



# PALESTINE CHARTING A PEACEFUL COURSE

In Light of Quranic Guidance

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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## ISSUE OF PALESTINE: A BACKGROUND

The present history of Palestine begins in 1948 in the days of the British Empire when Palestine was divided under the terms of the Balfour Declaration. According to this division, less than half of the land of Palestine was given for settlement to the Jews of the Diaspora, and more than half was given to the Arabs who inhabited that land.

The Jews were given this right between the First and Second World Wars under the limited quota system. The expansion of Israel, which took place later on, was not the result of the Balfour Declaration but was the outcome of the wrong policy followed by the Arabs.

For instance, the unilateral termination of the lease of the Suez Company in 1956, which in any case was going to expire in 1968, according to the pact, naturally had grave consequences. The selling of land to the Jews by the Palestinian Arabs at high prices had similar results.

Who are the Jews or Israelis? They are the descendants of the Israelites, the progeny of Prophet Jacob, and the grandsons of Prophet Abraham. More specifically, today's

Jews are the descendants of Juda, the fourth son of Prophet Jacob (also known as Israel, which in Hebrew means ‘God’s servant’).

The history of Abraham goes back four thousand years. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael, the elder, was the son of Hagar, and Isaac, the younger, was the son of Sara. By the command of God, Abraham settled Ishmael in Arabia and Isaac in Palestine. Isaac had a son called Jacob. He was also called Israel, the progenitor of the Children of Israel. Thus, Palestine came to be the homeland of the Israelites, just as Arabia came to be the homeland of the Ishmaelites.

As the Jewish religion is in direct line with its ancestors, Isaac and Jacob, the common land of all Jews, regardless of which part of the world they inhabit, is Palestine. The homeland of the Ishmaelites was always and still is Arabia. Both were settled in these lands by the command of God.

The ancient times were marked by intolerance in religious matters, which meant that the Jews had to face unpleasant experiences repeatedly. Over the centuries, wave after wave of them left Palestine, their homeland, in large numbers to go into exile. It is this spread of Jews living outside Palestine which is called the Diaspora. It was under the Balfour Declaration that it was decided

that the Jews who were living in the Diaspora would return to Palestine.

After 1948, when a number of these Jews who were living in different countries came to Palestine, the Arabs demonstrated a strong adverse reaction to them. The greatest organization of Arabs, Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn (Muslim Brotherhood), was formed due to these hostile feelings for the Jews. At that time, the slogan of the Arab leaders was 'We will drive the Jews into the sea.'

The settlement was strenuously opposed by Arab and non-Arab Muslim leaders alike, to the point where the entire Muslim world had turned against the Jews. All kinds of violence, including suicide bombing, were held to be lawful against them. But all these activities targeting the Jews proved to be counterproductive.

Muslims and Jews both have equally incurred the loss resulting from violent activities. In such cases, the Quran states, 'If you have suffered a wound, they too have suffered a similar wound. We bring these days to men by turns' (3:140). In other words, according to the divine scheme of things, Allah himself gives every nation political power by turns to test them.

## THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

This anti-Jewish policy followed by the Arab and non-Arab Muslims went against Islamic teachings. Under the Balfour Declaration, the division of Palestine was intended to facilitate the return of the Jews in the Diaspora to their homeland, which is clearly in accordance with the teachings of the Quran. According to the Quran, the Jews in the time of Prophet Moses were directed by God:

‘O my people! Enter the holy land which God has assigned to you.’ (5:21)

Who were the Jews of those times? They were those who were living in the Sinai desert in the Diaspora. The ‘Holy Land’ in this verse refers to Palestine. This verse was addressed to Prophet Moses’ contemporaries, the Jews living outside Palestine. The words of the Quran, ‘which God has assigned to you,’ mean that this return to Palestine was to be precisely by the law of nature. According to this law, any individual or group living in exile has the right to return to their original homeland.

Abraham had settled one branch of his family in Palestine. Joseph, Jacob’s son, was also born into this family. Destined



by circumstances to reach Egypt, he was ultimately given a high post in the country's government by the reigning king (one of the Hiksos dynasty), impressed by his capabilities.

