

Delineating the Concept of Human Dignity in the Quran: *Karamah Al-insan* as an Antidote to Religious Conflicts and Violence

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ABSTRACT

Human dignity is defined as the right of every human life to be valued unconditionally. In Islam, this is perfectly embodied in the Quranic concept of “*karamah al-insan*” (Human Dignity). *Karamah al insan* becomes an instructive Islamic principle that regulates all human relationships, including those between Muslims and others. However, misperceptions in peripheral exclusivist thoughts have clouded the concept, positioning the honour and rights of the religiously faithful above those who were deemed lower by virtue of their religious choices. This paper sets out to ascertain the distinction between inherent dignity as an intrinsic right of every human being versus acquired dignity, that which is obtained by virtue of a Muslim’s efforts to ascend up the spiritual ladder. This distinction will distill the value of *karamah al-insan* as a universal value (human rights) and a shared belief among the different faiths. Furthermore, this clear distinction will deconstruct the claims made by extremist groups to justify civilian and religiously-motivated attacks. To this end, the paper will take a closer look at the Quranic verse 17:70, that specifically mention about human dignity and other related Quranic verses. The paper concludes with the argument that as a universally-shared value, the concept of *karamah al-insan* will serve as a robust antidote to social and religious chaos especially in these divisive times.

Keywords: human dignity, *karamah al-insan*, human relationship, Muslim extremists, ISIS

INTRODUCTION

The world today is in a constant state of upheaval: social relations, inter-religious conflicts, discrimination against a particular community, religious violence and terrorism. Various factors can be cited, many of which are context-dependent. Yet, a common thread runs through these divisions: the lack of respect and appreciation for fellow human beings.

Known universally as human dignity, respecting and valuing one another as human beings, is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human dignity forms the fundamental teachings of many religious traditions. In Islamic thought, it denotes the inviolable value of all mankind. Fundamentally, this means that it is independent of conditional ties and simply results from being human either as an individual or as a member of a group of people.

The spirit behind such a concept is to promote an environment of cooperation and positive human interactions in daily lives. However, due to other intervening factors, human dignity can be overlooked. History are full of tragedies where ideologies that promote supremacy of a group of people wreaked total havoc and impact human relations badly. The use of race, religion or other arbitrary superiority criteria have been deviously employed to provide justification for violating human dignity. A famous supremacy ideology in the past would be Nazism. A more recent example would be the doctrine of *al-wala wal bara'* (loyalty and disavowal) which divides humans into two camps: the camp of the faithful and the camp of the enemy. The doctrine has been incorporated into the foundational ideology of many militant Islamist groups today such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ Through this doctrine, ISIS successfully persuades their followers that it is justifiable to attack those deemed of lower or different faith-standing as their disbelief negates their rights for honour and respect.

The paper begins with an attempt to scrutinize of the concept of human dignity from the Islamic perspective. In doing this, the paper takes a closer look at the Quranic verse 17:70 where the principle of human dignity is emphasized. It will also look at other Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions that highlights dignity and noble stature of human beings.

The second part of the paper investigates how contemporary violent Islamist organisations such as ISIS and other like-minded groups violate the concept of human dignity by their random and indiscriminate killings and violence.

The paper concludes in the final part with the argument that while efforts to build bridges between religious communities are necessary, emphasizing the concept of human dignity is paramount to promote social unity and religious harmony especially in this period of heightened Islamophobia and misinformation about the religion of Islam.

HUMAN DIGNITY

The term “dignity” originates from the Latin word *dignitas* which means “worthiness”. It is the quality or state of being worthy of honour and respect². As such, human dignity literally means respect for human beings. In other words, human dignity is the recognition that human beings possess a distinct value intrinsic to their humankind and as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings.

From this definition, it can be understood that human dignity means the worth of a person for basic honour and respect irrespective of their background. In the contemporary legal and social literature, human dignity means that human being is inherently a venerated, esteemed and honoured being. From the religious viewpoint, the principle entails the need for all human beings to be respected as the most noble creations of God.

¹ See Mohamed Bin Ali, “defining the “enemies” of god: muslim extremists perception of the religious other”, *journal of islamic studies and culture*, american research institute for policy development, vol. 6 no.1, june 2018, pp 80-96.

