

# The Concept of Islamic State

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## Introduction

The term Islamic State is composed of two words: “Islam” and “State.” The Muslim Ummah has come to realise that the solution to their problems resides in creating the Islamic State, but much confusion remains in defining its parameters. Does a majority Muslim population establish an Islamic State, regardless of the laws, systems, and constitution imposed upon it? Does the partial implementation of some aspects of Islam or having the name Allah on the state flag suffice to consider a state as Islamic? Does the existence of Islamic movements in positions of authority constitute an Islamic State? Even if a state possesses all of these elements, it would not be considered the Islamic State. Because Islam is the Quran and the Sunnah, the Islamic state revolves around the Quran and the Sunnah and not around Muslims. The presence of a large Muslim population or Islamic movements does not produce the Islamic State.

## The Formation of Islamic State

Because Islam is composed of the Aqidah (doctrine) and a collection of laws emanating from it, the Islamic State must derive its entire constitution from the Islamic Aqidah. All of the systems, laws, and regulations must emanate solely from the Islamic Aqidah and the sources of Shariah, and must be substantiated by evidence to verify such a law or article as derived from Islam, for a state to be considered Islamic. Any contradiction that exists between any law or article in the constitution and Islam will exclude such a state from the circle of Islam. Islam is a complete way of life that necessitates the existence of the State to implement the Shariah comprehensively, both at an individual and societal level. Individuals can abide by some rules of Islam related to the prayer, fasting, and Hajj. The other rules of Islam that organise the various political, social, economic, and international relationships require the existence of the State with the authority to

organise the myriad of relationships that characterise the society and the resources to mobilise the Ummah towards propagating Islam (Qadri 270).

Islam has to be the basis for the foreign policy between the Islamic State and other states. Consequently, Islam outlines the objective of the foreign policy of the State. The questioning of the ruler/state by the Ummah, individuals, or the political parties, has to be based upon Islam. Islam has to be the criterion for the State and the Ummah to measure the Islamicity of the State. Islam cannot be implemented by the State alone, Islam must be implemented by both the Ummah and the State. The State implements Islam while the Ummah keeps a check and balance on the State. In addition, even the process of check and balance has to be based on Islam. The Islamic State would not allow any concept or idea emanating from a source other than Islam, even if it had a similarity to Islam, to take root or establish itself within the social fabric.

The Islamic State is not a desire that one aims to satisfy, but an obligation that Allah has decreed on Muslims and commanded them to execute; He warned of the punishment awaiting those who neglect this duty. How are they to please their Lord if the Glory and Dignity are not to Allah, nor to His Messenger, nor to the believers? How are they to be safe from His punishment if they do not establish a state that would prepare the army for battle, defend the territory, implement Allah's penal code and rule by what Allah has revealed? Therefore, Muslims must establish the Islamic State, for Islam would not have an influential presence without it, and their country would not become an Islamic homeland unless it is ruled by the Islamic State (Qadri 270).

### **The Concept of Islamic State in the Qur'an and Hadith**

First of all we should know whether there is any concept of Islamic state in the Qur'an or Hadith literature. A thorough examination of the scripture and Hadith literature shows that there is no such concept of Islamic state. In fact, after the death of the Holy Prophet the Muslims were not agreed even on the issue of his successor. The Muslims split on the question—a section maintaining that the Prophet (PBUH) never appointed any successor and another section maintaining that he did.

As far as the Qur'an is concerned there is, at best, a concept of a society

rather than a state. The Qur'an lays emphasis on 'adl and ihsan, i.e. justice and benevolence. A Qur'anic society must be based on these values. Also, the Qur'an strongly opposes *zulm* and 'udwan, i.e. oppression and injustice. No society thus based on *zulm* and 'udwan can qualify as an Islamic society. The Qur'anic values are most fundamental. It is thus debatable whether a state, declaring itself to be an Islamic state, can be legitimately accepted as such without basing the civil society on these values. We will throw more light on this later.

## **Historical Background**

### **Pre Islamic Arab**

First of all it is important to note that the pre-Islamic Arab society had not known any state structure. It was a predominantly a tribal society which did not know any distinction between a state and a civil society. There was no written law, much less a constitution. There was no governing authority either hereditary or elected. There was a senate called *mala.* It consisted of tribal chiefs of the tribes in the area. Any decision taken had to be unanimous and the tribal chiefs enforced the decision in their respective tribes. If a tribal chief dissented, the decision could not be implemented (Mahmassani 15).