After his position was consolidated in Egypt, Joseph invited his family, including his father Jacob, to leave Palestine for Egypt. Once settled in Egypt, his people multiplied and gradually became a powerful racial group in the country of their adoption.

In the years following Joseph's ascendancy, a political revolution in Egypt established a new dynasty that supplanted the Hiksos kings. They adopted the title 'Pharaoh.' Under these new rulers, the Israelites were subjected to oppression until the advent of Moses, who succeeded in leading the Israelites out of Egypt into the Sinai desert. This was the first stage of their journey. The second stage of their journey was to enter Palestine and settle there in their former homeland.

During the time of Moses, that is, in the time of the ancient Jewish Diaspora, the plan for these exiled Jews to return to their former homeland was made at the behest of God. In modern times, the plan to return the exiled Jews of the Diaspora was executed in terms of the Balfour Declaration.

## THE PROBLEM OF THE RETURN TO THE FIRST QIBLA

Muslims generally regard Palestine's present problem as concerning the return to the first qibla. They point out that when Prophet Muhammad built a mosque in Madinah and laid down that five prayers had to be ritually recited in it, he followed the Jewish tradition in making al-Masjid al-Aqsa his qibla for a period of sixteen months.

However, this is a misunderstanding. When Muslims migrated to Madinah, they worshipped at the direction of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhra*), the Jewish qibla, and not at the direction of Al-Masjid al-Aqsa.

At the end of these sixteen months, the Quran revealed the command to change the qibla. So, the Prophet adopted the Kabah as the permanent qibla by God's command. Referring to this incident, Muslims claim that the problem of Palestine is one of the return to the first qibla. Thus, they point out that this problem is not a national but a religious issue for Muslims. This concept is based entirely on a misunderstanding. The first qibla has nothing to do with al-Masjid al-Aqsa. The name al-Masjid al-Aqsa in the following verse of the

Quran has not been cited in the sense of a particular mosque.

‘Holy is He who took His servant by night from the sacred place of worship [at Makkah] to the remote house of worship [at Jerusalem]—the precincts of which We have blessed.’ (17:1 )

The above verse means a place of worship situated at a distance. It is called the farthest place of worship because it is located at a distance of 765 miles from Makkah. In this context, Al-Masjid al-Aqsa refers to the Jewish place of worship, the Haykal Synagogue.

This Jewish synagogue, built by Solomon in 957 BC, was razed to the ground in 586 BC by the king of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar II. After a long period, the Jews rebuilt their place of worship. This was again reduced to ruins in AD 70 by the Romans. At present, only one wall of the building is left. This is called the ‘wailing wall’ or the ‘western wall.’ At the time of the revelation of the Quran, there was no building; it was only a vacant site. In AD 638, in the time of the second caliph, Umar Farooq, the Muslims entered Jerusalem. Caliph Umar did not have any structure erected on this site. During the Umayyad rule, Caliph Abdul Malik bin Marwan (d. 705) had the present al-Masjid al-Aqsa built in AD 688.

Another building on the campus of al-Masjid al-Aqsa is called the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhra*). The sacred

rock of the Jews has been situated there since ancient times. Caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwan built the dome on this sacred rock in AD 688. It was this sacred rock or Dome of the Rock, the qibla of the Jews, which was made the Muslim qibla temporarily by Prophet Muhammad after he emigrated to Madinah. This Dome of the Rock is known as *al-Quds*, and, by extension, this entire area of Jerusalem is called *al-Quds*.

Muslims regard al-Masjid al-Aqsa as the first qibla, and it has become a symbol of the Palestinian struggle. But the mosque has nothing to do with the first qibla. If there is any first qibla, it is the Dome of the Rock rather than al-Masjid al-Aqsa. Furthermore, when Prophet Muhammad was in Makkah, he used to say his prayers in the direction of the Kabah. After his emigration, for about sixteen months, he said his prayers in the direction of the Dome of the Rock. Afterwards, obeying God's command, he again started praying toward the Kabah. In this respect, the Dome of the Rock is the middle qibla, not the first.

