Peace in Islam: history, precept and practice
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Introduction

I could not help but feel touched the first time a New Zealand friend said salaam aleikum to me. The familiarity of the greeting, and the warmth with which it was said, made me feel a little closer to home, my native country Algeria. Reflecting on that experience recently, it occurred to me how much that simple greeting says about Islam. Salaam aleikum means 'peace be upon you', to which one replies alaikum assalam, 'peace be upon you too'.

This evening, I would like to speak to you about this question: what is the idea of peace in Islam? Put in a different, though perhaps less precise way, is Islam a religion of peace? My thesis is a simple one – that salaam, which means peace, is at the core of Islam. The Qu'ran, the Muslim Holy Book, and Hadith, the sayings of Prophet Mohammed, are replete with exhortations to non-violence over violence and forgiveness over retribution. The life and actions of the Prophet Mohammed are an example of the value in which Islam holds peace. Thus, when my friend says salaam aleikum to me, he expresses an idea which is central to the Islamic faith.

Whether Islam is a religion of peace is, of course, central to a critical assessment of whether Islam itself is culpable for acts of terrorism committed in its name. Today, Islam is on trial. Some are convinced of its guilt. To take an extreme example, after September 11, Robert A. Morey, a prominent evangelical cult-watcher, announced a spiritual crusade against Islam and invited Christians to sign a pledge affirming the belief that Islam is at the root of all "Muslim terrorism". A lesser form of Morey's claim seems to have popular credibility. In a poll conducted last year, 44 percent of Americans agreed with the view that Islam, more than other religions, is likely "to encourage violence among its believers".[1] Others are sceptical whether Islam is the proper defendant at all. For example, Edward Said, the Palestinian intellectual, viewed the September 11 attacks as "the capture of big ideas…by a tiny band of crazed fanatics for criminal purposes".[2]

While I will argue that peace is as the core of Islam, it would be of course inadequate to leave the matter there. We must acknowledge that civil and state-sponsored

[1] The Pew study, "Religion and Politics: Contention and Consensus", June 24–July 8 2003, cited in Daniel Pipes "Fixing Islam's Image Problem" New York Post (New York, USA, July 29 2003) <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/1179> (at 20 September 2005).
[2] Edward Said "The Clash of Ignorance" The Nation (New York, USA, 22 October 2001). <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said> (at 20 September 2005).

violence is prevalent in many Muslims countries and that Islam is used, pretextually at least, to justify international terrorism. The challenge is in transforming precepts of peace into contextually relevant practices - in other words, moving from principles to reality. This challenge can be met, in my view, by a commitment to dialogue and education.

To those ends, the structure of this lecture is as follows. I will begin at the level of principle through a textual and contextual analysis of what the Qu'ran and Hadith say about peace and the concept of jihad. Then, by way of illustration, I will give an account of Prophet Mohammed's actions and choices in the early years of Islam, to illustrate that he was a peacemaker. This will be followed by a consideration of the relationship between outer peace and inner peace. I will end with the practical question of how to promote peace in the Muslim world.

Two preliminary issues: methodology of interpretation and the meaning of 'peace'

Before I begin on the analysis of the peace in the Qu'ran and Hadith, I would like to address two preliminary issues.

The first issue is the methodology of interpreting the Qu'ran. Understanding the position of Islam vis-a-vis war and peace is essentially a problem of textual exposition. For the uninitiated, this can be a perilous task. The Qu'ran must be studied in its total background, not just studying it verse by verse or chapter by chapter. In other words, 'cut and paste' analysis should be avoided! There is a highly developed Islamic jurisprudence, better known as usul al-figh, for the analysis of Islamic texts. This jurisprudence has solutions to common problems such as reconciling the general with the specific, and the clear with the ambiguous.

Like any text, the Qu'ran is susceptible to many different interpretations. None of these interpretations are necessarily authoritative because there is no clergy in Islam. What I will be advancing is a particular interpretation of the Qu'ran that is informed by the text, its context, and subsequent jurisprudence. Because of the confines of a lecture, the interpretation will be necessarily incomplete. However, in broad strokes at least, it provides what is, in my view, a true picture of the idea of peace in Islam.