There was no taxation system or any police or army. There was no concept of territorial governance or defence or policing. Each tribe followed its own customs and traditions. There were of course inter-tribal wars and all adult tribals took part in defending their tribal interests. The only law prevalent was that of qisas, i.e. retaliation. The Qur'an put it succinctly as "And there is life for you in retaliation, O men of understanding" (al. Baqarah, 2:179). The whole tribal law and ethic in pre-Islamic Arabia was based on the law of retaliation.

### **Islamic State of Madina**

The Islamic movement in Mecca inherited this situation. When the Prophet and his companions faced severe persecution in Mecca they migrated to Madina, also known as Yathrib. Madina was also basically a tribal city governed by tribal laws. Like Mecca in Madina, too, there was no state, and only tribal customs and traditions prevailed. In fact Madina was worse in a way than Mecca. In Mecca

inter-tribal wars were not much in evidence as it was turning into a commercial society and inter-tribal corporations for trade were coming into existence. However, Madina, being an oasis, was a semi- agricultural society and various tribes were at daggers drawn. It was to get rid of the inter-tribal warfare that the people of Madina invited the Holy Prophet as an arbitrator (al-Dhahabi 23).

The Prophet, a great spiritual and religious personality, commanded great respect and set out to establish a just society in Madina. First of all he drew up a pact between various tribal and religious groups known as *Mithaq-i-Madina* (i.e. the Medinese treaty), which guaranteed full autonomy to all tribes and religious groups like the Jews, the Muslims, and other pagan tribes. Thus all religious groups were free to follow their own law and tradition and there was no coercion in such matters. The Holy Qur'an also declared that "there is no compulsion in the matter of religion" (2:256). The Mithaq-i-Madina was a sort of preliminary constitution of the `state' of Madina that went beyond a tribal structure and transcended the tribal boundaries in matters of common governance. It also laid down that if Madina is attacked by an outside force all will defend it together. Thus for the first time a concept of common territory, so necessary for a state to operate, evolved. Before this, as pointed out earlier, there was concept of tribal but not of territorial boundaries (al-Dhahabi 24).

The Prophet, in a way, took a revolutionary step in dissolving tribal bonds and laying more emphasis on ideological boundaries on one hand, and territorial boundaries, on the other. However, the Prophet's aim was not to build a political community but to build a religious community instead. If Muslims evolved into a political community it was accidental rather than essential. Hence the Qur'an lays more emphasis on values, ethics, and morality than on any political doctrines. It is Din which matters more than governance. Allah says in the Qur'an that *al-yauma akmalu lakum dinakum*, i.e. I have perfected your Din today (al-Ma'idah 5:3). Thus what the Qur'an gives us is a perfect Din, not a perfect political system. The political system had to evolve over a period of time and in keeping with the needs and requirements.

### **The Basic Task of Ummah**

One of the basic duties of the Muslims is "enforcing what is good and combatting

what is evil.” This clearly gives a moral and spiritual direction to an Islamic society. The later emphasis on integral association between religion and politics is, to the best of my knowledge, totally absent in the Holy Qur’an. The Prophet was an enforcer of good *par excellence* and he devoted his life to eradicating evil from society. But he never aspired for political power. He was one of the great spiritual persons born on this earth. He strove to inculcate spiritual power among his companions. The following verse of the Qur’an enunciates the basic philosophy of the Muslim community: “You are the best ummah (nation, community) raised up for people: you enjoin good and forbid evil and you believe in Allah” (Ali Imran 3:109).

Thus it will be seen that the basic task of the Muslim ummah is to build a moral society based on good and negation of evil. The unity of Muslims is possible only if they remain basically a religious community engaged in building a just society that has no elements of *zulm* (oppression and injustice), though there may be different ways of approaching the truth. The Holy Prophet is reported to have said that a society can persist with *kufr* (unbelief) but not with *zulm* (injustice) (Qadri 274). The Qur’an also describes Allah as *Ahkam al-Hakimin*, i.e. best of the Judges. (al-Tin 95:8). These are all value-giving injunctions and hence give a direction to the society.