² Definition of dignity from merriam-webster available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dignity#:~:text=1%20%3a%20the%20quality%20or%20state,from%20merriam%2dwebster%20on%20dignity> (accessed 2 september 2020).

In the Arabic language, the term human dignity is known as *karamah al-insan* or *takrim al-insan*. As a religion that emphasizes collective social responsibilities, preserving human dignity is an important Islamic principle that regulates human relationships, including that between Muslims and non-Muslims. Flowing from this concept, values such as equality, justice, respect and compassion emanate throughout Islam teachings. As sentient beings on earth, Islam has elevated man's standing to the noblest position and accorded humankind their role as the vicegerent³ of God on earth.

Due to this stature and role, dignity is bestowed by God to all human beings unreservedly and unexclusively. Such a dignity is known as 'inherent dignity' (*karamah al-muta'assilah*) which is gifted to all mankind. It will never cease or taken away from a human regardless of his actions, religion, orientation or status. Even a criminal is entitled to dignified treatment, as punishment should not be intended to humiliate but to reform and discipline a person. Thus, every person deserves to be respected and dignified as a fellow human being, and also to be granted certain rights.⁴

Scholars believe that the inherent dignity of man is the foundation of human rights and human rights instruments have emphasized that all human rights are derived from the inherent dignity of the human person.⁵ The United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that recognition of the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation for freedom, justice and peace in the world.⁶ The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁷ and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights⁸ have both emphasized that all human rights are derived from the inherent dignity of the human person. Human dignity, as understood in international human rights and its Islamic counterpart, thus form the *jus cogens* of international law, a common human heritage upon which everybody can agree.⁹

³ The Quran mentions in 2:30 "When your Lord said to the angles, 'Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth,' they said, 'Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?' He said 'Indeed I know what you do not know.'"

⁴ Ahmad Ubaidillah, *Concept of Human Dignity in Islam*, muslim.sg available at <https://muslim.sg/articles/concept-of-human-dignity-in-islam> (accessed 2 September 2020). See also Mohamed Bin Ali, "Muliakanlah Setiap Insan Sebagaimana Tuhan Memuliakan CiptaanNya (Honour Every Human Being as How God Honours His Creations), *Berita Harian Singapura*, 12 April 2020.

⁵ See Mohammad Hossein Mozaffari, *Human Dignity: An Islamic Perspective*, *Hekmat Quarterly Journal*, An International Journal of Academic Research, issue_04, dated Monday, December 2011

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 2 17A (III), U.N. GAOR Res. 71, U.N.Doc. A18 10 (1948).

⁷ See document International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, United Nation Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx> (accessed 9 September 2020).

⁸ SEE DOCUMENT ON INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, UNITED NATION HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER AVAILABLE AT

[HTTPS://WWW.OHCHR.ORG/EN/PROFESSIONALINTEREST/PAGES/CCPR.ASPX](https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx) (ACCESSSED 9 SEPTEMBER 2020).

⁹ ERMIN SINANOVIC, *HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION IN INTERNATIONAL AND ISLAMIC LAW*, *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ISLAM AND SOCIETY*, 20(1), JANUARY 2003, PP 88-106.

As such, Islam views all human beings as deserving of this inherent worth and dignity. In recognition of this, God granted humankind the intellect and ability to discern between right and wrong.¹⁰ The Quran mentions, "Now clear proof has come to you from your Lord: if anyone sees it, that will be to his advantage; if anyone is blind to it, that will be to his loss- [Say], 'I am not your guardian.'" ¹¹ The Quran repeatedly emphasizes the theme that a person's dignity is intimately related to his or her individual freedom, particularly the freedom of conscience.¹² For example, it affirms that God created humans "in the best of moulds"¹³ and, in doing so, He honoured humanity and conferred on it special favours.¹⁴

Human dignity is foundational for the many religious traditions understanding of distributive justice, common good, the right to life, the right to shelter and the right to freedom. Other perspectives, both religious and secular may conceive of human dignity in similar terms with a similar sense of its inherent worth or value and other implications, but may posit different sources for that dignity.¹⁵

HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE QURAN

As a book of guidance for mankind, the Quran presents human dignity as one of its central themes. The most obvious declaration of human dignity in Islam is found in the Quranic verse 17:70 where God declares: "*And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.*"¹⁶ The keyword that highlights human dignity here in this verse is "*karramna*" (we have honoured) in the first part of the verse "And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam" (*wa laqad karramna bani Adam*). This verse is explicit in its acknowledgement that the entire progeny of Adam, that is the entire human race is interconnected and deserving of giving and receiving inherent dignity for all without criterion of any kind. It shows that man by his very creation deserves respect and honour. This respect exists in a person's natural right and creation, regardless of what background he comes from and from which community he belongs to.