The second preliminary issue is a deceptively simple one – the meaning of peace. In the dominant Western conception, peace is effectively the absence of war, and is considered separately from justice.[3] Islamic aspirations, on the other hand, have long reflected a more expansive and holistic conception of peace. Peace in Islam is closely linked to justice and human flourishing, and is best understood as:

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[3] Abdul Aziz Said et al (eds) Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice (University Press of America, Maryland, 2001) 5-7.

> …the condition of order defined by the presence of such core Islamic values as justice, equity, human dignity, cultural coexistence, and ecological stability, and not merely by an absence of direct violence.[4]

With the preliminary issues addressed, we can now move to the subject of peace in the Qu'ran and the Hadith.

Peace in the Qu'ran and the Hadith[5]

The word 'Islam' itself does not derive from the name of a particular prophet or people, but has the same root as salaam, peace. Peace in Islam begins with God. Peace is one of the "most beautiful names" of God, as-salam (Qu'ran 59:23-24). God invites humanity to dar-as-salam, the abode of peace (Qu'ran 10:25), and does not love fasad, violence (2:205). In the Qu'ran, peace is the greeting, language, and condition of Paradise (Qu'ran 10:10, 14:23, 19:61-63, 36:58). The yearning for peace derives from the innermost nature, or fitrah, of humankind.

The entire spirit of the Qu'ran is infused with the concept of peace. For example, the Qu'ran attaches great importance to patience, which is set above all other Islamic virtues (Qu'ran 39:10). Patience implies self-control and tolerance, and is regarded as one-half of faith. When conflict arises, there is a clearly articulated preference in Islam for non-violence over violence and for forgiveness ('afu) over retribution.[6] Forgiveness is the highest ideal:

> The recompense of an injury is an injury the like thereof; but whoever forgives and thereby brings about a reestablishment of harmony, his reward is with God; and God loves not the wrongdoers (Qu'ran 42:40).

What is called for, in other words, is neither naïve pardon nor a mechanical retribution.[7] The goal is to generate contrition in the wrongdoer through a measured response:

> Not equal are the good deed and the bad. Repel evil by that deed which is better and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity will become as though he was a devoted friend (Qu'ran 41:34).

As I have alluded to, Islam, like all the other major religions, is not pacifist. Islam permits its followers to resort to force to repel military aggression and to fight

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[4] Ibid 18.

[5] Ibid 7; Louay M. Safi Peace and the Limits of War (International Institute of Islamic Thought, Virginia, USA, 2002) ch 3; Maulana W. Khan "Non-Violence and Islam" Paper presented at Symposium on Islam and Peace sponsored by Non-Violence International and The Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace at the American University Washington D.C, February 6 1998 <http://saif_w.tripod.com/questions/violence/non_violence_and_islam.htm>.

[6] Abdul Aziz Said et al, above n 3, 8.

[7] Abdul Aziz Said et al, above n 3, 8.

oppression, brutality, and injustice.[8] The Qu'ranic term for such a struggle is the often-misunderstood term jihad. The literal meaning of the jihad is 'striving', and its common use derives from the phrase 'striving in the path of God'.

For many in the West, jihad is translated as 'holy war'; that is, a war to enforce one's religious beliefs on others. In my view, this is completely incorrect because Islam explicitly protects freedom of religion and forbids coercion in matters of faith (Qu'ran 2.256). Although we come from one source and one soul, God made us different, and we are asked to know each other despite difference: "O people! We have formed you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another" (Qu'ran 49:13). Muslims are enjoined to invite non-Muslims to the faith in a graceful and courteous manner: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best" (Qu'ran 16:125).

In an essay on the meaning of jihad, the scholar Louay Safi observes that mistake of equating jihad with a holy war of conversion tends to arise from a misinterpretation of three Qu'ranic verses and one verse in the Hadith.[9] In an analysis employing the tools of jurisprudential analysis (which I mentioned earlier), Safi systematically deconstructs the meanings of the verses to uphold the general principle that Islam forbids coercion in religion. For example, Safi argues that one of the verses, Qu'ran 2:193, only authorises the selective use of force to protect the freedom to practice Islam, and does not authorise war as a means of conversion. Another verse Qu'ran 9:13, Safi argues, must be confined in its application only to non-Muslim Arabs who lived at the time of the Prophet. The evidence is conclusive that jihad does not mean 'holy war'.

