



The Palestinian Struggle Through the Prophetic Lens

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Introduction

Is Palestine a Muslim issue? What is the Islamic response to the Palestinian question? Put differently, “What would the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ do?”

Rarely do we encounter political situations in our lifetime in which the prophetic way is as clear as it is in the case of the Palestinian struggle. Questions of policy are often complex, morally ambiguous, even at times unanswerable, because the moral conundrums we must confront are often very different from the Prophet’s time and context. Not so in this case.

The question of whether the Muslims who take Allah’s Messenger as their role model should seek justice through resistance, or surrender, compromise, and accept the terms of their far more powerful and well-supported oppressor has more than one incontrovertibly normative and religious dimension; and for believing Muslims, on normative questions the Prophet ﷺ is the final authority. This is not to say that non-Muslims, who by definition do not follow the blessed Prophet ﷺ, could not find inspiration, strength, and truth in his model: the values and teachings that God Almighty revealed to him resonate deeply with human nature (*fiṭrah*), and are universal and accessible to all human beings. Islam is a religion that resonates with those striving for liberation precisely because it doesn’t promote surrender to and acceptance of tyranny as virtue. The Palestinian cause is no exception.

The facts are indisputable. Palestinians live in an apartheid, colonial-settler state, one that has dispossessed them of their land for some seventy years, has forced them to live in dehumanizing conditions that are worse than an open-air prison (unlike Palestinians, inmates are not periodically bombed), persecutes them for their religious affiliation, devastates them economically, seeks to (and yet has failed to) break them psychologically, interminably terrorizes and periodically massacres them as a policy (some of Israel’s politicians speak of killing Palestinians as ‘mowing the grass’).¹ The Israeli state strategically backs its

¹ See the *Washington Post*’s May, 14, 2021 article, “With Strikes Targeting Rockets and Tunnels, the Israeli Tactic of ‘Mowing the Grass’ Returns to Gaza,” and a detailed study, *Confronting Apartheid: A Personal History of South Africa, Namibia and Palestine* (2019) by John Dugard, distinguished South African legal scholar who was appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) chairman of a commission of inquiry on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories. A 2016 survey found that half of Israeli Jews endorse ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, and the public opinion has become more extreme since. See “Nearly Half of Israeli Jews

right-wing settlers who often make no secret of their genocidal intentions. Access to Islam's third holiest shrine, Masjid al-Aqsa, is increasingly restricted and effectively denied to most Muslims and Palestinians. The current escalation of Israeli aggression and Palestinian resistance began with the Israeli settlers occupying al-Aqsa, hoping to repeat the Israeli takeover of the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron.² Much more could be said about it, but the Israeli public mood is captured today by the recent election of an even more extremist, right-wing government and the state-organized chants of "Death to Arabs" and "Muhammad is dead," not to mention Israeli support of and inspiration to regimes such as India that have demonstrated genocidal intentions towards Muslims.³

That Palestine is an *especially* Islamic issue does not mean it is *exclusively* so. The target population is overwhelmingly Muslim, but not exclusively so: Israel also targets Palestinian Christians, depriving them of their basic human and religious rights, and its racist elite even discriminate against non-white Jews.⁴ Christian Zionism, that is as deeply anti-Semitic as it is hateful of Islam and Muslims, has been crucial to the creation and support of Israel, and continues to feed extremist,

Believe Arabs Should Be 'Expelled' from Israel, Survey Finds," *Independent*, March 8, 2016,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world>

[/middle-east/almost-half-of-israeli-jews-want-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-wakeup-call-survey-finds-a6919271.htm](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/almost-half-of-israeli-jews-want-ethnic-cleansing-palestinians-wakeup-call-survey-finds-a6919271.htm)

1. For the broader British and then American colonial policy in Israel, see Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (2020).

² "The Future of Ibrahimi Mosque in Danger," *Daily Sabah*, September 6, 2021,

<https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/the-future-of-ibrahimi-mosque-in-danger>.

³ "Thousands of Israeli Youth Chant Muhammad Is Dead," Real News Network, YouTube video, June 5, 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HNd-FPBNeig>; "Death to Arabs' What is happening in Palestine right now?,"

The Islam Channel, YouTube video, June 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGO_24WT3i0. Reuters

also reported a somewhat sanitized version of the state-supported right-wing march: "Israeli Nationalists March Raises Tensions in Jerusalem," YouTube video, June 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAlozT4p5W8>.

Also: "Why Indian Hindutva Supporters Back Israel on Gaza Bombing: As Israel Faces Criticism for Its Bombing of Gaza, It Has Received Support from India's Hindutva Supporters," Aljazeera, May 18, 2021,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/18/bjp-expresses-solidarity-with-israel-as-gaza-bombing-continues>; Achin

Vanaik, "How India Has Moved with Israel: A Timetable of Milestone Events," *Wire*, May 26, 2021,

<https://thewire.in/diplomacy/india-israel-palestine-history-diplomatic-relations>.

