



## Islam and Peace: A Dialogue

by Sezai Ozcelik

Before the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium, it should be noted that Muslims still suffer from war, injustice, oppression, and brutality as well as many other economic, environmental and social problems. Such atrocities are illustrated daily on the television. There we can view the dreadful brutality that peoples such as the Palestinians and Bosnians face everyday. Another issue of severity to note, is the seemingly ineffective voice of Muslims, which rarely generates solutions for the violence and the bloodshed in Algeria, Afghanistan, Albanians in Kosovo, Tajikistan, or the oppression in Chinese Turkistan and Crimea to name a few.

On February 6-7, 1998, a round table symposium called "*Islam and Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*" was held at the American University in Washington DC. The symposium which was sponsored by Nonviolence International and the Center for Global Peace, consisted of twenty-five Muslim thinkers scholars, officials, religious leaders, activists and representatives of major Islamic national or international organizations. These officials discussed the concepts of positive peace (the absence of structural violence) and negative peace (the absence of war). They also focused on specific issues of force, violence, social change, and nonviolence from the Islamic perspective.

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In addition to the factors mentioned above, rapid urbanization and technological changes are also related to Islam's inability to produce answers about post-modern human needs. Furthermore, the Islamic world is culturally, socially, and economically invaded by Western secular ideologies. For this reason, it is important that Islam should generate a unique and separate solution for modern Islamic human needs. In this respect, Islamic discourse on peace should emphasize its own concepts, precepts, and arguments. In addition, Muslims need to realize that they need to leave behind their bitterness over their current weak conditions that distort existing components for peaceful change in contemporary Islamic traditions.

A main emphasis in the symposium was that Muslims should take the responsibility to contribute to social and global peace and the necessary steps toward peacebuilding within the capacity of Muslim societies. There is

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*Jawdat Sa'id (Syrian Peace Activist), Dr. Mary-Jane Deeb (Editor, Middle East Journal) & Abdullahi A. an-Na'im (Emory University), during the presentation of the six country reports. Master artworks of calligraphy by Mohamed Zakariya and Hossein Tabnak, and solo renditions on the Ud and Tar, lent an aura of solema dignity during the Symposium.*

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a competition among different groups and factions over who possesses the “authority” to speak for Islam. Dr. **Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na’im** challenged many Muslims present to “*Stop lamenting! Stop exalting an ideal Islam! Look for the concrete logistics and mechanics for peace.*”

What was the outcome of the symposium? The symposium succeeded in bringing together Muslims of diverse intellectual, cultural, and ideological backgrounds in order to answer these primary questions:

**“How can Muslims express intensified religious identity and renewed commitment to social and political activism for peace building, without violence and dissension? What may Islam contribute to facilitate growing efforts at Peace, both within Muslim societies and globally?”** All the participants discussed these questions in three two-hour sessions of open exchange and debate, as well as in informal exchange during lunch and tea breaks.

In his keynote address “*What is peace? The Islamic Viewpoint*”, **Seyyid Hossein Nasr** enumerated four circles of Islamic peace: 1) The origin of all peace is being at peace with oneself through surrender to God; 2) then to make peace within our different selves; 3) to make peace with our immediate community-family, kinfolk, neighborhood...; and 4) to be at peace with our wider community, with all Muslims, with our environment and the rest of God’s creation.

The first sitting dealt with **inherent strengths and supports for peace and peaceful social and political change ‘built into’ Muslim societies.** In his presentation about “*Nonviolence and Islam*”, **Maulana Wahiduddin Khan** presented long-suffering (**sabr**) as one of the chief nonviolent components in Islamic tradition. Later, Ambassador **Sadek J. Sulaiman** laid out five points in order to clarify the Islamic perspective on peace and nonviolence: 1) Peace is universally desirable and essential for development; 2) Islam is essentially peaceful; 3) Islam distinguishes between legitimate & illegitimate use of

force; 4) the Islamic conception of peace is holistic: within family-community-globally and environmentally.; 5) Islam does distinguish between ‘sacred struggle’ (**jihad**) as a lifelong struggle with peaceable means, and warfare (**qital**) to stop aggression, defend rights, and end unlawful disorders. He asked “what safeguards exist in Islam to prevent the eruption of violence?”

The second sitting dwelt upon **removing obstacles to peace in the reassertion of religious identity among Muslims;** and the Third sitting was devoted to **identifying paths of change within the renewal of Islamic religious identity and values in meeting the various human needs for the coming period.** In between these two sessions came a series of country reports or “current realities” about Afghanistan, Kashmir, Iran, Palestine, Kosovo, and Algeria.

The most important contributions in the discussion was the introduction of the key notion of ‘community’ or (**Ummah**) as a trans-national reality which may provide a bridging function from what ‘is’ to what ‘ought’ to be. In his paper, “*Haji*” **Abdurrahman Wahid** as-

serted that the concept (**Ummah**) might replace the power paradigm concept of ‘nation states’ and could play a central role for implementing essential Islamic values such as justice, peace, tolerance, nonviolence, etc. **Sohail Hashmi** argued about the possibility of the intervention process in interstate as well as intrastate conflicts in the Muslim world. Professor **Mahmaud Ayoub** rejected the idea that Muslim states should ally with non-Muslim states against other Muslim states. Overall, the participants agreed that there is a need and a potential for more regional cooperation among Muslim states in the area of economy, policy, security, environment, education, disarmament, health, technology, etc.

In his concluding remarks, **Mubarak Awad** pointed out the non-violent struggle of Palestinian villagers as an example for the Islamic world. **Karim Crow** stated that al-Islam, the ‘Religion of Peace’, can teach a peaceful reality and proposed to establish a trans-national Muslim association or Islamic Peace Forum. This will be a global network of Muslim individuals, groups and organizations employing Islamic values in peaceful paths of social change.



*Participants carried on intensive exchanges over the two days of the Symposium. Here Ustadh Jawdat Sa’id, a prominent Islamic philosopher of peace who has written numerous works, confers with Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani, United Nations Permanent Representative for The Organization of Islamic Conference.*