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Islamic Pacifism: Contexts, Principles, and Dilemmas

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Abstract

Despite increased interest in Islamic pacifism, there are still significant gaps in academic research on this topic, especially regarding the contexts of its emergence, its shared principles and ethical dilemmas. The goal of this article is to chart the rise and evolution of Islamic pacifism throughout various Muslim contexts since the middle of the 20th century. I will also discuss some of the main ethical principles of Islamic pacifism as they relate to modern Muslim ethics and politics, particularly the peaceful settlement of disputes and the recent work on covenants in Islam and peacebuilding. Additionally, I will address some of the dilemmas that Islamic pacifists confront in relation to absolute pacifism, the efficacy of nonviolence, conflict and just peace. This article makes the case that pacifism could be a viable alternative to Islamist politics in the current Middle East conflicts. However, Islamic pacifists also face major skepticism amidst unjust policies.

Keywords: Islamic pacifism; non-violence; ethics of war and peace; covenants in Islam; just peace

1. Introduction

The contribution of pacifism to Islamic ethics has drawn increased attention from academics in recent years (Abu-Nimer 2003; Huda 2010; Halverson 2012; Shadi 2017; Afsaruddin 2020; Cole 2021; Lohlker 2022; Mokrani 2022; Dragovic 2023; Overbeck 2024; Pizzi 2024; Moussa 2024; Abdulaev 2024; Woerner-Powell 2025). The majority of these studies, however, concentrate on lone theologians or intellectuals, especially Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890–1988), Wahiduddin Khan (1925–2021) and Jawdat Sa'īd (1931–2022), tracing their paths as pacifists in light of local conditions. This perspective creates the perception that Muslim pacifist intellectuals and activists are separate and unrelated to a movement that primarily represents a shift in beliefs and viewpoints. We suggest here to bridge this gap in the literature through identifying the common origins of Islamic pacifists and recognizing the shared ethical values that most pacifists promote as well as the challenges that put limits on their contributions. Even though elements of Islamic pacifism have existed since the early days of Islam, it can now be considered as a distinguishable paradigm with its own hermeneutics, political discourse, and activities. In particular, we will pay close attention to the set of shared beliefs among Islamic pacifists, namely the sanctity of life, redefining jihad as a spiritual conflict, peaceful dispute resolution, and the efforts to bring pacifism and just war theory into harmony.

This article begins with a historical overview of Islamic pacifism through a careful examination of the contexts of emergence that make Islamic pacifism a paradigm and a movement of shared ideas that goes beyond a simple response to Islamist terrorism and US foreign policy in the Middle East. The constitutive variables of this history, whether

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they be early tribal political opposition to Islam, internal Islamic civil wars, colonialism, or Islamist terrorism, suggest that Islamic pacifism emerged not only as a rejection of violence but also as a philosophy of change, a method of resistance, and a political aspiration. This historical overview relies on a textual study that considers the arguments put forward in light of the context of production and diffusion of ideas. The texts in question were authored by some of the most significant figures in Islamic pacifism, as evidenced by their impact on their respective societies (Palestine, India, Syria) and by the critical scholarly studies conducted on their writings. I chose a variety of geographically dispersed figures in order to ensure a fundamental understanding of what Muslim pacifists have in common outside of their particular contexts. I also primarily used the available literature that is available mainly in Arabic, German, French, and English, and I relied on their written works that are devoted to peace or non-violence. Besides a description and contextualisation of their views, I will critically discuss some of the dilemmas Islamic pacifists encounter in their ethical deliberations, including the problem of constitutive violence, conditional vs. absolute pacifism, and the effectiveness of pacifism.

2. Contexts of Emergence

Pacifism was the main attitude endorsed by the early Muslim community in Mecca (610–622) and Medina (622–624). During Muḥammad's mission in Mecca (610–622) and 2 years after his emigration to Medina (in 622), early Muslims followed the method of patience and refrained from violence; many Muslims see these years as the model to be emulated (Taha 1987). Muslims began military action in Medina in 624 (the Battle of Badr) as a retaliation and an attempt to recover the Muslim properties that Quraysh confiscated in Mecca. Asma Afsaruddin, for example, sees these wars between Muḥammad's followers and Quraysh as an exceptional state of affairs brought about by the Arabian tribes' determination to uproot Muslims (Afsaruddin 2020, pp. 99–158). The Quran, according to the Muslim tradition, urged Muslims to carry out jihad and use all available means to defend themselves against the enemy; even so, the Quran also called Muslims to disengage from violence and conclude peace treaties (Sertkaya 2023). Later, depending on the attitude and political affiliations of Muslims, whether aggressive or pacifist, individuals and communities chose to focus, in their interpretation of the Muslim legacy, either on the first pacifist 15 years or on the last warring 8 years of Muḥammad's mission. Both attitudes are inspired by this dual aspect of Muslim heritage and could easily find justification for whatever perspective one adopts. Muslims were also divided by the early caliphate's internal wars (7th–8th centuries), motivated by political and tribal as well as religious factors, and many well-known mystic and traditionalist Muslim leaders decided to distance themselves from society and support a peaceful stance. Nonviolence was also common in many Sufi communities, although some Sufi orders engaged in war (Afsaruddin 2020).