⁴ "Israel's Relentless War on Christian Palestinians," Inside Arabia, Jan 24, 2020,

<https://insidearabia.com/israels-relentless-war-on-christian-palestinians/>; Tani Goldstein, "Ethiopian-Israeli Community Has Hit Boiling Point, Leading Activist Says," *Times of Israel*, July 8, 2019,

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/ethiopian-israeli-community-has-reached-boiling-point-leading-activist-says/>;

Nadine Sayegh, "Racism: In Israel Some Jews Are More Equal Than Others," TRT World, July 9, 2019,

<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/racism-in-israel-some-jews-are-more-equal-than-others-28109>.

messianic fantasies.⁵ Nor is this a Muslims-vs-Jews issue: some of the leading advocates of Palestinians' rights—scholars, historians, and activists—are of Jewish origin. Whereas an Israeli historian has called Israel's acts “incremental genocide” of the Palestinians, the leaders of Arab-Muslim states have routinely betrayed their Islamic duty to help their brethren and protect one of the three holiest shrines of Islam—not to mention the Palestinians' Islamic rights—for the sake of their own personal, political, and economic gain.⁶

The secular and colonizing roots of the idea that only political, nationalist, or human-rights interpretations of the conflict are acceptable, fertile for broad cooperation, and legible to the civilized world have been exposed in a brilliant essay by Muneeza Rizvi.⁷ Palestinian American scholar Steven Salaita (who is not Muslim, to the best of our knowledge) has similarly cautiously argued from a critical, decolonial perspective that it is indeed a Muslim issue.⁸ What we offer here confirms some of their insightful contentions, but seeks to remind us of some of the profoundly Islamic dimensions of this struggle.

Let us briefly count some of the ways in which Islam and the Palestinian Question are inextricable. For believing Muslims, Palestinian or otherwise, the Israeli occupation of the holy mosque of al-Aqsa and its environs makes it an especially Islamic question, no different in principle than if a colonizer, God forbid, were to occupy Medina, the city of the Prophet ﷺ, murdering and dispossessing its inhabitants and preventing the believers worldwide from making pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) to it. Regardless of what anyone else in the world thought, it would be

⁵ Chrissy Stroop, “America’s Islamophobia Is Forged at the Pulpit: White Evangelicals’ Apocalyptic Fantasies Are Driving U.S. Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/26/americas-islamophobia-is-forged-in-the-pulpit/>.

⁶ See the courageous works of Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2006), and Noam Chomsky, “Gaza’s Torment, Israel’s Crimes, Our Responsibilities” (Z Commentaries, July 12, 2014, <https://zcomm.org/zcommentary/gazas-torment-israels-crimes-our-responsibilities/>) and “Ceasefires in Which Violations Never Cease” (Open Democracy, September 4, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/ceasefires-in-which-violations-never-cease-whats-next-for-israel-hamas-/>), Ilan Pappé, “A Brief History of Israel’s Incremental Genocide” in *On Palestine* (2015), and Norman Finkelstein, *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom* (2018). Also: Jeremy Bowen, “Five Reasons Why Israel’s Peace Deals with the UAE and Bahrain Matter,” BBC, September 15, 2020 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54151712>.

⁷ Muneeza Rizvi, “Palestine and the Question of Islam,” <https://www.criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/palestine-and-the-question-of-islam/>.

⁸ Steven Salaita, “Is Palestine a Muslim Issue?,” June 7, 2021, <https://stevesalaita.com/is-palestine-a-muslim-issue/>.

the paramount duty of all Muslims to liberate Medina; the Aqsa Mosque is no different. But there is more. Life, human dignity, and freedom from coercion in faith are nowadays universally recognized rights, affirmed in Islam for all of God's servants.⁹ Islam, nevertheless, has a particular way of ordering and securing these rights, especially if those violated are Muslims. The Palestinian issue checks this box. The sacred status of the Aqsa Mosque makes this even more poignant. For instance, accommodation of the five daily prayers and freedom from gratuitous insults against the Blessed Prophet ﷺ are especially Islamic issues. Even though many non-Muslims often support these, striving for these rights for all Muslims is a duty of all Muslims. The Palestinian question checks this box as well. But there is more. Allah declares the land surrounding al-Aqsa to be a blessed one in at least six verses—an honor that belongs to no other land—and in his miraculous prophecies about the end-times, the Beloved Prophet singled out those struggling to defend Masjid al-Aqsa as the last people on earth who will continue to stand for the truth even when others falter.¹⁰ This honor alone would make the defense of “Masjid al-Aqsa and its environs” a sacred religious honor and duty. All these are well-known teachings that are not new to any Muslim who is moderately literate in Islamic tradition.