In commenting on this particular verse, many Quranic exegetes and scholars opine that the dignity which is bestowed upon the "sons of Adam" includes humankind in its entirety. The famous 19th-century Iraqi Islamic scholar Mahmud al-Alusi in his 30 volume tafsir of the

¹⁰ ABDULLAH SAEED, *MAKING THE ISLAMIC CASE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY*, HUDSON INSTITUTE, 1 MARCH 2017 AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.HUDSON.ORG/RESEARCH/13022-MAKING-THE-ISLAMIC-CASE-FOR-RELIGIOUS-LIBERTY](https://www.hudson.org/research/13022-making-the-islamic-case-for-religious-liberty) (ACCESSED 2 SEPTEMBER 2020). SEE ALSO FROM THE SAME AUTHOR, *RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ISLAM: THE WITNESS OF THE QUR'AN AND THE PROPHET*, ABC RELIGION AND ETHICS, 23 OCTOBER 2018 AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.ABC.NET.AU/RELIGION/RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-IN-ISLAM/10419798](https://www.abc.net.au/religion/religious-freedom-in-islam/10419798) (ACCESSED 2 SEPTEMBER 2020).

¹¹ Quran 6:104

¹² Abdullah Saeed, *Making the Islamic Case for Religious Liberty*.

¹³ Quran 95:4

¹⁴ Quran 17:70

¹⁵ Kamali M. H. *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective (Fundamental Rights and Liberties in Islam)*, Islamic Texts Society 2002, p. 56-67.

¹⁶ Quran 17:70. Translation by Sahih International available at <https://quran.com/17/70-80?translations=20> (accessed 2 September 2020).

Quran, "Ruh Al-Ma'ani" writes that every members of the human race, regardless of their background and regardless of whether they are pious or sinners, are endowed with dignity, nobility and respect, which cannot be made exclusive to any particular group or class of people.¹⁷ Al-Alusi attributes dignity to all mankind whether the righteous or evil doers and do not give any group an advantage over others in having dignity.¹⁸ Zuhayli in his "Tafsir Al-Muneer" noted that dignity is the natural right (haqq tabi'i) of every human being and that Islam has uphold it as such and made it a principle of governance and a criterion of interaction among people.¹⁹ Ibn Kathir in his famous exegesis "Tafsir Ibn Kathir" holds that the dignity of mankind is inviolable.²⁰ Shaykh Muhammad Ali Al-Sabuni in his book "Safwatu al-Tafsir" also said that human beings have inviolable values and dignity through blessings of intellect, knowledge, speech which God has bestowed upon him.²¹

Apart from these famous Quranic exegetes and commentators, many other leading scholars of Islam such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali from the Shafie school of jurisprudence, Ibn Rushd, Al-Qurtubi, Ibrahim al-Shatibi, and Ibn Ashur from the Maliki school of jurisprudence, Ibn Taymiyyah and his famous student ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah from the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, Al-Tabari²², Al-Zamakhshari,²³ Jalaluddin As-Suyuthi²⁴ and many others have maintained this universal understanding and position of human dignity.²⁵

In an article on "Human Rights in Islam", the Egyptian House of Fatwa (Dar Al-Ifta Al-Misriyyah), explains when commenting on Quran 17:70 that 'such an attitude has given human rights in Islam special characteristics and advantages, the most important of which is its inclusivity. They include political, economic, social and intellectual rights. They are also general rights, that is, all people enjoy it, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims and with no

¹⁷ SEE SHIHAB AL-DIN AL-ALUSI (D.1854), AR-RŪH AL-MA'ĀNĪ FĪ TAFSĪRI-L-QUR'ĀNI-L-'AZĪM WA SAB'U-L-MATHĀNĪ.