Islam never required Muslims to evolve into a political community. Politics leads people basically to power-seeking projects and aspirations for power bring about division rather than unity. The Qur’an required Muslims to remain united and not entertain disputes weakening themselves. “And obey Allah and His Messenger,” the Qur’an says, “and dispute not one with another, lest you get weak-hearted and your power depart, and be steadfast. Surely Allah is with the steadfast” (al-Anfal 8:46).

### **Political Power**

When someone aspires for political power they dispute with others and thus become weak, which is what Muslims have been warned against. And in the history of Islam the dispute between Muslims arose on the question of political power. Who should wield political power and who should rule was the main

question after the death of the Holy prophet. Thus Muslims began to divide on the question of power.

Various disputes arose between different groups of Muslims even leading to bloodshed during the thirty years of what is known in Islamic history as Khulafa al-Rashidin (period of the rightly guided rule). This thirty year period is full of conflict and bloodshed. Three rightly-guided Caliphs out of four were assassinated. Why was the spirit of unity lost? Why did wars break out between different groups and parties? It was mainly on account of fights between different aspirants for power and pelf. The first signs of these aspirations appeared immediately after the death of the Holy Prophet (Majid 3).

The people of Mecca belonging to the tribe of Quraysh claimed their superiority over others and said that an Imam could only be from the tribe of Quraysh, as they first embraced Islam and were most cultured and cultivated, and had adequate experience. The supporters of the Prophet from Madina the Ansars claimed that they helped the Prophet when he was driven out of Mecca due to severe persecution by the people of Quraysh and hence they better deserved to succeed the Prophet. The Imam or Caliph, they claimed should be from amongst the Ansars. The members of the family of the Prophet (PBUH) felt that "Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet and leader of the Hashimites, was better qualified to succeed the prophet" (Qadri 274).

Thus these fissures appeared as different groups aspired for leadership and consequently for power associated with the nascent Muslim state. It is also necessary to stress here that a preliminary state structure came into existence because it was historical and not religious need. We would like to elaborate this a bit.

As every Muslim knows, the religious duties of Muslims are to pray, fast, pay the poor due (zakat), perform Haj, and believe in *tawhid* (unity of Allah) and not associate aught with Him. This is necessary for spiritual control over oneself. A Muslim can perform these obligations wherever he/she lives. There is no need for an Islamic state for this. A Muslim living in a non-Muslim society can perform these obligations without let or hindrance. And even when there is Muslim rule no ruler can forcibly enforce these obligations on Muslims. Matters of *'ibadat* (i.e. acts of worship and spiritual exercises) cannot be coercively enforced by any authority. It is a matter between human beings and Allah.

However, it is different matter as far as *mu'amalat* (i.e. relations

between human beings) are concerned. A state has to govern these *mu'amalat* and the ultimate aim of the state is to set up a society based on justice and benevolence ('*adl* and '*ihsan* in the Qur'anic terms). '*Adl* and '*ihsan* are most fundamental human values and any state worth its salt has to strive to establish a society based on these values. But for this no particular form of state is needed. Even an honest monarch can do it. It is for this reason that the holy Qur'an praises prophet-rulers like Da'ud and Sulayman, who were kings, but Allah's Prophet's too. Even Queen Bilquis is praised for her just governance in the Qur'an though she was not a prophet herself.

But the Qur'an is also aware that such just rulers are normally far and few in between. The governance has to be as democratic as possible so that all adults can participate in it. If governance is left to an individual, or a monarch, the power may corrupt him or her as everyone knows absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is for this reason that the Qur'an refers to democratic governance when it says: "And those who respond to their Lord and keep up prayer, and whose affairs are (decided) by mutual consultation, and who spend out of what We have given them" (al-Shura 42:38). Thus the mutual affairs (those pertaining to governance) should be conducted only by mutual consultation which in contemporary political parlance will be construed as democratic governance. Since in those days there was no well defined practice of political democracy, the Qur'an refers to it as '*amruhum shura' baynahum*, i.e. affairs to be conducted through mutual consultation, which is a very meaningful way of hinting at democracy. The Qur'an is thus against totalitarian or monarchical rule.

Here a problem may arise as far as the Shi'ah sects are concerned. They believe in the theory of imamah, i.e. only an Imam from the progeny of the Prophet's son-in-law and his daughter, Fatima, can inherit the Prophet (PBUH). The Shi'ahs, in other words, reject the concept of khilafah, i.e. succession to the Prophet through election by the people. The right to succession is confined only to the members of the Prophet's family and it is available to no one else. It is no doubt the very basis of the Shi'ah tradition and faith (Qadri 275).