So, what does jihad in fact mean? To understand this question fully, it must be remembered that the Islamic revelation took place over a period rather than at a single point in time. The term jihad first appears in the Qu'ran in the Meccan period. At this time, the Prophet and his followers were being persecuted and oppressed by the main tribe in Mecca, the Quraysh. Muslims were not permitted to fight at this time, and thus jihad was used to mean peaceful struggle in the cause of God. After the Prophet and his followers migrated to Medina, and were then pursued aggressively by the Quraysh, Muslims were then permitted to wage war in self-defence. The meaning of jihad then enlarged to embrace the defensive use of force. Thus, it follows that the use of military tactics is only one of several avenues through which the duty of jihad can be discharged. The methodology of jihad includes, among other things, peaceful resistance and perseverance.

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[8] Louay A. Safi, above n 5, ch 1.
[9] Louay A. Safi, above n 5, ch 2.

The question then turns to the circumstances in which jihad in the sense of the use of force can be justified. The Qu'ran is clear on this point. Only defensive war is permitted in Islam: "Fight for the sake of God those that fight against you, but do not be aggressive" (Qu'ran 2: 190). Aggression is forbidden against those who offer peace: "And if they incline to peace, incline to it and rely upon Allah" (Qu'ran 8:61). In essence, Islam accepts a principle of dissuasion; that, if necessary, force can be used to dissuade and repel attackers.

Not only must jihad be justified as legitimate self-defence, but the use of force is also highly regulated by, what we would call in modern parlance, 'rules of engagement'. Jihad is placed within the Islamic ethical sphere and is thus highly regulated to prohibit harm to non-combatants, enemy property, and the environment. Some of the main principles were clearly stated in a speech made by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr (who was one of the closest companions of the Prophet) when he sent his army on an expedition to the Syrian border:

> Stop, O people, that I may give you ten rules for your guidance in the battlefield. Do not commit treachery or deviate from the right path. You must not mutilate dead bodies. Neither kill a child, nor a woman, nor an aged man. Bring no harm to the trees, nor burn them with fire, especially those which are fruitful. Slay not any of the enemy's flock, save for your food. You are likely to pass by people who have devoted their lives to monastic services, leave them alone.[10]

These principles were ahead of their time, and we see them today in the Geneva Conventions. There are further principles restricting the use of force. Firstly, there must also be a clear declaration of war before beginning hostilities. Secondly, peace conventions must not be unilaterally breached. Thirdly, the force used must be no more than necessary and must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. In the Hadith (narrated by Al Bukhari), a story is told of a prophet who was stung by an ant, and in retaliation he razed by fire all the ants he could find in his town. God admonished the prophet for his act, and said that he should only have retaliated against the specific ant that had hurt him.

Finally, there is no absolute right of retribution with the same type of force employed by the aggresor. For example, Islamic scholars were unanimous that even if the aggressor burned civilians intentionally to spread fear, Muslims are not allowed to retaliate in the same way because it is not an ethical manner with which to conduct war.

To summarise, I have made four main points so far. Firstly, jihad does not mean a holy war of conversion. Secondly, jihad, which means striving in the path of God, embraces a range of activities, only one of which is the use of force in limited circumstances.

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[10] Quoted in Chaiwat Satha-Anand "The Nonviolent Crescent: Eight Theses on Muslim Nonviolent Action" in Abdul Aziz Said et al (eds) Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice (University Press of America, Maryland, 2001) 199.