¹⁸ Alusi, M. 1995, vol. 8, Rahu al-Ma'ani, Beirut, Darul Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, p. 112.

¹⁹ SEE WAHBAH ZUHAILI, TAFSIR AL-MUNEER ("THE ENLIGHTENED EXEGESIS") AN EXEGESIS OF THE QUR'AN WHICH IS 17 VOLUMES LONG.

²⁰ IBN KATHIR, TAFSIR IBN KATHIR, (ABRIDGED), VOL.6, AL-HARAMAIN ISLAMIC FOUNDATION, DARUSSALAM PUBLISHERS, P.52. SEE ALSO IBN KATHIR, TAFSIR AL-QURAN AL-AL-A'DHIM, DAR AL-KUTUB AL-MISRIYYAH, CAIRO (UNDATED), VOL. 3, P. 58.

²¹ Muhammad Ali al-Sabuni, Safwat al-Tafsir, Tafsir Li al-Qur'an al-Karim, Dar al-Fikr Li al-Taba'at wa al-nashr wa al-tauzi", Beirut, 1421AH/2001CE, vol.2 pp.156-157

²² Tafsir-al-Tabari (Jaamiu al-Bayan fi Ta'wil al-Qur'an), Al-Maktabatu al-Tawfiqiyyah, Cairo, 2004, p. 125.

²³ Al-Zamakhshari Al-Kashaaf, Dar al-Filiri Lil Tiba at wal-Nashri wal-tawzi, Cairo, 2006, p. 459.

²⁴ Al-Suyuthi, al-duru al-manthur fi al-tafsir bil maathur, matba'at al-anwaar al-muhammadiyyah, vol. 4, p. 213

²⁵ RECEP SENTURK, SOCIOLOGY OF RIGHTS: "I AM THEREFORE I HAVE RIGHTS": HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISLAM BETWEEN UNIVERSALISTIC AND COMMUNALISTIC PERSPECTIVES, MUSLIM WORLD JOURNAL OF HUMAN RIGHTS, VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1, ARTICLE 11, 2005. IN THIS ARTICLE, RECEP SENTURK OFFERS AN ORIGINAL REREADING OF ISLAMIC LEGAL HISTORY BY TRACING TWO CONTRASTING POSITIONS ON THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON—THE "UNIVERSALISTIC VIEW" ("BASIC RIGHTS ACCORDED BY VIRTUE OF BEING A HUMAN") AND THE "COMMUNALISTIC VIEW" ("BASIC RIGHTS ARE ACCORDED BY VIRTUE OF ISLAMIC FAITH OR A TREATY").

distinction, whatsoever, based on colour, gender or language. They are inalienable and unalterable because they are related to the doctrine of the Lord of the worlds.’²⁶

The unity of humanity and human family is a fundamental concept in Islam as the Quran acknowledges the diversity of people in language, religion and colour as a sign of God’s creation. Importantly, the Quran made it clear that differences in people should not be a basis of superiority of one over another. The Quran mentions: “O mankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-aware”.²⁷

On the one hand, this verse (Quran 49:13) highlighted the unity of humankind which results in the equality of all men. On the other hand, it affirms that as per religious teachings there is another type of dignity that is acquired through sincere belief and good deeds. While the existence of inherent dignity is for all human beings, the acquired dignity²⁸, varies from one individual to another according to which, one may become nearer to the Lord and more dignified before God.

While the difference between inherent dignity and acquired dignity is explicit in the Quran, one cannot deny that there are also verses in the Quran that make a kind of distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims. However, it is evident that such a distinction also exists between believers in respect to their varied degrees of piety and devotion or the difference in the quality of their acquired dignity and approachability before God.²⁹ Thus, this distinction is a matter of inequality before God only and does not imply discrimination before the law.³⁰ So even though the criminals are punished for their crimes, they do not lose their dignity and, therefore, the courts of law and judicial systems are required to treat with them as human beings that have committed a crime and not as misled creatures.