In this essay, rather than reiterating these teachings, we focus on an even deeper way in which the Palestinian cause is Islamic, though one that is often overlooked. And that is how the Palestinian struggle to protect al-Aqsa deeply resembles the Prophet's own paradigmatic struggle against the Meccans. This most blessed of struggles was the occasion for a large portion of Qur'anic revelation and has been seen as a model by Muslims for their own struggles throughout history. In other words, few struggles today allow us to better appreciate and intimately experience the moral teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet's Sunnah. What makes this appreciation all the more urgent is the misuse of Prophetic teachings by the

⁹ The rights of God's servants in Islam are to be distinguished from the Western “universal human rights” discourse, which has a secular origin and checkered, if not hypocritical, record of application. For penetrating analyses of the development and application of this modern concept, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 127-58, and *idem.*, “What do Human Rights Do?: An Anthropological Inquiry,” *Theory and Event* 4.4 (2000).

¹⁰ An excellent summary of these Qur'anic verses and prophetic hadiths is available at: Ammar Al Shukry, “The Glorious Virtues of Masjid al-Aqsa,” *Muslim Matters*, September 11, 2017, <https://muslimmatters.org/2017/09/11/the-glorious-virtues-of-al-masjid-al-aqsa/>.

religious spokesmen of the opportunistic autocrats who are, ironically, proud pawns of the same type of Western elite that see themselves as, and sometimes act as, heirs to the crusaders of yore.¹¹ What could be a worse fate for those who claim to be Muslim leaders than to sell the third holiest shrine of Islam, the Blessed Mosque of al-Aqsa for a short price, and normalize with an apartheid regime that is actively expanding the occupation in defiance of international law? The normalizers turn the lesson of the *sīrah* and in particular the blessed Treaty of Ḥudaybīyah on its head, insinuating that they are in fact modeling prophetic behavior by making peace with the enemies of justice. Setting aside the fact that those claiming to be negotiating with the occupiers are not the aggrieved party, but Westoxicated autocrats who have always abused and betrayed the Palestinians at every step, there is a deeper deception at play. That is the obfuscation of the lesson and meaning of the *sīrah* and the Treaty of Ḥudaybīyah that are stated in the Qur'an and the Sunnah in no unclear terms.

After the Meccans persecuted the Prophet ﷺ and the believers for some thirteen years and drove them out of their homes, the Muslims migrated to Medina, establishing themselves as an independent political force. Where in Mecca they were but a group of individuals at the mercy of the Quraysh, in Medina Allah blessed them with the political agency required to properly counter the oppression they faced and preach their message. In a series of revelations, they were first permitted and then commanded to fight back against the Meccans. **What stands out in these verses for our present purpose is how closely the reasons named in these verses resemble those that drive the Palestinian struggle today: persecution, expulsion from homes, usurpation of property, and blocked access to a sacred mosque.**

Specifically, the reasons for the Battle of Badr that occurred in the second year of the Prophet Muhammad's migration to Medina bear an uncanny resemblance to the Palestinian situation today. That encounter on the 17th of Ramadan, 2 AH, in

¹¹ See, for instance, Ola Salem and Hassan Hassan, "Arab Regimes are the World's Most Powerful Islamophobes: Middle Eastern governments have forged alliances with right-wing groups in the West dedicated to anti-Islam bigotry," *Foreign Policy* 3/29/19, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/29/arab-regimes-are-the-worlds-most-powerful-islamophobes/> (Accessed 7/27/21).

which a small army of three hundred and some Companions with a meager supply of arms and only two horses defeated a far better-supplied Meccan army some three times their number, became a turning point in the story of Islam. And what could be a more *Islamic* struggle: the Blessed Prophet ﷺ declared that the Companions who participated in it were specifically guaranteed paradise. The reasons for this battle are, fortunately, described at length by Allah Almighty in the verses that address the events leading up to the Battle of Badr. Furthermore, the agreed-upon contextual details allow us to date the divine commentary on the matter and relate it to the precise time period.