If we were to concentrate on the present era, we could distinguish between two major types of Islamic pacifism: anti-colonial pacifism and post-Islamist pacifism. Given that this article endorses the definition of pacifism as "principled rejection of war and killing", anti-colonial pacifism should be interpreted as the principled rejection of war and the killing of the colonizers or their collaborators while simultaneously confronting and opposing colonization. Therefore, anti-colonial pacifism stands out from the broader concept of pacifism as it opposes colonization without resorting to violence. Post-Islamist pacifism criticizes radical Islamic movements and supports a peaceful, pluralistic, and tolerant social and political model in opposition to the Islamist paradigm. Therefore, what distinguishes Post-Islamist pacifism is that it is a principled rejection of war and killing by Islamist movements, opposing acts of violence committed in the name of Islam, a particular kind of religious extremism and militancy that poses a threat to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In Senegal and India, anti-colonial pacifism took spectacular shapes, giving rise to two Islamic pacifist movements that had a significant and lasting influence in their respective contexts. First, the Senegalese Sufi Amadou Bamba (1853–1927) founded the Mourides movement in 1883, which became the major religious, social and political organization in Senegal (which still shapes politics and society in Senegal to this day), opposing racism and French colonial dominance and adopting nonviolence and service as a pedagogy and way of life (Woerner-Powell 2025, pp. 24–53). In India, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, under the influence of Gandhi, successfully led a pacifist movement against the British Empire, initiating one of the earliest modern Muslim attempts to promote non-violence (Kurtz 2011). Inspired by the Indian experience, Farid Esack carried out nonviolent Muslim action against Apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s, in collaboration with the multifaith United Democratic Front (Cole 2023).

The Syrian Jawdat Sa'īd, who published in the 1960s his first pacifist works criticizing Islamist violence he witnessed in Egypt, deserves credit for laying the grounds for post-Islamist pacifism. Sa'īd established a pacifist school of thought in Syria, which shaped other major Syrian pacifist thinkers such as Muḥammad Ḥabash and Khāliṣ Jalabī. The violence perpetrated by Islamist movements in the Muslim world and the West alarmed other Muslim pacifists with Sufi leanings such as the Mauritanian theologian-jurist 'Abdallāh Bin Bayya, the Moroccan philosopher Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the Gambian American scholar Lamin Sanneh (1942–2019) and the Algerian thinker Mustapha Cherif, who obviously share a legacy with African anti-colonial pacifism in addition to emphasizing post-Islamist ethics of peace and co-existence. In India, post-Islamist pacifism was mainly marked by Gandhi's influence, particularly in the thought of Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), Asghar Ali Engineer (d. 2013) and Wahiduddin Khan (Crow 2000; Halverson 2012).

The Indian experience also had an impact on pacifism in Southeast Asia. That being the case, as shown by the trajectories of Abdurrahman Wahid (1940–2009) in Indonesia and Chaiwat Satha-Anand (1955–2024) in Thailand, local Islamic pacifism in the region has charted its own path, embedded in its specific history and context. As an Islamic scholar and a celebrated leader of Nahdlatul Ulama mass organization, Wahid was a prominent advocate for nonviolence, publishing many writings about changing Indonesia through nonviolent opposition, against the authoritarianism of Suharto and some Islamic organizations that seek change through violence (Wahid 1993). Furthermore, during his tenure as president of Indonesia from October 1999 to July 2000, he implemented a policy of reconciliation with rebels and tolerance towards minorities (Wisdom 2022). In a similar vein, Satha-Anand, an influential Muslim scholar from Thailand, was involved in peacekeeping and reconciliation in the Pattani conflict between the state in Thailand and Muslim rebels (Satha Anand 1992). He has also left many theoretical works on Muslim nonviolent alternatives to terrorism (Hermansen 2017; Satha Anand 2018).

We should not overlook the emergence of a number of pacifist intellectuals among Muslims in the West and among Westerners who converted to Islam. Since the 1990s, American convert Rabia Terri Harris and British convert Karim Douglas Crow have initiated pioneering peace projects and pacifist Muslim discourses in the West (Hermansen 2017). Later, the American philosopher Hajj Muhammad (Gary) Legenhausen also emerged as a distinctive advocate for nonviolence (Legenhausen 2015). Muslims living in the West have also been prominent advocates within Muslim communities, particularly the Algerian Aïda Abida Allouache (in France and Belgium) and the Tunisian Adnane Mokrani (in Italy) who reacted mainly to the Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe in recent years (Abida 2017; Mokrani 2022). In Belgium, Mohamed El Bachiri, a Muslim Belgian writer of Moroccan origin and who lost his wife in the Brussels terrorist attacks of 2016, has been a leading voice of pacifism (El Bachiri 2017). Furthermore, Khaled Bentounès, the

leader of the Sufi brotherhood, the Alawiya, has invested major resources, interfaith initiatives, and discourses to foster an Islamic pacifism in France (Bentounès 2002). In Germany, Bekir Alboğa, a leading German Islamic scholar of Turkish origin and an influential figure in Islam in Germany through the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DİTİB), has been a notable voice of Islamic pacifism (Alboğa 2006) and of Christian-Islamic dialogue (Alboğa et al. 2008). Likewise, Lamya Kaddor, a liberal Muslim German activist and intellectual of Syrian origin, has also been advocating for nonviolence among Muslims in Germany (Kaddor 2007). Muslim pacifists in the West are mostly Muslim activists, leaders of Sufi organizations or intellectuals. Some of them can be academics such as Mokrani, Alboğa or Legenhausen. These academics contribute to cross-fertilize Islamic pacifism within the framework of Western and non-Western theories of peace while also producing historical and philosophical knowledge about pacifism in Islam.

Analyzing Islamic pacifism in a comparative perspective and its numerous emerging contexts is outside the purview of this article, which focuses on mapping Islamic pacifism, its shared principles, and its dilemmas. While some factors are similar across all these contexts, history takes distinct paths, and there are too many variations to take into account here. However, it is helpful for readers who are not familiar with Islam to know that Muslims are diverse in terms of their geographic locations, geopolitical and economic interests, ethnic backgrounds, wealth and urbanization levels, political and social models, education and development, openness and closeness, and secularization and democratization. Each of these elements contributes to the interaction with a given concept such as pacifism. For example, Gandhi's popularity, influence, and success have made pacifism a realistic way to bring about change, justice, and optimism throughout Southeast Asia and India. Thus, several rulers and political leaders, who played key roles in the region embraced pacifism. Non-violence, however, has failed to bring about any change or justice in the Middle East (nor has violence in any case), and as a result it is perceived as a non-viable political strategy. Over the past century, the region has seen a number of civil wars, military coups, terrorism, militias, and successive wars involving both international and local powers. The Involved parties perpetuate the vicious cycle of violence, leaving no room for compromise and aiming to cause the most amount of harm to their adversaries.