Thirdly, force can only be used in self-defence, again in strictly limited circumstances. Finally, the use of force is highly regulated by 'rules of engagement'. Viewed in the context of these four points, the terrorism of our age cannot in any circumstances be justified on the grounds of jihad. As Bernard Lewis, the American historian wrote with poignancy in The Wall Street Journal two weeks after September 11:

> What the classical jurists of Islam never remotely considered is the kind of unprovoked, unannounced mass slaughter of uninvolved civil populations that we saw in New York two weeks ago. Indeed it is difficult to find precedents even in the rich annals of human wickedness.[11]

I would like to push the reasoning one step further and introduce you to a creative line of inquiry by the Thai scholar-activist Satha-Anand.[12] The question that he considers is this: given the disproportionate magnitude and indiscriminate effect of weaponry such as explosives and nuclear technology, can Muslims use force consistently with Islamic principles? Satha-Anand argues that they cannot, and therefore Muslims cannot use violence in the modern world. The only way to discharge the duty to fight oppression and injustice is to engage in non-violent action. This, as I have argued, is entirely consistent with a fuller understanding of jihad.

I would now like to turn illustrate some of the principles I have discussed in relation to the life and actions of Prophet Mohammed. I will argue that the choices made by the Prophet to protect the early Islamic state illustrate an anxiousness to preserve peace even at the expense of pride, and the use of force only as a last resort

Prophet Mohammed as a peace-maker

Prophet Mohammed was born in the year 570 AD in Mecca. Even before the first revelation of the Qu'ran to the Prophet around 610 AD, he was known as a peacemaker, and as Mohammed Al-Ameen, the one of high integrity. When he was over thirty, a dispute arose among the Quraysh, the main tribe in Mecca. The great stone temple called the Kaaba was being re-built. At first, the work went on smoothly. However, conflict arose when time came for the sacred black stone, revered for having fallen from Paradise, to be put back in place in the southeast corner of the building. The different clans of the Quraysh all wanted the honour of putting back the black stone, and were ready to fight and kill. Mohammed acted as conciliator. He placed the black stone in the middle of a sheet, and asked the heads of the assembled clans to hold the corners of the sheet and raise it. They did so, and then taking the stone in his hands, he put it in position. In this way, the honour of all the clans was protected, and conflict averted.

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[11] Bernard Lewis "Jihad vs. Crusade: a historian's guide to the new war" (Wall Street Journal, New York, 15 September 2001) <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=95001224> at 20 September 2005.

[12] Chaiwat Satha-Anand, above n 10, 195-211.

Around 613 AD, the Prophet began to spread his message amongst the people. As the ranks of his followers swelled, he became a threat to the local tribes and rulers of the city, particularly the Quraysh. The Prophet was asked to preach in secret but refused. The Quaraysh, the Prophet's own clan, withdrew their protection of him. Muslims endured hunger and persecution. The Quaraysh posted a Charter on the Kaaba establishing, in essence, a boycott of the Muslim population. Traders could not sell to Muslims, and fraternisation with and marriage to Muslims was prohibited. Still, Muslims were forbidden by the Prophet to react with violence.

As Khan observes, part of this non-violent activism was the choice to migrate rather than confront.[13] Around 615 AD, Muslims sought refuge in Abyssinia (now Ethiopia) which was then ruled by a Christian King, and were welcomed and protected from their Quraysh persecutors. The major migration took place in 622 AD when the Prophet and his followers, around two hundred in number, migrated to Medina. The migration, known as hijra or flight, is celebrated to this day as the beginning of the Islamic calendar. The Prophet continued to play the role of peacemaker when establishing the new state in Medina by negotiating and concluding two Charters. The first Charter resolved the feud between the two rival Arab factions in Medina. The second Charter, named mu'ada, was a constitutional charter to uphold harmonious and peaceful relations between Muslims and Jews, who were the significant minority in Medina at this time.

Relations between the Quaraysh in Mecca and the Muslims in Medina worsened in the ensuing years. Meccans confiscated all the property that the Muslims had left in Mecca. The Meccans sent armies against Medina. The two sides clashed in the battle of Badr in 624 AD and the battle of Uhud in 625 AD. We see, during this time, the first Qu'ranic verses that authorise the use of force. For example:

> "…permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory" (Qu'ran 22:39).

In 627 AD, another Meccan force was led against Medina, but the Prophet led his followers in digging a deep trench around Medina between the two sides, thus successfully preventing a battle from taking place.