²⁶ HUMAN RIGHTS IN ISLAM, DAR AL-IFTA AL-MISRIYYAH AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.DAR-ALIFTA.ORG/FOREIGN/VIEWARTICLE.ASPX?ID=359&TEXT=ENTER](https://www.dar-alifta.org/foreign/viewarticle.aspx?id=359&text=enter) (ACCESSED 9 SEPTEMBER 2020).

²⁷ Quran 49:13

²⁸ IT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD THAT ACQUIRED DIGNITY, AS REVEALED IN THE QURAN, IS A DIGNITY THAT CAN ONLY BE ACQUIRED BY MUSLIMS THROUGH GOOD DEEDS AND PIETY. IT IS THROUGH THEIR CONDUCT AS BELIEVERS AND PIETY THAT GOD BESTOW UPON CERTAIN MUSLIMS HIGHER STATUS THAN OTHERS. ON THE OTHER HAND, INHERENT DIGNITY IS A DIGNITY THAT IS GIFTED TO ALL OF MANKIND, INHERITED FROM ADAM, NEVER TO BE LOST OR TAKEN AWAY FROM A HUMAN REGARDLESS OF HIS ACTIONS, RELIGION, ORIENTATION, STATUS. THEREFORE, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER A PERSON IS MUSLIM OR NON-MUSLIM, HE DESERVES TO BE RESPECTED AND DIGNIFIED AS A FELLOW HUMAN BEING AND TO BE GRANTED CERTAIN RIGHTS.

²⁹ FOR EXAMPLE, SEE QURAN 49:13.

³⁰ APART FROM QURAN 17:70, THE QURAN ALSO MAKE DECLARATION OF DIGNITY FOR THE WHOLE OF THE HUMANITY IN ANOTHER PLACE BUT WITH A SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO THE MUSLIMS. THE DIGNIFIED STATUS (*AL-IZZAH*) OF THE MUSLIMS IS THUS EXPOUNDED ALONGSIDE THAT OF GOD AND HIS MESSENGER. IN QURAN 63:8, GOD SAYS: “AND HONOUR (*AL-IZZAH*) BELONGS TO GOD, TO HIS MESSENGER AND THE BELIEVERS...”.

Prophet Muhammad drew parallel of the Ka'bah which is known be the House of God of the Muslims to express the extent of the dignity of the Muslims. Once the Prophet was in front of the Ka'bah, he made the supplication: *"How pure you are and how pure is your fragrance! How great you are and how great is your sanctity! By the one in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, the sanctity of the believer is greater to Allah than your sanctity, in his wealth, his life, and to assume nothing of him but good."*³¹

It is also important to note that the Quran has emphasized that the dignity which is bestowed to man is due to his quality of being human and there is no distinction in this regard between Muslims and non-Muslims. In some of the verses mentioned earlier, the Quran has employed terms such as "people (*an-Naas*)" and "children of Adam (*bani Adam*)". Should the inherent dignity only be reserved for Muslims, more specific words like *muslimin* (Muslims) or *mukminin* (righteous ones) would be used. However, the Quran repeatedly stressed that God has dignified all men, not just Muslims.

Apart from Quranic verses, the significance of human dignity is also emphasized in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (also known as the hadith tradition). In the Prophet's tradition, human dignity and human rights are unequivocal. This is evident in one of the Prophet's sayings *"All of you from Adam, and Adam is from dust"*.³² This hadith demonstrates that all human beings are created from the same origin, and therefore emerge from one community of brothers and sisters whose parents are Adam and Eve. All of them were all born with dignity and are equal in the eyes of God.

The respect for human beings is also exemplified in the countless deeds of Prophet Muhammad. A famous hadith that explicitly shows the deep sense of honour Prophet Muhammad has towards the non-Muslims is the incident where the Prophet stood up when a funeral procession of a Jew passed by him.³³ It was narrated that the Prophet and several of his companions were sitting down along a street in Medina. Along came a companion who spotted a funeral procession approaching them. In respect of the dead, the Prophet stood up as the procession passes in front of him. At that instant, another companion, who was still sitting down, said to the Prophet, "This is a funeral of a Jew. He is not a Muslim." Upon hearing these words, the Prophet became upset and responded to the companion, "Is he not a human soul?" The message of the Prophet is clear: human beings ought to be respected irrespective of their religion. Through his exemplary action, the Prophet taught mankind that every human soul is noble, whether alive or dead. This is Islam's true concept of dignity. By such action, the Prophet defended humanity.