Let us begin by reviewing the reasons that justified action against the Meccans. A few months after his arrival in Medina, Allah's command was revealed:

Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah has power to give them victory. [They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right—only because they say, “Our Lord is Allah.” And were it not that Allah checks people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might.¹²

Here, Allah Almighty not only commands the Muslims to begin to resist, He also gives reasons for this resistance—oppression, expulsion from homes, and persecution for faith—and goes on to speak of a general principle applicable to all situations. If God did not employ some believers to resist the oppression, tyranny would so engulf the land that not only mosques, but all other places where Allah is worshipped too would be destroyed. Clearly, there were no synagogues or monasteries under threat at that moment. In general, Muslim scholars agree that the particular, contextual account given for the revelation of a Qur'anic verse does not preclude its general applicability, but some verses, like this one, are emphatic in

¹² Qur'an 22:39–40. A full itinerary of the verses of *qitāl* with a discussion of their context in the Qur'an (but without much historical context) is provided concisely by Shaykh al-Azhar Maḥmūd Shaltūt (d. 1383/1963) and available in translation in Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Medieval and Modern Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 39–50. He notes, “This permission was motivated by the fact that the Moslems suffered injustices and were forced to emigrate and to leave their dwellings without justification” (42). For a classical discussion, see Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370 AH), *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1992), 1:319, under the *tafsir* of 2:190.

their general character.¹³ It highlights God's general wisdom in commanding resistance, for acquiescence to injustice and tyranny anywhere leads to the destruction of all piety and religion.

Economic boycott and the Prophet's fight against tyranny: Justice before peace

The Blessed Prophet ﷺ now begins to intercept the Quraysh's caravans, and by the time Badr occurred a year and a half after the Hijrah, he had dispatched four minor expeditions (*sarīyah*, pl. *sarāyā*) and himself led another four relatively more significant ones (*ghazwah*, pl. *ghazawāt*). Rather than direct confrontation, the Prophet had chosen to pressure the Meccans economically. Being a commercial center, Mecca relied on these caravans for its prosperity. By threatening these routes, the Prophet was forcing them to take his demands seriously, right the wrongs they had committed, and stop harassing Muslims. On one of these *sarīyah* expeditions, the Prophet ﷺ dispatched some eight men under the leadership of Companion 'Abdullāh b. Jahsh, Allah be pleased with him, to study the movement of the Quraysh's caravan arriving from Yemen. In the prevailing Arab custom, there could be no war during the four sacred months, nor within the confines of the Meccan sanctuary (*ḥaram*); this ancient custom allowed trade and pilgrimage to flourish in Arabia. As the caravan hastened to reach Mecca before the end of the last day of Rajab, the Muslim expedition decided to attack and capture it, thereby violating the customary prohibition.¹⁴ This invited much negative publicity as the Arabs saw the Muslims as violating their vital customs. Confusion as to which of the pre-Islamic customs still applied was natural, for there had been no formal directive on whether the sacred months were to be honored in Islam. The Prophet ﷺ himself greatly disapproved of the attack, for he had intended to uphold the

¹³ For this principle, which is widely agreed upon, see Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *al-Ashbāh wa-al-naẓā'ir* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1991), 2:136. Al-Subkī notes that this principle of universal applicability of meaning addresses the case when there is no indicant suggesting universality; if, however, there is such an indicant, there can be no doubt in its general applicability.

¹⁴ In some traditions, the incident took place at the beginning of Rajab, but this makes no difference for our discussion. See Ibn Sayyid al-Nās, *ʿUyūn al-Athar* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1993), 1:264–65.

sanctity of the custom and had not ordered military action, and refused to accept the spoils until the following verse was revealed:

They ask about the Sacred Month, about fighting in it: Say, fighting in it is an enormity, yet, blocking (*sadd*) Allah's path and its rejection (*kufr*) and [blocking] the Sacred Mosque, and expelling its people from it, are greater enormities with God: And persecution (*fitnah*) is greater than killing... (Qur'an 2:217)

This verse expands on the reasons in 22:40 quoted above as well as other verses for the retaliatory actions against the Quraysh and confiscation of its caravans. These are: (a) persecution for faith, and preventing people from it, (b) preventing the believers from visiting the Sacred Mosque, and (c) expulsion from homes and usurpation of property. Note that self-defense in the ordinary sense is not one of these, as there is no indication that at the time of Badr the Quraysh had actively declared war on Medina. Nor was the Prophet's ultimate objective merely *secular* peace or justice. His mission was to preach his religion first and foremost and to do so in peace: "So that [Allah's *dīn*] may prevail" (Qur'an 9:33; 48:28; 61:9). The Muslims, however, took up arms to oppose injustice and persecution (*fitnah*), to right the wrongs and pave the way for peaceful preaching. Put differently, the prophetic mission had a prescriptive and a preventive aspect. The preventive aspect was to remove external obstacles from the path of anyone who chose to believe and end tyranny and oppression that was directed against them as a result; armed struggle was employed for this purpose. The prescriptive aspect was to preach the message, and no coercion could be employed to this end. This is quite remarkable, for even in the Qur'an the greatest injustice humans can ever commit is that against God's right to be worshipped and worshipped alone, yet that is an injustice that harms one's own soul. The purpose of the armed struggle was not to force-convert anyone, for the same *sūrah* had clearly declared, "There is no compulsion in *dīn*" (Qur'an 2:256). Furthermore, the Muslims were instructed to be eager to put down arms if the enemy "inclined" toward a just, acceptable peace in which they could preach their religion without persecution (Qur'an 8:61-2). Simultaneously, however, against those who obstructed Islam's open practice and preaching or committed treason, they were instructed to be disciplined, indomitable warriors, even when the odds were greatly against them. Another *sūrah* that was revealed

around this time specifically prohibited making peace out of cowardice and a sense of impotence (Qur'an 47:35). The peace that the Prophet ﷺ sought, in other words, was not just any peace: it was peace *with* justice and freedom to preach his message.