3. Concepts

In using the terms of pacifism, nonviolence, quietism and just war pacifism, I largely adhere to the definitions given by Fiala in his article on pacifism in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Thus, pacifism is defined as a "principled rejection of war and killing" (Fiala 2023) while nonviolence is defined as "commitment to avoiding unjustified intentional injury" (Fiala 2023) and quietism is "passivity of meditation or contemplation and withdrawal from political life" (Fiala 2023). Finally, I use the concept of just war pacifism which rejects "modern wars as not fought according to the standards of the just war theory because they make use of aerial bombardment and other means that do not adequately discriminate between combatants and noncombatants"(Fiala 2023).

I also use the phrase "post-Islamist pacifism" to describe a form of pacifism that rejects Islamist presumptions, whether held by mass movements or radical factions, regarding the use of jihad to establish an Islamic state or polity. Post-Islamism, then, is a critique of Islamism in its political purpose, world division, and methods of action. Asef Bayat coined the phrase "post-Islamism" to describe how Islamist leadership might transform into a re-secularized worldview, creating a pious society within a civil nonreligious state and combining secular ideals (rights, freedom, and democracy) with Islam (Bayat 2013, 1996). Thus, one difference between Bayat's term of post-Islamism and the way I use it here should be noted. While Bayat describes post-Islamism as a tendency among Islamists (in Iran and

other Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey and Egypt), I refer to post-Islamism as anti-Islamist, that is, a critical attitude of thinkers who are outside of Islamist movements and who strive to free Islamic thought altogether from Islamist ideologies, much like how post-communist societies left communism behind.

4. Principles

A set of moral precepts is present in most of the published Islamic pacifist literature. This list of principles, however, is not all-inclusive and, at best, represents the most fundamental ideas Islamic pacifists promote. In this section, my work consists in describing these ideas as they appear in the Islamic pacifist literature and grouping the material into five tenets. None of the Islamic pacifists has grouped these ideas into five categories; instead, the principles are scattered across their writings. My task is, thus, to arrange the information according to fundamental principles so that researchers and readers can more easily comprehend the arguments they make.

4.1. The Principle of the Sanctity of Life

A main idea in Islamic pacifism, which it shares with other religions and philosophies, is that all human lives are "sacred and precious, not only Muslim lives" (Abdulaev 2023, p. 66). This principle gives greater value to the sanctity of life and links it to a long history of pacifist tendencies in Islam, promoted by Islamic scriptures, Sufism, and Muslim traditionalism. Thus, several verses in the Qur'an support this principle, as in Qur'an 5:28: "Yet if thou stretchest out thy hand against me, to slay me, I will not stretch out my hand against thee, to slay thee; I fear God, the Lord of all Being" (Arberry 1996, p. 132) and Qur'an 5:32: "Therefore We prescribed for the Children of Israel that whoso slays a soul not to retaliate for a soul slain, nor for corruption done in the land, shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whoso gives life to a soul, shall be as if he has given life to mankind altogether. Our Messengers have already come to them with the clear signs; then many of them thereafter commit excesses in the earth) (Arberry 1996, p. 133).

Several Muslim pacifists have emphasized human dignity, human rights, or human fraternity in relation to the sanctity of life principle. The American-Palestinian activist and scholar Mohammed Abu-Nimer upholds the sanctity of human life as a tenet of Islamic peacebuilding perspective, strengthening the defense of human rights and dignity and advancing equality for all individuals, irrespective of their color, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. He contends that resources should be allocated to prevent violence and preserve human life since it is precious and has to be preserved (Abu-Nimer 2003, pp. 59–60). Similar views have been expressed by the Syrian Jawdat Sa'īd who called to endorse the doctrine of the Son of Adam (Abel) in rejecting violence against adversaries (Sa'īd 1993, pp. 93–94) and the Afghan Mohammad Hashim Kamali who argues that peace can be achieved only through inclusivity and universalism (Kamali 2016, p. 161).

Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the Moroccan Sufi thinker, begins his argument against violence by claiming that tyranny has taken control of man (*ḥubb al-tasalluṭ*); that is why he is prone to violence despite many religions, including Islam, urging people to restrain their violent tendencies. Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, thus, has a stronger affinity with Hobbes's perception of man than with Rousseau's or Plato's; he uses the Biblical story of Cain and Abel (also quoted in the Quran) to highlight how deeply ingrained violence is in human nature. Man is so gripped by tyranny that he could justify violence with his own religion (Ṭāhā 2017, pp. 10–11). According to him, all forms of violence are unacceptable because they undermine human dignity and are a result of immorality and evil (though the state's use of force is a different kind of "violence" because it is governed by the law). While force regulated by the law can save lives, violence only kills people. He considers the Quranic

law of *qiṣāṣ* (retaliation or lex talionis) as valid today because it is a force applied by the law rather than mere violence (Ṭāhā 2017, p. 37).

The sacredness of human life has been a privileged subject of interreligious discussion and is, in fact, one of the tenets upon which interreligious understanding and cooperation can be established on firm grounds (Rane 2024). In the last thirty years or so, numerous meetings and discourses between the Vatican and Islamic institutions focused on human dignity. Additionally, the recent wave of terrorist assaults in Europe has led Christians and Muslims to develop common initiatives about the value of human life (Piwko 2025; Kulska and Solarz 2025). In the aftermath of every Islamist terrorist attack, whether in the West or the Muslim world, most Muslims and Christians denounce terrorism in the name of the sanctity of life. There is definitely an overlap between Christianity and Islam on this principle in terms of religious-ethical discourse (Demiri et al. 2022). Notwithstanding extremism, the belief that life is sacred is a universal value that Muslims and Christians respect in general.