In light of this, the expression 'return to the first qibla' is meaningless. If this supposed return is attributed to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, it should be noted that it never was the qibla of Prophet Muhammad. At the time of the Hijrah (AD 622), there was only a vacant site on which a Jewish synagogue had previously stood. There was no mosque in existence at the time of the Prophet. As far as the Dome of

the Rock is concerned, there is no question of its return. It was the Jewish qibla earlier, and it is the Jewish qibla today. The demand for the return of the Dome of the Rock is as invalid as the demand (if there is any such demand) of the polytheists to return the Kabah to them, as at one time, it housed their deities.

## BALFOUR DECLARATION: A CASE OF MISSED OPPORTUNITY

When the exiled Jews started coming to Palestine to be settled there in the wake of the Balfour Declaration of 1948, the only reaction from the Arabs was violent jihad. The Arab countries started funding the Palestinian Arabs on a large scale. They wanted to crush the Jewish state but failed to achieve their objective.

This was undoubtedly a great mistake on the part of the Arab leaders. Had these Arab leaders learned any lesson from Islamic history, they would have indeed found that there was a better option before them. That was to welcome those Jews as their neighbours and work for the progress and development of Palestine in collaboration with them. These Jews, coming mainly from Western countries were highly educated, had great expertise in modern science and technology, and could become the

best partners the Arabs could hope for regarding the progress and development of Palestine. But in their welter of emotion, the Arab leaders failed to understand this positive aspect of the matter.

There were excellent examples in the history of Islam of this collaboration between the Jews and the Muslims. When Muslim empires were being established, Muslims undertook the task of translating into Arabic ancient books available in Greek and other languages, which they found in different countries. Translation bureaus were set up, and a significant number of ancient texts were translated under the auspices of institutes such as Bait al-Hikmah, which was established in Baghdad in AD 832, and Dar al-Hikmah, which was set up in Cairo in AD 1005, both under direct state patronage. Later, when the Arabs entered Spain and brought it under their control, they established great academic and educational institutions in Cordoba and Granada, where these Arabic translations were rendered into Latin. These Latin translations were again rendered into different European languages. Not only were translations undertaken, but also, side by side, different kinds of research and investigations were carried out on a large scale.

These academic activities led directly to the Renaissance in Europe. In this way, the Muslims of those times acted as a bridge between the ancient traditional age and the modern scientific age.

Western historians have generally acknowledged this fact. For instance, recognising the contribution of the role of the Arabs, Robert Briffault writes, ‘It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern industrial civilization would never have arisen at all.’ (Robert Briffault, *The Making of Humanity*, p. 190)

How did the Arabs perform this extraordinary role in the field of learning, mainly when no such academic tradition existed among them? The answer is that they achieved this feat through their collaboration with others, such as the Christian and Jewish scholars who worked in the institutions established by the Arabs in Iraq, Egypt, and Spain. The result of this joint contribution is the grand academic history of medieval times, based on which Western Europe made tremendous progress. (Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan Press, 1979)

In the wake of the Balfour Declaration, a similar opportunity presented itself to the Palestinians but blinded by their emotions, their Arab leaders misled them and launched them on the path of confrontation rather than collaboration. The Muslim failure to avail of this opportunity resulted in futile activities, which culminated in great destruction. While God had commanded in the Quran, ‘If they should be inclined to make peace, make peace with them, and put your trust in God.’ (8:61)

A comparison between the two parts of Palestine— one under Arab rule and the other under Jewish rule—

is a telling example of what would have been had the two communities entered a collaborative exercise. The Jewish-ruled Palestine, which, before 1948, was a barren desert, has been converted into green fields and orchards. By contrast, the Arab-ruled Palestine is still in the same backward condition as before 1948. The Palestinians are still waging a futile battle under their unwise leaders. Earlier, their goal was to return Palestine to its original state, as it was in the pre-1948 period. Now, their goal is to bring Palestine to the state of 1967. Meeting both these targets is impossible. This is akin to reversing the course of history, and history itself is a witness to the impossibility of such a reversal. The Palestinians' first option was to accept the status quo of 1948 willingly. Now, their second option is to accept the present status quo. If they lose this second opportunity, they will not find a chance to exercise a third option. Their third option will be death and destruction rather than life and construction.

