idea that some verses are more important than others and asserts that the verses upholding justice, equality, human dignity, charity, compassion, and forgiveness constitute the fundamental message of the Quran. He explains that just as all detailed clauses in a constitution must conform with the preamble and articles on fundamental rights, similarly, the other verses of the Quran must be in accord with the basic principles and values in the Scripture.

Flowing from this, just as changes in detailed laws do not change the basic structure of the Constitution, similarly reforms in matters of detail do not constitute a change in the basic message of Quran. Thus, giving equal rights to women in matters of marriage, divorce, and maintenance, or according full political and economic rights to non-Muslims in a Muslim society do not conflict with the fundamental message of Quran, but they are, in fact, in accord with the fundamental principles of equality and justice enshrined in the Quran.



Obviously, several problems still remain – many of the negative aspects of the faith are the products of historical processes over which Muslims have had little control, but which have cumulatively besmirched the image of Islam and its followers. For instance, it is important to recall that the “global jihad” in Afghanistan, which spawned violent extremist movements across West Asia and beyond for several decades, did not emerge from Islam but was a carefully-planned political project. It was put together by the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan to confront Soviet interests during the Cold War, with its sponsors paying little heed to the implications of this cynical use of faith for short-term political purposes.

Again, today most Muslim communities are ill-served by their rulers. Sustained western political interventions over the last two centuries have made Muslim states both authoritarian and fragile, and beholden to western interests rather than serving public welfare. Many of these states have justified their harsh and coercive order through specious references to Islamic tenets. The distinguished Egyptian scholar, Nazih Ayubi, had described the present-day Arab state as a “fierce” state that deals with its citizens through “coercion and raw force” and the exercise of arbitrary power. Ishrat Aziz’s book makes it clear that, while these states may have Muslim rulers, they are *not* Islamic states.

The author’s explication of the Quran has broken the logjam in Islamic thought and replaced stagnation and sterility with vigour and dynamism. The book provides fresh perceptions of Islam and can help to reshape the understanding of the faith both among Muslims themselves and those antagonistic to them. This is, therefore, a path-breaking presentation.

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