In his 2011 book *Islamic Pacifism: Global Muslims in the Post-Osama Era*, American-Pakistani Muslim author and lawyer Arsalan Iftikhar makes the case that, although the Muslim tradition has been pacifist in its foundations, based on the concept of the sacredness of life, the image of Muslims as advocates of violence has been skewed by Islamist terrorism in the West and the Muslim world since 9/11 as well as by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Iftikhar 2011, pp. 89–196). To put it differently, violent Islamist groups and militias have transgressed the sanctity of life, a fundamental principle of Islamic ethics (and the foundation of humanism). As a result, they can no longer claim Islamic legitimacy to assert their authority over Muslims. Meanwhile, imperialist wars in the Middle East foster and give pretexts to these radical organizations to claim to act in the name of resistance or the defense of Muslims.

4.2. Peaceful Settlement of Disputes

Throughout medieval times, Muslim societies have developed effective mechanisms of consensual justice, including arbitration (*taḥkīm*), reconciliation (*ṣulḥ*), intercession (*shafā'a*) and various forms of oaths and mediation (Tillier 2016). In modern times, Muslim pacifists have drawn considerably on this legacy. For instance, in his text "Islamic pacifism", Wahiduddin Khan asserts that:

> We live in the age of weapons of mass destruction. In this age, no war can be fought in which non-combatants are not killed. This, therefore, means that according to Islam, today war is not possible at all. So, at the internal level, the Prophet has declared political revolt unlawful and stressed that Muslims should focus only on constructive activities. On the external front, he allowed only for a defensive war in the face of clear aggression. He specified that even in this case, it is not permissible to kill non-combatants. Since in today's age of weapons of mass destruction it is not possible that non-combatants will not be killed during a war, there is only one option for Muslims now—and that is peaceful settlement of disputes. The option of war has ended. (Khan 2015a, p. 12)

Like many other Muslim modern thinkers, Khan perceives the classical Muslim ethics of war and peace as contingent pacifism, permitting defensive warfare as a last resort. That is, Muslims fought back armed aggressors, not civilians, engaging in war as a limited armed response. Khan emphasizes how the Prophet Muḥammad conducted peaceful missionary activities in Mecca, signed the Ḥudaybiyya no-war covenant with Quraysh, and engaged in numerous negotiations with his adversaries in Arabia. Khan perceives the current Islamist jihad as terrorism and blames al-Qaida and its commander, Osama Bin Laden, for pursuing a pointless route of militancy that yields no results and is therefore

not a viable option for Muslims to pursue as Islamist violence only causes more evil and more damage (Khan 2015a, p. 12).

Khan combines deontological and consequentialist forms of pacifism. He uses the Muslim tradition, which generally prohibits violence, particularly against non-combatants. At the same time, he highlights the futility of using violence to achieve goals because Islamist terrorism has just made things more violent and expanded the scope of hostilities. At first glance, deontological and consequential arguments might appear to be at odds; Khan, however, believes that peace is good and the means of achieving it should also be good. He does not support war in any case and thus does not adhere to Augustine's just war theory (Fiala 2023). However, he shares with Augustine the belief that peace is the *summum bonum* based on the Quran (4: 128), which states that "*wa-l-ṣulḥ khayr*" (reconciliation is best), which encourages resolving conflicts amicably, demonstrating the significance of the nonviolent approach in Islam (Khan 2015a, p. 14).

In Khan's view, individuals and communities have disagreed and will continue to do so. Disputes, however, ought to be controlled rather than fought as using violence will not fix the issues at stake; instead, it will only make things worse, and the cycle of violence will lead to further escalation (Khan 2015a, p. 15). In order to resolve disputes, a community should carefully engage in the resolution process and avoid anything that could provide others with a reason or chance to use violence. This implies that Muslims themselves should refrain from using violence as well (Khan 2015a, p. 16). When deciding on a peaceful course of action, Khan maintains that all depends on the circumstances; he calls for wise judgment, an open mind, patience, negotiation, positive planning, communication, preaching, promoting education and running businesses (Khan 2015a, p. 18).

Beyond Khan, Abu-Nimer has also highlighted reconciliation and peaceful resolution of the conflicts as milestones of peacebuilding. In his view, an agreement on what makes a just resolution of the conflict at hand must be the foundation for reconciliation (Abu-Nimer 2001b, p. ix). Abu-Nimer organized several Arab-Jewish meetings in the 1990s in order to foster communication, education for peace, and democracy between Arabs and Jews in Israel (Abu-Nimer 1999). He also organized interreligious gatherings (between members of 11 different religious groups) to facilitate peacebuilding and conflict resolution between 1993 and 1999 (Abu-Nimer 2001a). Additionally, he created and implemented models of dispute resolution procedures between Christians and Druze in an Arab town in Israel (mediated by Muslims) and in an ethnic dispute in Cleveland, Ohio (Abu-Nimer 1996).

Pacifism as mutual acknowledgment, reconciliation, and conflict resolution can also be observed in the growing body of work on covenants in Islam. Morrow argues that, in contrast to the practices of subsequent Muslim empires, the Prophet's covenants with Christians portray Islam as a religion of peace that aims to promote social, political, and spiritual harmony and is always receptive to dialogue (Morrow 2013, p. 371). Zein and El-Wakil demonstrate instances of peaceful coexistence in the Prophet's covenants with the Monks of Mount Sinai, the Christians of Najrān, the Samaritans, the Jews, and the Magi (Zein and El-Wakil 2022). Rane maintains that the Qur'ān and Sunnah's covenants established human security and peaceful coexistence as the normative basis of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. As for the use of military force, it is allowed in self-defense in reaction to armed aggression and treaty violations that endanger peace and security, even though Islamic covenants uphold the concept of nonviolence (Rane 2024). More recently, Rane and Zein reclaimed the importance of covenant (*ʿahd* and *mīthāq*) in Islam and its necessity for maintaining justice, fostering trust, assuring accountability, and preserving peace and security, highlighting that covenants are not incidental but rather fundamental to Islam's theological and ethical framework as they influenced Muslim awareness, diplomacy, and interreligious relations (Rane and Zein 2025).