To reiterate, the Battle of Badr, which defined the conflict that was to develop over the following years, was not *defensive* in the strict sense of the word. Nor, for that matter, did it constitute unprovoked aggression. Nor was the reason for the armed struggle the Meccan's rejection of the Prophet's message per se. All this becomes clearer in the verses revealed slightly later in Surah al-Mumtahina:

Allah does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes: Allah loves the just. Allah only forbids you to take as allies those who have fought against you for your faith, driven you out of your homes, and helped others to drive you out: any of you who take them as allies will truly be wrongdoers. (Qur'an 60:8)

Peaceful unbelievers merited not only fairness (*qist*), but courteousness and kindness (*birr*). And even when none of those virtues were shown to him, the Prophet never allowed the injustice he received to lead him to permit the killing of innocent civilians or persecution of others in return. The Prophet's love for justice is expressed powerfully by another well-known incident. The Blessed Prophet ﷺ once reminisced, "I witnessed the Alliance of al-Muṭayyabin with my uncles as a boy, I would not like to break it for any number of red camels!"¹⁵ In another version, the Prophet says, "Were I called to it even in Islam, I would ratify it. They agree that they will return the surplus to whom it was due, and no one shall be permitted to oppress or wrong a weak party."¹⁶ This alliance, which is better known as *Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl*, demonstrates the Prophet's love for justice and shows his eagerness to enter into alliance even with the pagan Arabs, his biggest detractors, for the sake of helping the oppressed and fighting for justice.

¹⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, no. 567; also given by al-Ṭabarī in his exegesis of verse 3:33, graded authentic by al-Albānī.

¹⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah*, excerpted from *al-Bidāyah wa-al-Nihāyah*, ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Wāḥid (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1976), 1:258.

The Truce of Ḥudaybīyah: Dragging the tyrant to the negotiation table

Classical exegetes and jurists agreed that jihad had been legislated in phases, and that the “middle” phase of jihad began with the Hijrah and lasted at least until the Conquest of Mecca in 8 AH.¹⁷ Badr had been part of an ongoing conflict with the Meccans, in which the Muslims had been commanded to seek justice for the Meccans’ past transgressions and ongoing hostility against both Islam and Muslims. What precisely was the Prophet’s strategic purpose, or end-game, in this struggle? This becomes even clearer if we follow the events leading up to the Truce of Ḥudaybīyah four years after Badr. The Quraysh had amassed their largest armies to lay a brutal siege to Medina in 5 AH and had been terribly frustrated when, instructed by the sagacious Persian convert Salman, the Muslims had dug a trench to protect the city. Without bloodshed, the Quraysh were frustrated in their greatest assault, and this broke their will. The following year, the Prophet set off for the Sacred Mosque of Mecca to perform *‘umrah* (minor pilgrimage), and when obstructed by the hostile intentions of the Meccans, camped at a place called Ḥudaybīyah, where this historic truce eventually transpired.

By now, due to the Muslims’ fortitude in the three major and several minor battles, two of the main original reasons named in aforementioned verses had been mitigated: the message of Islam could no longer be obstructed, nor could the Medinan Muslims and anyone who joined them be persecuted for their religion. Even though the Muslims remained strained for resources—one report has it that the Prophet’s family did not taste two meals in one day until after 6 AH—some of their financial losses too had been recovered. This does not mean that all was well. An unknown number of Muslims in Mecca continued to be persecuted, as mentioned in Qur’an 48:25. The most glaring grievance, however, remained access to the Sacred Mosque.

¹⁷ The explanation given so far requires taking no position in the debate among Muslim scholars on whether the so-called “sword verse” (Qur’an 9:29) abrogated all the earlier verses or whether all these verses remain valid in different contexts. Although the latter opinion seems far more persuasive, that discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.