In the context of these military encounters, one might expect that the greatest victory of the early Muslims would be a grand military triumph. In fact, it was the opposite – a truce, followed by a peace treaty. Having had a vision in which he found himself entering Mecca unopposed, the Prophet was determined to attempt the pilgrimage. The Quraysh were suspicious of his motives, and maltreated one of the Prophet's envoys who was sent to explain that the Prophet came only as a pilgrim. After several diplomatic manoeuvres, the two sides finally sat down to negotiate. The negotiations

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[13] Khan, above n 5.

were long and delicate, but the famous Treaty of Al-Hudaybiyah was finally concluded. The two sides agreed for a truce lasting ten years.

The notable feature of the Treaty were the unilateral concessions in form and substance made by the Muslims to the Quaraysh, despite the fact that by this stage the Muslims were stronger militarily than the Quaraysh. In terms of form, the Prophet acquiesced to Quaraysh demands that he sign the Treaty simply as Mohammed, rather than as Mohammed the Prophet of God. In terms of substance, the Prophet agreed that any Quaraysh who embraced Islam and came to the Muslims without permission from his guardian was to be returned to the Quaraysh, but not so deserters from the Muslims to the Quaraysh. Why did the Prophet make these concessions, which were certainly painful? In my view, the only conclusion can be is that the Prophet valued the peace so highly that he was willing to accept it costs for himself and his people.

In the event, the Treaty of Al-Hudaybiyah worked largely to the advantage of the Muslims, and so is now regarded as the early Muslim state's greatest victory. The stature of the Prophet and Islam had grown so significantly through this peace that the number of converts to Islam in the following two years was greater than the total number of all previous converts.

In summary, from his early life onwards, the Prophet was first and foremost a peacemaker. He held the peace despite severe persecution in Mecca, and resorted to the use of force only in self-defence in reaction to Quaraysh aggression. Finally, the Prophet preferred peace to continued conflict, even at the expense of short-term Muslim interests. The Prophet's choices illustrate that there are a range of peacemaking options in Islam – such as perseverance, migration, and treaty-making – and force may only be used as a necessary defensive measure. In contrast, as I discussed earlier, the use of indiscriminate force against innocent civilian populations, such as the suicide bombings that we see today, is totally outside Islam.

Having now painted, in broad strokes, a picture of the idea of peace in Islam, I would like to consider what Islam says about inner peace. What is the relationship between the inner peace (that is, peace within one's being), and outer peace? What does Islam say about the cultivation of inner peace?

Inner peace

Put simply, without a sense of inner peace, one cannot make peace between people. God, as the source of peace, bestows his grace only if we strive for peace within ourselves: "…Allah would not change a favour which He had bestowed upon a people until they change what is within themselves" (Qu'ran 8.53). The challenge, of

course, is striving to maintain a peaceful attitude when going through a difficult ordeal.

I faced such a challenge when I first arrived in New Zealand and was imprisoned for two years, the first ten months of which I was placed in solitary confinement. Getting through life day by day became itself a monumental challenge, but a great source of strength were the lessons from the Qu'ran and Hadith about how one should remain calm and peaceful. The Hadith tells the story of the Prophet urging a grieving woman to show patience and restraint in order to cope with shock (narrated by Al Bukhari and Muslim). I remember being deeply shocked when I was shown for the first time some of the inflammatory media coverage about me. I struggled to remain patient, to analyse my situation, to try and understand what was happening. Later, I would cry, and feel relieved. In the Islamic view, it is best to try and remain optimistic, especially in human relations, to try and look and things in the best light possible. In my time of isolation, I would lie in bed and try to check my soul for bad feelings, and to try and cleanse myself of these.

When I was feeling very downhearted, I would recall two passages from the Hadith. The first passage is a story which illustrates that one should remain forgiving even in times of hardship. In the Battle of Badr, the Prophet had been injured by the Quaraysh, who as you will recall were formerly his own tribe. Rather than react in anger, the Prophet said while wiping blood from his face, "O Allah! Forgive my people, because they are certainly ignorant" (narrated by Al Bukhari and Muslim). The second passage from the Hadith illustrates that particularly in times of hardship, when the human will to persevere is weak, one should surrender oneself to God:

> "No one must long for death because of any misfortune which befalls him. If he cannot help doing this, he should say, 'O Allah, grant me life as long as You know that life is better for me, and make me die when death is better for me" (narrated by Al Bukhari and Muslim).