4.3. Islamic Just War Pacifism

Many Muslim thinkers such as Chaiwat Satha-Anand and Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen support an Islamic just war pacifism. The latter aims to refrain from causing harm and find alternatives to violence and conflict given that, in the current situation, war cannot be waged in a way that complies with religious precepts. Muslims are encouraged to explore alternatives to pursue just peace since the destructive force of modern warfare technology makes it impossible to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Furthermore, modern warfare does not meet the requirements for just war in Islam. Islamic just war pacifism does not mean that fighting wars is never acceptable. While there is room for defensive military actions, it is preferable to avoid them when their aims might be met by other means because the effects of this warfare on the non-combatants could be devastating. Islamic just war pacifism rejects the traditional Islamic doctrine of jihad, which holds that offensive and defensive wars are to be waged in fighting against injustices (committed against Muslims) both inside and outside the community's borders. Still, injustice should be opposed, but mostly peacefully. Muslims are urged to combat injustice without resorting to violence, through the promotion of forgiveness, speaking up, protest, disobedience and discouraging pursuing vengeance or destruction (Satha Anand 2001, p. 204; Legenhausen 2015, p. 36).

The idea of Islamic just war pacifism brings pacifism and just war theory together. Although it agrees with pacifism that all wars are destructive and should be avoided, it prefers conditional pacifism because it acknowledges that defensive wars may be justified in some situations of survival. However, the idea that war ought to be waged for just causes is not taken for granted either. Islamic just war pacifism endorses a practical position by stating that no wars should be waged, not even defensive ones, if they do significant harm to the population. What seems to lie behind this principle is the Islamic legal rule of avoiding harm (*lā ḍarar wa-lā-ḍirār*/*There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm*) which takes precedence over all other regulations and determines whether Muslims should engage in combat or not.

4.4. Jihad as Spiritual Struggle

In the Muslim tradition, jihad is both a spiritual struggle and combat in the name of God, and these two meanings were interrelated in Medieval Islamdom, and did not exclude each other. In later medieval Islam, some esoteric Muslims tended to marginalize jihad as combat and celebrate jihad of the heart (against one's ego). This led to the making of the tradition known as the greater jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*), spiritual struggle, which appeared in the 11th century (Renard 2007; Cook 2005, pp. 32–44). However, Muslim pacifists such as Asma Afsaruddin (a Bengali-American Muslim scholar) highlight the significance of peaceful jihad in early Islam as an interior struggle against one's wrongdoings; she argues that spiritual struggle was marginalized by the majority of jurists and theologians, and by Muslim empires, in favour of military jihad for obvious political reasons. In the Quran itself, war is a last resort to defending the community against aggression, and, thus, it is an exceptional state of affairs. She also contends that peace, *salām* (God as peace, and Islam as finding peace in submission to God), patience (*ṣabr*), and reconciliation (*ṣulḥ*) are foundational for inter-personal and inter-communal relations of Muslim ethics throughout the history of medieval Islam. She joins other pacifist Muslim thinkers in downplaying the military jihad in favour of a spiritual jihad as forbearance, justice, and charity towards others (Afsaruddin 2020, pp. 99–158). For the Indian thinker Wahiduddin Khan, jihad is striving to the best of one's efforts and an ideological battle to win over people's hearts and minds (Khan 1984, p. 6). Moreover, jihad is but another term for nonviolent or

peaceful activism, while the notion of *qitāl* is a defensive battle that involves violent action practiced by early Muslims (Khan 1984, p. 6).

As for the Syrian Jawdat Sa'īd, he perceives jihad as war for a just society and believes it should be preceded by persuasion in a peaceful society. That is, only an elected government can wage jihad and only to restore or maintain justice. He claims early Muslims did not use violence for the sake of political goals. They endorsed the Qur'anic view of peace and violence that consists of fighting unjust violence with justice. Sa'īd supports his claim by citing Muḥammad's refusal to use violence in the Meccan period as he wanted to transmit a peaceful message by peaceful means as well as his refusal to use violence during his triumph in Mecca; Sa'īd interprets the Medinan prophetic jihad as a tool to establish justice in the Muslim city (Sa'id 2001, pp. 136–44).

4.5. Nonviolence and Change

Muslim pacifists advocate nonviolence as transformative ethics, intended to be a vehicle for both individual and group change. Thus, pacifism is not a defeatist attitude that implies a passive acceptance of reality or quietism. Once violence is eliminated from the action plan, there are alternative ways to advance one's rights and change reality. In Wahiduddin Khan's view, one can only conduct constructive plans with non-violence and the kind of revolution that allows for non-violent, constructive and progressive changes is the most ideal course of action (Khan 2002, p. 50). He also makes use of the pragmatic argument, which holds that only in a state of peace can a person or a country realize that there are countless opportunities, and that adversity may be transformed into opportunity (Khan 2001, pp. 8–10). In nature, Khan argues, peace is the accepted approach as it ends hostility and even transforms it into friendship (Khan 2003, p. 34).