But this hardly changes the ethos of governance. The state in Iran is today a democratically elected one. The President of Iran and the Majlis (parliament) are elective in nature. In today's world there is no question of a ruler coming from the Prophet's family. It was a different matter when the controversy

arose immediately after the death of the holy Prophet. A group of people then did feel that Ali, the son-in law of the Prophet, who was rigorously just, who had fought and won many an Islamic battle, who was one of the bravest and most honest people, should have succeeded the Prophet. He was qualified for good governance in more ways than one. Apart from being just, honest, and brave, he was most learned as well. The holy Prophet had described him as gateway to the city of knowledge, Prophet being the city of knowledge himself. He was also greatly confident of his knowledge. He often used to say “saluni qabla tafquduni,” i.e. ask me before you loose me.

Thus even an imam from the Prophet’s family cannot be absolutist and has to base his rule on democratic principles. Thus even the Shi’ah theory of imamah cannot lead to absolutist or purely personal rule. Also, an imam can be infallible in religious matters, in laying down religious rulings. But in all secular and worldly matters he will be bound by democratic structures of governance.

### **Composition of Muslim Society**

Once Islam spread to vast areas of the world outside the confines of Arabia, new ethnic and racial groups were added to its fold. This proved to be both the strength and the weakness of the Islamic society. Its strength lay in its rich diversity, and its weakness resulted from complex problems and group conflicts. The group conflicts greatly intensified even within the limited period of Khulafa’ al-Rashidin, which lasted for slightly less than thirty years.

During this period, a number of groups came into existence. The most powerful group was the tribe of Quraysh, who were *muhajirs* (immigrants) who migrated to Madina along with, or after, the Prophet to avoid persecution in Mecca. They claimed to be the *sabiqun al-awwalun*, i.e. those who responded to the call of Islam earlier than others and also belonged to the tribe of the Prophet. After the death of the Prophet they also came out with the doctrine that the Khilafat be confined to the tribe of Quraysh. However, the Quraysh were divided into several clans of which the clans of Hashim (to which the Prophet himself belonged) and of Banu Umayyah were at loggerheads. Among the Qurayshites, the Hashimites and the Umayyads fought against each other for the leadership of the

nascent Muslim state. Ali and his sons (particularly Hasan and Husain), who were claimants to the leadership, all belonged to the clan of Banu Hashim (al-Dhahjabi 35).

Then there were Ansars—those who belonged to the tribes of Aws and Khazraj of Madina and who had helped the Prophet by swearing allegiance to him, by helping him migrate to Madina, and by supporting him vis-a-vis his powerful opponents (hence Ansars means ‘helpers’). The Ansars also claimed leadership of the state after the death of the Prophet on the basis that they had helped the Prophet and that without their help his mission would not have survived. But the Qurayshites strongly resisted their claim to the Khilafat. Then the leaders of the Ansars proposed a compromise to let one from the Quraysh and one from the Ansars share the leadership but this was also turned down by the Qurayshites, who felt that it would lead to more conflict and confusion.

The third group was of those Muslims who embraced Islam from amongst the conquered non-Arab peoples of Iraqi, Persian, Egyptian, or Syrian origins. The emphasis of Islam on justice and equality of all believers was a great attraction for these non-Arab peoples. In the course of a few years, a large number of non-Arabs, most of them belonging to weaker sections of society, converted to Islam and demanded equal treatment. But despite strong emphasis of Islam on equality of all believers irrespective of their social status, nationality, colour, or race, the ruling classes among Muslims were not prepared to accord equal treatment to them. Most of the Muslims were accepted Muslims only when they were made mawla (affiliate or associate) of a tribe. Kufa and Basra in Iraq, Egypt, Damascus etc. became centres of these non-Arab Muslims. Many of these non-Arab people were those captured in various wars.

As for the first group, the Qurayshites, they wielded power with the second group of Ansars as their co-partners. These groups were contented to a great extent though some sub-groups were not. The Hashimites, for example, were a discontented group among the Qurayshites as the non-Hashimites had captured power. Similarly among the Ansars who were initially the allies of the Quraysh, the younger generation among them felt neglected.