In the Treaty of Ḥudaybīyah, the Prophet ﷺ persuaded the Quraysh to agree to a ten-year truce and acknowledge the Muslims' right to perform the lesser pilgrimage (*‘umrah*, the right to which by custom was enjoyed by all Arab tribes) the following year. In exchange, he ﷺ granted the Quraysh the concession to continue to prevent any future Meccan Muslim converts from joining him in Medina, while freely allowing any Medinan Muslim who so wished to leave Islam and join the Meccans. The Muslims saw this concession to prevent Muslim converts from coming to Medina as incredibly painful and humiliating, but they had no choice but to obey.¹⁸

Make no mistake about it: the Prophet ﷺ had not relented or become weak at Ḥudaybīyah; the Qur'an left no doubt in that this was a decisive victory. How so? In a brilliant political move that the cornered Meccan leaders helplessly recognized, he had forced them to make peace and acknowledge him as an independent, legitimate entity with whom others too could now make peace without inciting the Quraysh's ire. Furthermore, if the Meccans allowed the Muslims, with whom they had been at war for several years and largely lost, to proceed to make pilgrimage, they risked appearing weak, and if they obstructed a legitimate group of pilgrims from the Sacred Mosque, they would be perceived as violating their own vital custom. Predictably, the Meccans at first refused to negotiate with the Muslims, effectively denying that they were a legitimate party—a people who had rights like any other tribe. Sounds familiar, does it not? Have we not heard that Palestine was an empty plot of land for a people without a land, a land ready to be occupied, for Palestinians are not a people, a nation, or even fully human?

This negotiation took an incredible show of the Muslims' dedication to their Prophet and their cause. Only after the fourteen hundred companions of the Prophet ﷺ pledged to fight to death alongside the Prophet ﷺ were the Meccans cowed into making peace. This “pledge” Allah Almighty declared to be

¹⁸ For a detailed account of the protracted negotiations of al-Hudaybiyya and the historical sources on it, see Akram Ḍiyā' al-‘Umarī, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyah al-ṣaḥīḥah* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Ubaykān, 1996), 440–53; on the revelation of Sūrat al-Faṭḥ about Ḥudaybīyah, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1786; on the guarantee of paradise for those who participated in Badr and Ḥudaybīyah, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2495; on ‘Ali’s writing of the treaty (Allah be pleased with him and with the family of the Prophet), see *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 2698; on the Muslims’ reaction to the unequal terms, see *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1784 and generally al-‘Umarī, *al-Sīrah*, 443.

most pleasing to Him (Qur'an 48:18) and hence came to be known as the Pledge of Divine Pleasure (*Bay'at Ridwān*), and after Badr, this was the second occasion when those who participated in it were guaranteed paradise.¹⁹

All noble struggles require taking calculated risks. The message of the Prophet's diplomacy for our day is clear. Tyrants, settler-colonialists, and oppressors do not make peace because they want to. They must be dragged to the negotiation table, and forced to keep their end of the bargain, or else they will go on oppressing, taking, and killing. True, in return for peace and access to the Sacred Mosque, and for incalculable strategic advantage, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ compromised strict reciprocity of rights for the Meccan Muslims. But this was the farthest possible thing from "peace without justice" that some Muslim autocrats and their pet spokespersons today are advocating, distorting God's message for a small price. As a resourceful, brilliant leader, the Blessed Prophet had twisted the arms of a proud, spiteful enemy, after already having broken their will to fight in many a battle, to now make peace with him. It was the Prophet ﷺ who forced the Meccans to make this peace in the interest of his message and against their own interests. Today, the normalizers justify Israel's policies that the entire world recognizes as unjust in order to secure their own self-serving interests, and to ensure the Western elite of their loyalty to them and treachery to Islam. By doing so, they have unleashed immeasurable harms against Muslims.

Economic pressure: A neglected *sunnah*

The Battle of Badr was directly a result of the Prophet's policy to economically sanction the Meccans to penalize them and force them to relent. This economic diplomacy continued throughout, and the remarkable anecdote of Thumāma Ibn Uthāl demonstrates how deftly the Prophet ﷺ wielded this power. A powerful chief of the Quraysh's great rivals, the Banū Ḥanīfah tribe from Yamāmah, Thumāma was an avowed enemy of the Prophet ﷺ. He plotted an attack on the Prophet in Madinah in the year 628 after managing to kill some of the Companions

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7206; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1856, 1860. One report has it that the pledge was "upon death" (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 7206; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1860); a differing report from Jābir suggests that the pledge was that they would not flee at any cost but was not until death (*Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1856).

who had left the city. In a serendipitous encounter, the Companions captured him, not knowing his identity, and brought him to the Prophet ﷺ who tied him to a pillar of the Mosque, and treated him honorably, allowing him to observe the Muslims in prayer for three days, and then freed him.²⁰ Moved by what he saw, he embraced Islam, and then set out to do *‘umrah* at the order of the Prophet as a Muslim where he would meet his former friends from the Quraysh. The news of his Islam predictably did not sit well, but their intentions to harm him were thwarted by his stature as a leader of Yamāmah, the Quraysh’s source of wheat and grain. He responded to their impudence by declaring a crushing economic boycott, and that no grain would reach them unless the Prophet ﷺ himself interceded for them. This led the defeated Meccans to plead with the Prophet ﷺ to lift the embargo. The Meccans pled for mercy in the spirit of the Treaty of Ḥudaybiyah, even though the Treaty mentioned no such concession. The Prophet ﷺ acted with characteristic mercy. Having secured for his community a position of strength, he demonstrated grace that had not been shown to him.