In his *Mumārast al-taghyīr li-inqādh al-muslimīn*, the Iraqi Shiite pacifist scholar Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Shīrāzī (1928–2001) sees change as necessary to save Muslims today (al-Shīrāzī 2009). He opposes dictatorship and urges change to be the aim, even if he believes that everyone has the right to live in peace and emphasizes the value of human life and blood (al-Shīrāzī 2009, p. 179). The tools he suggests for change are political awareness, spiritual education, patience, focus of energies and competencies, enthusiasm, strategy, and confrontation in the proper manner (avoid direct and frontal confrontation, avoid violence and suicide, look for weaknesses, use deception, avoid provocation, and use the media) (al-Shīrāzī 2009, pp. 102–11). Al-Shīrāzī believes that ultimately Muslims should establish an Islamic state that would govern them all (al-Shīrāzī 2009, p. 9). In his view, an Islamic state should be achieved through a social movement that mimics military strategies without resorting to violence (al-Shīrāzī 2009, p. 109). This standpoint on Islamic governance and the strategy to obtain it are very different from the projects of other pacifists such as Khan and Sa'īd who call to a post-Islamist society, democratic, free and non-religious. Moreover, both of them link contemporary Islamist movements to failure, violence, and devastation.

As for the Syrian Khāliṣ Jalabī, he envisions change as a mental-cultural process and an act within the realm of the possible. He asserts that mankind is a slow, cumulative result of conscious efforts that were formed across numerous units of time. For example, the Battle of Badr (opposing early Muslims and their polytheist opponents of the Quraysh tribe in 624), which the Qur'an called the Criterion, *al-furqān*, was a manifestation of possibilities that had previously been formed, and not an achievement that suddenly came to the surface (Jalabī 1997, p. 36). He adds that society is a huge number of individuals organized within a network of relationships, and the gradual change in individuals will ultimately lead to a change in society. This does not require changing all individuals, as it is neither required nor possible, but rather changing the decisive quantity (or critical mass),

and upon reaching the change in the critical mass, the social current begins to take shape (Jalabī 1997, p. 36). He concludes that human conflict is usually two-sided, and the right attitude is to train oneself in a useful way to bring thoughts under control. For blaming the others is—indirectly—an invitation to relieve oneself from responsibility, self-criticism and the fatigue of self-correction; it is an attitude of disabling the law of effort while we should be changing our souls which is the beginning of the mechanical, psychological, and social lever of global change (Jalabī 1997, p. 37). He argues that the foundation of social transformation is a change in the soul, which is the premise of a nonviolent, peaceful approach to social change. Jalabī recommends several nonviolent tools of change, including acknowledging the other, addressing violence with nonviolence, engaging in discourse, transforming the soul first, establishing a sound culture, and fostering freedom of thought (Jalabī 1998).

5. Dilemmas

In the current international affairs, which are governed by realism and the violence of the powerful, a number of dilemmas challenge Muslim pacifists. Perhaps the most difficult dilemma that Muslim pacifists need to address is advocating for nonviolence in a violent world. These pacifists encounter challenges, by no means specific to Muslims, that originate in a power-driven reality. In other words, the complexity of social and political structures predicated on power, hegemony and the pursuit of selfish interests creates obstacles for Islamic pacifism rather than Islamic pacifism falling into or creating its own dilemmas. Every thought and system of ideas are evaluated based on how well they respond to, adjust to, and overcome the obstacles presented by reality.

Before elaborating on these dilemmas, we should answer the question whether Islamic pacifism is compatible (or not) with non-Islamic models of peace, social peace and international relations in general. Islamic pacifism is compatible with various peace philosophies in many parts of the world insofar as its principles (the sanctity of life, peaceful dispute resolution, just war pacifism, spiritual struggle, and peaceful change) are shared by all world religions and most ethical systems. Furthermore, Islamic pacifism often fits within the UN statements and decisions as well as international law. In this regard, the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration, a document signed by over 250 Muslim scholars, heads of state, and leaders to protect the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries (Aziz and Suhaib 2023) and the 2019 Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, a joint statement signed by Pope Francis of the Catholic Church and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar are two recent illustrations of this compatibility (Kulska and Solarz 2025).

In this section on dilemmas, I will discuss the limits imposed by reality on Islamic pacifism as well as the question of compatibility. I proceed by exploring a particular conundrum in relation to Western theories of peace, and in the context of geopolitics and political conflicts, particularly in the Middle East.

5.1. Pacifism and Constitutive Violence

Violence can take various forms, some of which are sudden and obvious, while others are latent and constitutive of the system. Onur Günay, the Turkish anthropologist, addresses a set of criticisms to pacifism, including his claims that being against all forms of violence is a naïve attitude and that non-violence ignores the state's intrinsic violence. He posits that sovereign authority ignores the continuity of violence that makes up nation-states, suppresses or assimilates the other (ethnic or religious); thus, subordination of minorities contradicts political subjectivities. This process normalizes the state's use of violence as the basis for legitimacy, politics, and the law (Günay 2013, p. 181). Although

Günay refers mainly to the situation of the Kurds in Turkey, his criticism is relevant to other instances where states monopolize violence in favor of some groups while suppressing others. Thus, Muslim pacifists need to face the problem of ongoing or constitutive violence by law enforcement and state institutions in Muslim societies.

However, none of the Islamic pacifists I examine here call to submit to regulated state violence. Through a variety of civil and political tools at their disposal, they promote nonviolent resistance to the state's injustice. For example, the Syrian pacifist thinker Muḥammad Ḥabash, while he opposes Islamist terrorism, urges people to fight for freedom and democracy via a fierce resistance that respects human freedom and dignity and grants people the gift of free existence (Ḥabash 2023, p. 6). He also supports the human right to oppose oppression, injustice, haughtiness, and occupation (Ḥabash 2023, p. 51). Similarly, Jawdat Sa'īd in Syria, Abdul Ghaffar Khan in India, and Amadou Bamba in Senegal all engaged in nonviolent resistance to state violence by colonial or local states. The idea that Islamic pacifism is defeatist and that it advocates accepting de facto political circumstances as they are, with or without dissent or protest, is untrue and many Muslim pacifists were dissidents or treated as such by colonial or authoritarian regimes, and some of them were executed such as Maḥmūd Muḥammad Ṭāhā (1909–1985) in Sudan who was officially condemned for "heresy, opposing the application of Islamic law, disturbing public security, provoking opposition against the government, and re-establishing a banned political party"(Halverson 2012, pp. 79–90; Wright 1985, p. 203).