The duty to strive towards God in one's own thoughts, heart, and life, can also be conceived of as 'inner jihad', Al-jihad-al-Akbar. There is a story told in the Islamic literature that the Prophet having returned from battle said that he was returning from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad. The implication, of course, is that it is the inner jihad which is paramount. In other words, striving to do good, taking care of oneself, one's family, and one's society, is the highest duty in Islam.

I would like now to turn to the final topic I will be touching upon tonight. Given Islam's rich heritage of valuing peace and restricting force only to circumstances of self defence, how do we explain the violence that is committed in Islam's name? What practical steps can be taken to promote peace in the Muslim world?

Converting principles to action: dialogue and education

Neither question, of course, admits of an easy answer. The roots of religious extremism are multiple and complex. In a recent lecture at Victoria University on that topic, I concluded that the lack of democracy in Muslim countries is the main cause of religious extremism. In an authoritarian regime, dissent is created without a peaceful means of expression, and conflict is fuelled by the imbuing of political action with the certainties of faith. For present purposes, this illustrates that peace is indivisible from other essential social values, such as respect for human rights, democracy, and justice. As I discussed earlier, the Islamic conception of peace is more expansive than simply the absence of violence.

What, then, are the key steps that should be taken to promote peace in the Muslim world? Two of the most important, in my view, are dialogue and education.

In most Muslim countries, including Algeria, there is no democracy so there is no real dialogue. Without dialogue about the pressing social and political issues of the day, a true peace cannot be sustained. Dialogue must also occur about the past. Each Muslim country has a special story, a particular experience of colonialism, a particular path of post-colonial development. While we must acknowledge this story, and acknowledge the lingering effects of colonialism, we cannot make the story a prison. We cannot be trapped in the past. We must understand our history to understand and change our present, but we must then look to the future.

Another type of dialogue that must take place is dialogue about Islam itself. What place should Islam have in political life? How can our conception of Islam be renewed to be relevant to modern times without losing the essentials of the faith? How can Islam be better integrated into international discourse about the promotion of peace, rather than being looked upon as an accused on trial? These questions are vast, and we must at least begin an open dialogue about resolving them.

Peace must be supported by dialogue, and dialogue must be supported by education. As the scholar Riffat Hassan observes, educating for peace is a compelling ethical imperative and must have a high priority in Muslim societies and for Muslims generally.[14] Educating for peace requires engagement on many levels, from raising basic educational standards to fostering learning and research in fields such as international relations, conflict resolution, and human rights.

There is a particularly pressing need for education about the true nature of Islam. Islam is as misunderstood and misconceived in Muslim countries as much as it is in

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[14] R. Hassan "Peace education: a Muslim perspective" in H. Gordon and L Grob (eds) Education for peace: testimonies from world religions (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis books) 90-108.

the West. In many Muslim countries, people often don't have the tools to understand Islam in a holistic and rich manner because there is no appropriate mainstream religious education. This is not by accident or lack of resources, but rather deliberate design by authoritarian governments. In my country, all prayer leaders, imams, must be registered with the government and their speeches are vetted and controlled. Imams are paid very poorly by the State, and, many are uneducated and in some cases even illiterate. Authoritarian governments know that if people knew the essence of Islam, they would demand all the things that they are entitled to under Islam that are now denied to them – democracy, freedom from oppression, respect for human rights, and peace.

Conclusion

The question I posed at the beginning of this lecture was this: what is the idea of peace in Islam? To conclude, peace is at the core of Islam. The Qu'ran, the Hadith, and the choices of the Prophet Mohammed in establishing and protecting the first Islamic state, illustrate that Islam values peacemaking, and only authorises the use of force in self-defence, and even then in a restricted and proportionate manner. In this context, the pretextual use of Islam to justify terrorism can be exposed for what it is – a sham, and a disgrace. To make a bridge between Islam in principle and actual practice in Muslim countries, we must renew our commitment to informed and educated dialogue, particularly about the renewal of the faith and how Islam can form part of international discourse to promote peace.

Salaam aleikum, peace be upon you.