'Status-quoism' means acceptance of the current situation as it is. This is not a matter of weakness. It is a wise policy of a high order by the law of nature. In this world, there always exists some controversial issue or the other. Along with this, the very system of nature demands that there should be opportunities to solve problems in every situation. However, given the present state of affairs, a result-oriented policy would be to ignore the problems and seize opportunities to improve the situation. Becoming



entangled with controversial issues always comes at the cost of losing precious opportunities and leaving the situation unimproved. That is why the Prophet of Islam always emphasised: Indeed, God is Kind; he loves kindness and is pleased with it. He grants through a conciliatory approach what He does not grant through a confrontational approach. (*Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith no. 16805)

## A PRACTICAL OPTION FOR PALESTINIANS

**I**n Palestine, the Arab leaders have been fighting for their lost land for a long period. But if we look at it from the perspective of results, we find that all their efforts and sacrifices have been wasted. Not only have they failed to achieve the target of recovering their land, but they have missed out on precious opportunities to make other kinds of progress, thereby incurring immense loss.

The present age is one of globalization. In the agricultural age of ancient times, land was of the utmost importance, but modern communications have now reduced the land to a secondary position. Of prime importance now are the opportunities presenting themselves, thanks to globalization, in equal measure to all. Now, anyone working in a modest office can avail of worldwide opportunities.

Given this situation, fighting to acquire a piece of land is anachronistic and can never yield positive results.

The present state of affairs in Palestine is a crisis which benefits neither the Arabs nor the Israelis. It is in their interests to think seriously and, without prejudice, decide to normalize the situation. However, both parties must adopt a realistic approach to the matter. Any unacceptable condition to both sides will be unrealistic and lead to an impasse.

As I understand it, the only practicable solution to this problem is for the Arabs to abandon all kinds of terrorism. This is the first prerequisite. Trying to find a solution without fulfilling this condition is to travel in an imaginary world—on a journey that will never reach its destination. So far as Israel is concerned, it will have to give the Palestinian Arabs (residing in Palestine) the same rights as other residents enjoy under the constitution. If both these points are accepted in principle, a practical settlement can be reached through peaceful negotiation.

There is much talk about giving land for peace. But based on my knowledge and information, I consider this suggestion impracticable. The only workable formula in this context is 'peace for the sake of peace.' Its most significant benefit would be that by accepting it, the Arabs could immediately find a starting point for a better future. At the moment, the Palestinian movement is caught in a blind alley, but

by accepting this proposal, the deadlock would instantly be broken, and the Arabs would see before them a golden opportunity to begin their journey on the highway of progress by availing the opportunities available to them once peace is established in the region.

On the issue of Palestine, all the Muslim leaders, Arabs and non-Arabs alike, have only one thing to say: Israel should return the land occupied during the war, and only then will the Palestinians stop all violent activities. Acceptance of this proposal is supposed to lead to 'peace with justice'.

Despite tremendous effort, implementing this proposal has never been possible. The sole reason for the failure of this formula is that it is unrealistic. No unrealistic formula can ever meet with success in this world of realities. This world is based on the eternal laws of nature; only that formula can meet with success, which these laws reinforce.

The truth is that according to the laws of nature, justice is not a part of peace; therefore, bracketing justice with peace may have meaning in terms of human aspirations, but it is a fallacy from the point of view of reality. Once peace is established, justice is not an automatic sequel. It only opens opportunities. And by peacefully availing ourselves of these opportunities, we can achieve justice as well as other desirable things.

The endeavour to accomplish justice commences when we seize these opportunities to cultivate it. The truth is that

whenever one receives justice, it is the result of one's hard work—whether acting as an individual or as a group. Prophet Muhammad provides a clear historical example of this in his method of negotiating the Hudaibiyya peace treaty.

By the grace of God, I have travelled to Palestine three times: in August 1995, in October 1997, and then again in October 2008. These visits allowed me to observe Palestine firsthand. Moreover, I have met many Palestinian Muslims in and outside Delhi and familiarized myself with their situation by reading several authoritative books on Palestine.

In my experience, I can say that the Palestinians are a vibrant people with excellent physical and intellectual potential. This is natural, for they have been brought up in a geographical region that the Quran (17:1) describes as having been 'blessed' by the Almighty.