5.2. Conditional vs. Absolute Pacifism

As discussed above, there are still Muslim pacifists who support a limited use of violence in defensive wars. This enables us to differentiate between conditional or situational pacifism and absolute Islamic pacifism (Fiala 2023). In India, Wahiduddin Khan could be considered an absolute pacifist as he believes that Muslims should never fight back through violence (and thus avoid confrontation and protest, although not the political rights guaranteed by law). Most Muslim pacifists in the Middle East are rather contingent pacifists. Although they endorse non-violence in general, they exceptionally allow defensive wars depending on the context and the cause at stake. For example, the Syrian thinker Jawdat Sa'īd contends that a just society has the right to end aggression and the right to self-defense to protect itself from those who wish to bring back lawlessness and a jungle-style society; he argues that the Qur'an allowed this kind of combat so that the members of a just society could fight back.

As noted by the Tunisian thinker Adnane Mokrani, just war or defensive war is a prevailing position in the Muslim world and beyond, and one that is difficult to overcome easily (Mokrani 2022, p. 91). A sense of realism, so to speak, makes many Muslim pacifists endorse a contingent pacifism in the middle way between what they see as two extreme positions: absolute pacifism and the theory of preventive and offensive warfare, promoted by radical Islamists. However, Mokrani hopes that "the awareness of nonviolence as a fundamental solution to the tragedies of war, killings, and displacements has begun to crystallize and present itself as an alternative and a new horizon" (Mokrani 2022, p. 92).

5.3. Pacifism Does Not Stop Aggression

Over the past years, a number of nonviolent movements have sought to challenge authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. The most well-known were the Chabab of Daraya in Syria in 2011 and the Silmiya movement in Sudan in 2019 (Awad 2022). None of these movements, however, has been successful. Syrian rebels were able to oust the Assad dictatorship only by force in 2024, under the leadership of the Islamist militia Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, while the population of Daraya was massacred by Al-Assad regime in 2012

(Donati 2013). As for Sudan, since 2023 it has been going through a major civil war, ignited by rival military factions. This raises the question of whether pacifism can effectively confront authoritarian regimes. The same is true with foreign military invasions or occupations. Sharp and Jahanbegloo have argued that as a result of continued, illogical belief in the efficacy of violence, the question of the scope and usefulness of nonviolent struggle is recurrent (Sharp and Jahanbegloo 2013, p. 224).

It is true that the pacifist revolutionary groups in Syria and Sudan did not seize power from the authoritarian regimes. They did, however, lessen the impact of violence and possibly lessened the harm done to civilians. They also contributed to undermining the legitimacy of these regimes. Pacifism fosters a mature political culture that provides an escape from nihilist violence and thus should not be measured in terms of immediate results. In concern to foreign invasions and occupation, civil disobedience has been proven effective in a number of circumstances, the most well-known of which are Gandhi's India and Mandela's anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. In the same vein, Jawdat Sa'īd frequently urged his followers to take a cue from Japan's post-World War II experience, which was to deal with American hegemony via economic growth, democracy, and science rather than via passion and violence, advocating for peaceful resistance to occupation and authoritarianism in contemporary Muslim societies (Sa'id 2001, pp. 136–44).

To better understand how violence restricts the potential of pacifism and how Islamic pacifism responds to a particular conflict, let us focus on the Syrian case. In Syria, the Baath party (Arab nationalist-socialist) has been imposing authoritarian and oppressive state brutality on the Syrian people from the 1963 coup d'etat until it fell in 2024. From within the party, Hafiz al-Assad came to power in 1970 and adopted a pro-Alawite stance which led to Sunni protests in the 1980s; they were mercilessly put down. After assuming power in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad immediately suppressed the Damascus Spring 2000–2001, which was a nonviolent and secular call for democracy. When the Arab Spring sparked protests in 2011, calling for change throughout the Arab world, including in Syria, Bashar al-Assad rejected nonviolent calls for reform, causing a civil war that destroyed Syria and ultimately his own regime.

In his *Tanbīh al-marāji' 'alā ta'ṣīl fiqh al-wāqi'* (published in 2014 in the heat of the Arab Spring), 'Abdallāh Bin Bayyah, the Muslim pacifist who was most opposed to the Arab Spring, states that "it is not permissible to expose oneself to death or physical harm. We said that people going out into the squares is for the purpose of enjoining good and forbidding evil. So, is it permissible for a mufti to issue a fatwa permitting them to go out in demonstrations, knowing the possibility of their lives being lost or their injuries occurring during the demonstrations, without the mufti bearing any sin or committing any wrongdoing?" (Bin Bayyah 2014, p. 243). He adds that the great challenge facing scholars, intellectual elites, and party leaders is "how to find a way to eliminate injustice without the oppressed becoming, legally and rationally, an oppressor of themselves, resorting to methods that harm them, exacerbate the injustice, multiply suffering, and inflict deep wounds on the community" (Bin Bayyah 2014, p. 243). He criticized Muslim jurists "who joined the revolutions amidst escalation, mostly to condemn the oppressor, but without addressing the plight of the oppressed or healing the wounded. He may even add to their suffering, urging them down an endless path of bloodshed. Scholars used to forbid the general public from carrying weapons, limiting themselves to advising the authorities on the proper application of Islamic jurisprudence through preaching, and instructing the general public to disapprove in their hearts" (Bin Bayyah 2014, pp. 244–45). In Bin Bayyah's understanding, the deaths and property losses that accompanied the Arab Spring were too great a cost for the little that was accomplished, and as such, they should be considered as harm rather than benefits for the community's good. He disagreed with Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and his

group of pro-Islamist jurists and the revolutionaries, issuing conciliatory and moderating views on reform and attitudes towards the ruling regimes. He was particularly critical of the violence that accompanied the uprisings, moving to the United Arab Emirates, where he established the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (known now as the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace) in 2014. In reaction to the enormous violence and destruction that were sweeping through the Middle East, some of which were committed by Islamist movements, Bin Bayyah chose gradual reform rather than revolution (al-Azami 2019; Warren 2021).