Lessons for Palestine and other oppressed people

Should the Palestinians (or Kashmiris, or Rohingyas, or the Uyghurs) just give up, disappear, accept whatever the enemy wants? Why take the risk of resisting, fighting back, speaking up, defending their God-given rights, defending their religion or the Sacred Mosque? Why not accept, bow down, lay down, just disappear? Why not, some “masters” of realpolitik remind us, just normalize relations with Israel and let them take what they want?

After much trial and error over the past century, Muslims are rediscovering the lesson the Prophet’s ﷺ diplomacy, guided by Allah’s eternal message, teaches us. As a prophet, he prophesied what was to afflict his *ummah* as well as the way out of it. One such miraculous hadith has it:

People will one day summon one another to attack you as those dining invite each other to share their serving dish. Someone asked, “Will that be because of our small numbers at that time?” He replied, “No, you will be a multitude, but you will be like scum carried by a torrent, and Allah will take fear of you

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4372.

from the heart of your enemy and throw weakness into your hearts.” They asked, “What is the weakness?” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ replied, “Love of the world and dislike of death.”²¹

The foregoing account shows what the Prophet ﷺ meant by this, for he embodied it. Through the incredible fortitude and willingness to sacrifice that Allah granted His Messenger and the believers around him against tyranny and oppression, be it through economic sanctions and, when necessary, military action, the bloodshed of both Muslims and their detractors was minimized. By one estimate, some two hundred Muslims (and a similar number of enemy combatants), which amounts to less than one percent of the number of Muslims in Medina, were killed in battle over these eight years in over a dozen encounters.²² Typically, many more times this number would have been killed in the endless tribal conflicts just among the people of Yathrib had Islam not blessed them with its just peace. By even secular standards, before we consider the incalculable value of the final revelation from God, the Prophet’s wise governance and willingness to take up arms had brought peace to Arabia. This is why Allah Almighty has declared,

Fighting has been prescribed upon you and it is hateful to you. Perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you, and you love a thing and it is bad for you. Allah knows and you do not know. (Qur’an 2:216)

Compromise accompanied by weakness and appeasement only emboldens the enemy and aggravates his tyranny. Only unified, disciplined, and persistent action capped by fearlessness and utter trust in God brings an arrogant, unprincipled bully with far greater resources to the negotiation table. No matter how superior in

²¹ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 4297; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 22460, grade: *ṣaḥīḥ*.

²² By the estimates given by most scholars, the total number of Muslims and pagans killed in all of these battles combined, totaling over two dozen confrontations over a period of ten years, was around four hundred at most, almost evenly spread between the two sides (Ahmed al-Dawoody, *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* [New York: Palgrave, 2011], 40). Dawoody’s study generally strikes an apologetic note and the claims it cites can be questioned. The total number of Muslims killed, nevertheless, remains a rather small fraction of their total number. If we accept the numbers historians give for the Muslim population of Medina by the Conquest of Mecca in 8 AH, the number of Muslim troops was ten thousand (which included Medina and its surroundings, and suggests a total Muslim population of up to fifty thousand); by the Battle of Tabūk in 9 AH, the number of Muslim troops (now inclusive of Meccans) is placed at thirty to forty thousand (about this many Muslims performed the Final Pilgrimage with the Prophet ﷺ). All this would put the total number of Muslims in Medina and Mecca upwards of two hundred thousand by 10 AH (al-‘Umarī, *al-Sīra*, 474, 527, 549).

comparative strength, the settler-colonizer can and must be isolated and broken, economically, militarily, and psychologically before he will agree to peace.

What about the argument that today we—nearly two billion Muslims—are helpless, and should follow the prophetic conduct in Mecca rather than Medina, for any resistance is risky? Lack of faith and solidarity are hardly valid arguments. But recall that the Prophet’s strategy at Ḥudaybiyah was rather daring. The hypocrites in Medina, the Qur’an tells us, made precisely these arguments, “looking at [the Prophet] as if overcome by the fainting of death” (47:20). This was a calculated risk, and had the cooler heads not prevailed in Mecca by God’s grace (48:20-24), they could have recklessly attacked the Muslims and caused much bloodshed on both sides. Could it not be said that the Prophet ﷺ took such risks because Allah specifically told him that it would turn out fine, or that such daring strategy was only for him to venture? This doubt melts away the moment we reflect on the Qur’anic texts that speak of general, timeless principles and lessons reflected in the lives of earlier prophets and applicable until the Day of Judgment: that victory does not depend on size or strength, but on God’s backing.