The fact that the second Caliph was assassinated by a discontented non-Arab slave on the dispute about wages to be paid to him, showed the beginning of the dissidence in early Islamic society. It reached its peak during the period of 3rd Caliph Usman when the non-Arab people from Egypt, Kufa and Basra surrounded

his house and murdered him in the presence of his wife when he was reciting the Holy Qur'an. Dr. Taha Husain, in his book, *Al-fitnah al-Kubra (The Great Insurrection)*, has dealt with this problem. This uprising against Usman was a result of deep discontent found among them as they felt completely neglected and found themselves discriminated against.

Islam had tried to usher in a just society based on compassion, sensitivity towards other fellow human beings, equality, and human dignity. However, the well entrenched vested interests, though they pay lip service to these values, in practice sabotage them in various ways and continue to impose their own hegemony. The weaker sections and the downtrodden attracted by the revolutionary thrust of Islam and its sensitivity towards them, felt disillusioned and they revolted. This revolt brought about near anarchy in society and resulted in a civil war in which thousands were killed.

There was yet another group of Bedouins who lived in the desert and resented the hegemony of the urban elite. They considered the Khilafat an urban rule imposed on them. They were not accustomed to submission to any authority. Thus in the Battle of Camel fought between the fourth Caliph Ali and Amir Mu'awiyah, the Bedouins seceded from the army of Ali and raised the slogan *al-hukmu lillah* (Rule of Allah). They adopted extreme postures and caused much bloodshed in the early history of Islam.

Ultimately the Umayyads captured power and Khilafah was converted into monarchy. Maulana Abul A'ala Maududi has thrown detailed light on it in his book, *Khilafat aur Mulukiyyat*. Thus we see that the Islamic society went through great deal of turmoil and bloodshed and could not evolve a universally acceptable form of state. When the Abbasids overthrew Umayyads in the first half of the second century of Islam, there again was a great deal of bloodshed. When the Abbasids captured power, some Umayyads fled to Spain and established their own rule there. Now there were two Caliphs simultaneously in the Islamic world. Earlier, the theory was that there could be only one Caliph or Imam at a time. Now that theory had to be revised in view of the empirical reality and two Caliphs at a time were accepted. But still later, at the end of 2nd century of Islam, the Fatimid Imams established their rule in Egypt and now there were several rulers at a time in the Islamic world.

The Abbasid Caliphs were also reduced to nominal heads of the state as

the Bwayhids and Saljuqs captured power and wielded real authority. They came to be known as Sultans, the real power behind the Abbasid caliphs. The Islamic political theory had to undergo change again. Now, by and large, non-Quraysh were wielding power and hence the theory of Quraysh alone becoming caliph had to be abandoned. Earlier, the Khawarij (Seceders), who were mainly Bedouins and hence non-Qurayshites, had rejected the theory that only a Quraysh could become the caliph.

### **Conclusion**

Thus we see that the political theory of Islam had to undergo frequent changes to accommodate the empirical reality. It is, therefore, not possible to talk of an 'Islamic State' with a sense of finality. It is an extremely difficult task to evolve any *ijma'* (consensus of Muslims) on the issue. Today also, there are several Muslim countries with varied forms of state, from monarchical to dictatorial and from semi-dictatorial to democratic. There are examples of each of these states, however, that call themselves 'Islamic States.'

The forms and structures of state are bound to vary from place to place and time to time. It would be very difficult, for example, to create a democratic state in a feudal society. Thus the Qur'an does not give much importance to the form of state but greatly emphasises the nature of society. While the state is contingent, the society based on values like justice, equality, compassion, and human dignity is a necessity in Islam. And needless to say, in our time it is only a democratic state with the widest possible power-sharing arrangement that can guarantee such a society.

Also, as per the Qur'anic teachings, the Islamic state should guarantee equal rights to all ethnic, racial, cultural, tribal, and religious groups. The Qur'an considers racial, national, tribal, and linguistic differences signs of Allah and indicative of identity (see 30:22). It also accepts the right of other religious communities to follow their own religion and it also accords equal status to men and women (see 33:35 and al-Baqarah al-Ahzab 2:228). The Qur'an accepts plurality in society as the will of Allah (al-Ma'idah 5:48).

Thus, in view of all this, an Islamic state should have following characteristics: 1) It should be absolutely non-discriminatory on the basis of race,

colour, language and nationality; 2) it should guarantee gender equality; 3) it should guarantee equal rights to all religious groups and accept plurality of religion as legitimate and; 4) it should be democratic in nature and its basic premise will be human dignity (al-Isra' 17:70).

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