5.4. Just Peace

In the current global debates on "just peace," a key issue (among others) in relation to what peace means and under what conditions it ought to be sustained, religiously grounded pacifist positions could be significant. In this regard, Philpott proposed a concept of just peace ethically grounded in the Abrahamic religions and centered on the practice of forgiveness, more comprehensive than the liberal peace building offered by the United Nations (Philpott 2012). In principle, the references to Abraham and forgiveness resonate with Islamic pacifism. Stassen argues that rather than justifying and defending the use of force and armed conflict, Christians should be dedicated to a more pro-active and politically involved type of "just peace-making" that would eliminate the necessity for war (Stassen 1992). This call speaks to many Muslims (Barak 2023) and Christians (Ujházi 2024). However, a minority of Muslims still condones acts of violence carried out in the name of Islam or Muslim causes, which has prompted many young people to participate in what is known as global jihad (from Afghanistan in 1979 to ISIS in recent years). As we have seen, the majority of Islamic pacifists I study here support nonviolent forms of protest and struggle for just peace.

According to Kaldor, a system of just peace needs military force under the command of capable authorities, and states are still the only authorities with the authority to enforce law. However, this use of force should be restricted by international laws and norms. The purpose of military forces is not to wage war against other states, but to support international security and the implementation of a worldwide system that upholds human rights. States would need to have the UN's approval or meet a specific set of internationally accepted rules before they could lawfully deploy armed force (Kaldor 2007). Sa'īd and Khan, among others, also believe that only the state, as a legitimate authority, can use force to protect law and society. However, when it comes to foreign interventions by typically imperialist powers, the validity of international law has been discarded in international relations. Realpolitik comes to justify the results of wars, and sheer power becomes the standard for promoting interests in international politics. Perhaps the weakest aspect of Islamic pacifism and pacifism in general is the fact that peace in international relations is at the mercy of violence in the absence of international law and legitimate force to support it. Businesses and governments decide in offices to fight wars in Africa and the Middle East (typically for economic reasons) while ethics, human rights, and international security are irrelevant.

Muslim pacifists may resonate and/or endorse different ideas about what constitutes just peace. The space available here does not allow us to discuss various Muslim interpretations of just peace since the goal at hand is to identify the main dilemmas facing Islamic pacifism. However, in the interest of illustration, it is sufficient to elaborate on Wahiduddin Khan's position on this subject. In 2001, Khan published his *Manifesto of Peace*, in which he decouples justice and peace because, in his opinion, justice cannot be achieved by peace alone. In other words, peace does not always entail justice. In his perspective, what peace does is provide opportunity and produce favorable circumstances that allow people

to pursue justice and other beneficial goals; peace is always preferable for its own sake (Khan 2001, pp. 3–4). In his book *The Age of Peace: Peace is the Only Culture for both Man and the Universe* (2015), Khan makes the case that peace is the normal state that enables people and civilizations to reach their full potential (Khan 2015b, p. 13). To believe that pursuing justice may lead to peace would be a mistake since peace is not desirable for the sake of justice; it is desirable for the sake of establishing normalcy (Khan 2015b, p. 17). In his *The Concept of Jihad in Islam: The Peaceful Ideological Struggle in the Path of God*, he maintains that if peace is established unilaterally for the sake of peace, numerous opportunities can arise, which, when availed of peacefully, can lead to justice. Individuals or groups can establish justice only when they recognize available opportunities and wisely approach them (Khan 2022, p. 33).

The decoupling of peace and justice requires some additional critical engagement. In fact, Khan believes that a "just peace" is not something that should be pursued and that justice is not a condition for peace. This leads to a very specific interpretation of peace that some might see as a call to "obnoxious peace" that Martin Luther King so harshly denounced as "negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight" (Malone-France 2011, p. 255). Khan seems to view justice and peace as absolute, while in most situations, they need to be contextualized and even closely linked. For him, any kind of peace is preferable to any bloody fight for justice and freedom. He does not appear to accept occupation and oppression though; instead, he advocates non-violent forms of expression and contests negative peace, in which the victim passively consents to oppression in return for peace. Often, durable peace can only be achieved by addressing the underlying causes of the conflict that first sparked the violence and by achieving some form of reparative justice for the victims. Thus, Khan would agree with King that peace should guarantee freedom and dignity to all people and be a lasting peace. The latter is not acceptance of one side's defeat but removal of the resentment of one side or both sides. Otherwise, it will quickly come to an end and only be a pause in war. Peace builds on reconciliation, which can take place if some sort of justice is achieved. Accepting peace for peace does not entail validating injustice but entering into a process that guarantees some conditions that eventually lead to justice.

6. Conclusions

This article reviews the development of Islamic pacifism throughout South Asia and the Arab world since the 20th century, distinguishing between anti-colonial and post-Islamist pacifism, and linking each to its own context of emergence. It also discussed some of the core moral precepts of Islamic pacifism such as the sanctity of life and the peaceful settlement of disputes and how they apply to contemporary Muslim politics and ethics. I also briefly examined some of the dilemmas that Islamic pacifists confront, especially absolute vs. conditional pacifism, and the effectiveness of non-violence in the current system of international relations. In particular, I explored how pacifism is a feasible alternative to Islamist politics. However, injustice in the Middle East, committed by authoritarian regimes or foreign occupation, greatly limits the impact Islamic pacifism could have on the Middle East conflicts.

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