The Palestinians, endowed with exceptional natural qualities, can undertake significant tasks, but tragically, it has not been possible for them to realize their potential. The principal reason for this tragedy is that their leaders have launched them on the path of violence and hatred. They have wrongly come to regard the land they are struggling for as of the most significant importance and are sacrificing their lives to acquire it. They are unaware that the life of a Palestinian is a thousand times more precious than the land they have been making futile efforts to achieve for so

long. Had Palestinians been aware of the possibilities of the modern age, they would certainly have availed of the opportunities it offered, not only at the level of Palestine but also at an international level. They would thus have made significant progress.

Peaceful action, by the laws of nature, increases human creativity and is, therefore, at all times and in every way superior to violent action. Those who employ peaceful means for achieving their goals steadily evolve into creative groups. On the contrary, those who opt for the way of hatred and violence perpetually suffer from an erosion of their creativity, and it is almost impossible to compensate for the various kinds of losses resulting from their violence. While success crowns the actions of the creative groups in this world, uncreative groups are destined for every kind of failure. This is an eternal law of nature. There is no exception to it.

## CONCLUSION

**I**n conclusion, I would like to say Islam is a peaceful religion in the complete sense of the term. We would not be wrong in saying that Islam is the first religious system in human history that offers a complete ideology of peace. By adopting it, Prophet Muhammad successfully brought about a peaceful revolution in the real sense. The ideology of Islam banishes the

notion that there can be anything acceptable about terrorism. Islam is an entirely peaceful religion, and the Islamic method is peaceful. By following the ideology of peace, each individual's mind can be re-engineered away from the culture of violence and closer to the culture of peace.

The essence of Islamic teaching on peace is underscored by an incident when Prophet Muhammad returned from the Tabuk campaign in 9 AH. When he reached Madinah with his 30,000 companions, he said to one of them, 'We have come back from a smaller jihad to a greater jihad.' (Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Tarikh Baghdad*, Hadith no. 4590)

What did the Prophet mean by 'a smaller jihad' and 'a greater jihad'?

'A smaller jihad' connotes a temporary jihad, and 'a greater jihad' connotes a permanent jihad. A permanent jihad is a part of the daily life of a believer. In this world, where man is undergoing a divine test, a believer must lead a principled life, eschewing temptations and provocations and adhering unflinching zeal to Islamic principles. That is why it is called a greater jihad. So far as the more minor jihad is concerned, it is, in fact, another name for defensive war. It takes place infrequently and only as the occasion warrants it. It is not a permanent feature of Islamic life.

Prophet Muhammad was born in AD 570. He received his prophethood on 12 February 610 in Makkah. He died on

8 June 632 in Madinah. Thus, according to the Christian calendar, his prophetic period lasted twenty-two years and three months. In this entire period, only four short battles took place: the Battle of Badr (2 AH), the Battle of Uhud (3 AH), the Battle of Khaybar (7 AH), and the Battle of Hunayn (8 AH). The battles, or skirmishes, lasted only half a day on all these four occasions. That is two days in total. Counting the days of his prophetic period, the total comes to about 8130 days. So, during this long period, the Prophet and his Companions were engaged in a peaceful struggle for 8128 days, and they fought defensive battles for only two days. It would thus be appropriate to say that, in Islam, peace is the rule and war the rare exception.

The realistic solution to the Palestine problem is for the Arabs to abandon all kinds of violent activism. This is the first prerequisite. Trying to find a solution without fulfilling this condition is to travel in an imaginary world—on a journey that will never reach its destination. So far as Israel is concerned, it will have to give the Palestinian Arabs (residing in Palestine) the same rights as other residents enjoy under the constitution. If both these points are accepted in principle, a practical settlement can be reached through peaceful negotiation.



Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) was an Islamic scholar, spiritual leader and peace activist. His work has received international recognition for his seminal contributions toward world peace. The Maulana authored over 200 books dealing with Islam's spiritual wisdom, the Prophet's non-violent approach, Islam's relation with modernity and other contemporary issues. His English translation of the Quran is widely appreciated as simple, clear and easily understandable. He founded *Centre for Peace and Spirituality International* in 2001 to popularize the culture of peace and share the spiritual message of Islam with people.

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