A second question might be: “Who decides what policy to adopt: whether, when, and how to resist?” In the absence of a unified *ummah* and a leader to organize our affairs and defend our weak—which itself is a great calamity—each part of the *ummah* must do what it can, and no one has greater right to decide that than our Palestinian sisters and brothers, those who have revived the weakening spirit of the *ummah* everywhere through their unbending will, who are protecting the Sacred Mosque, standing, smiling, and resisting by throwing little rocks at heartless tyrants, and whose faith and resolve have frustrated the most cunning colonizing powers.

Today powerful media and global powers are bent on dehumanizing the Palestinians. However, the persistence of the Palestinians, with the help of the earnest support and prayers of the helpless Muslim masses and the growing voice of people of conscience worldwide, aided by the spread of social media, has miraculously begun to challenge the mainstream narrative. In fact, just as the

Palestinian struggle has done more than anything else to show the world how to resist tyranny, so it has to keep the Muslim *ummah* alert to its need for unity.

In the absence of the unified leadership of the *ummah*, only limited actual measures are possible. Even here, the Palestinians have found that the Prophetic policy of sustained economic pressure is the best place to begin. In 2005, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement was launched seeking to use economic pressure to force Israel to comply with international law. The movement was inspired by the model of the peaceful struggle of oppressed black people in South Africa (the Anti-Apartheid Movement) against the racist government. The movement began to coordinate the boycott of the regime in 1959 and grew to be a global force and achieved its goals by 1993. At first, every Western nation opposed it, and yet the support it garnered among people of conscience worldwide proved decisive. The movement was not only successful, but it also changed the global narrative and inspired oppressed people everywhere. The participation of ordinary people at the global level, including universities and other elements of civil society, was crucial to its historic success, as it gave concerned people around the world an effective way to demonstrate solidarity.

Economy matters; in fact, it can achieve what physical resistance alone cannot. This is why the Israeli state fears the BDS movement and pushes legislation, through lobbies and policymakers in North America and Europe, to punish all who dare support it. As numerous Jewish scholars have noted, Israel routinely weaponizes false anti-Semitism charges to try to stigmatize a movement for justice that includes Jews and people of all faiths.²³ This, in fact, detracts from the real anti-Semitism that remains a virulent problem in the West, ultimately harming Jews everywhere.

There is yet another thread to the Palestinian conflict whose tug only a believing heart can feel. To yearn to visit the “Farthest Mosque,” as it is named in the

²³ “Jewish Leaders Say: We Won’t Be Distracted, We Won’t Be Divided,” June 2, 2021, <https://jewishleadersletter.medium.com/jewish-leaders-fb839edb323>; “Jewish Voice for Peace Unequivocally Opposes the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism,” Jewish Voice for Peace, February 8, 2021, <https://jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2021/02/ihra/>.

Qur'an, is part of faith. We are taught to long for it, to visit it, and to offer prayer in it. Indeed, the Prophet ﷺ said that there will come a time where seeing the holy land would be more beloved to a believer than the world and everything in it.²⁴ To those who cannot visit it, in one hadith the Prophet ﷺ advised that they should at least send some oil to light its lamps.²⁵ And if it is an act of worship to send oil to the lamps of Al-Aqsa, then surely it is an act of worship to boycott the oil of the lamps of those who illegally occupy it.

In the moment of ultimate victory over the Meccans, the Prophetic model is ready with yet another, equally crucial, lesson for us. This being his conduct at the Conquest of Mecca in 8 AH, when he entered the city with his head bowed in utter humility, honoring and consoling the wounded enemy that had relentlessly persecuted and fought him. This lesson was learned well and practiced by the Rightly Guided Caliphs and numerous Muslim commanders, God be pleased with them all. Most notable among the latter perhaps is Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī who would follow this *sunnah* six centuries later, when the Crusaders, whose ancestors had massacred Muslims, Jews, and even fellow Christians, were met with legendary forgiveness.

Those, then, who wish to invoke religion to persuade Muslims that they must submit to a humiliating peace at any cost without resisting or demanding justice—this being effectively the magical solution and “only road to progress” being offered by the autocrats of the Middle East to their fed-up and restless Muslim populaces—must distort every message of the Qur'an and the Prophet's blessed mission. For Allah and His Prophet ﷺ left no doubt that there can be no peace without justice. This is the message of the story told in Sūrat al-Baqarah of the God-fearing Israelite followers of Prophet Moses and his successor prophet: “And how many a small group has overcome a mighty one by Allah's leave!” (Qur'an 2:249).

²⁴ Al-Hākim, *al-Mustadrak* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1990), 4:554.

²⁵ *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, no. 457. Most hadith critics declare this report to be weak.