³¹ THIS HADITH WAS NARRATED BY ABDULLAH IBN UMAR WHO REPORTED THAT SAW THE MESSENGER OF GOD CIRCLING THE KA'BAH AND SAID THIS SUPPLICATION. THE HADITH CAN BE FOUND IN SUNAN IBN MĀJAH 3932.

³² HADITH FOUND SUNAN AL-TIRMIDHI, KITAB AL-MAN'QIB-HADITH NO. 3955. SEE ALSO MUHAMMAD NASIRUDDIN AL-BANI, KHULASATU HUKMI AL-MUHDITH: SAHIHU FI SAHIHI AL-JAMI" HADITH NO. 5482.

³³ THE HADITH WAS REPORTED BY QAYS IBN SA'D. HADITH CAN BE FOUND IN ŞAHĪḤ AL-BUKHĀRĪ NO.125 AND ŞAHĪḤ MUSLIM NO. 961.

From this incident, the Prophet did not consider the religious adherence of the deceased person to have any bearing on his inherent dignity, which called for unqualified respect.³⁴ Muhammad al-Ghazali has quoted Ibn Hazm to the effect that a Christian woman, Umm al-Harith bint Abi Rabi'a, died and the Prophet's companions took part in her funeral procession. Al-Ghazali then concluded that 'we would like to see that our relations with other communities are founded on this kind of latitude (*al-samaha*). This is because we believe that Islam commands us to have good and peaceful relations with those who are not aggressive toward us'.³⁵

The Prophet's love of humanity can also be seen in how he commanded his followers to respect the People of the Book, as commanded in the Quran. In year 622, the Prophet constituted the Medina Charter, also known as the Constitution of Medina,³⁶ which contained the rights and responsibilities of the Muslims, Jews and other tribal communities in Medina.³⁷ As the head of state, the Prophet guaranteed all citizens of Medina the rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

VIOLATION OF THE HUMAN DIGNITY CONCEPT

Yet, in the very city of Medina where Prophet Muhammad stood in respect for a Jewish funeral and formed the Medina Constitution, the terrorist organization, ISIS launched suicide bombing attacks which killed four Saudi security and injured many others just outside the Prophet's mosque in Medina,³⁸ in July 2016. How do violent organisations like ISIS who claim to act in the name of Islam justify their actions vis-à-vis the vision of the Quran and the actions of Prophet Muhammad?

In this part of the paper, I will focus on how contemporary terrorist organisations such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and other like-minded groups have mutated the Islamic concept of human dignity. They do this by employing the supremacy theory, that goes way back to the devil Syaitan who thought himself superior to Prophet Adam. Along the way, others who hold this theory includes Nazism, Japanese Ultra-Nationalism and the White Supremacy which believes that some humans are more superior than others. By assigning superiority and inferiority statuses for humans, based on their prescribed parameters like religiosity, ISIS has made justifiable the attacks on those they deem as lower than them. This unlevel ling of humans

³⁴ Kamali M. H. *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective (Fundamental Rights and Liberties in Islam)*, Islamic Texts Society 2002.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ SEE YETKIN, YILDRIM, *THE MEDINA CHARTER: A HISTORICAL CASE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION*, ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN –MUSLIM RELATIONS, ROUTLEDGE, VOL. 20, NO. 4, 439– 450, OCTOBER 2009. SEE ALSO MOHAMED BIN ALI, "RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND PEACE: LESSONS FROM THE MEDINA CHARTER", RSIS COMMENTARIES NO. CO16035, 16 FEBRUARY 2016.

³⁷ THE CHARTER DECLARED THAT MUSLIMS AND JEWS WERE EQUAL MEMBERS OF A NEW POLITICAL COMMUNITY. INDEED, EVEN POLYTHEISTS WERE GRANTED EQUAL RIGHTS. MOREOVER, THE PROPHET'S CONSTITUTION DID NOT TREAT JEWS AS A MONOLITHIC ENTITY; HE RECOGNISED AND RESPECTED THEIR ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITIES. ALL JEWS WERE GRANTED THE RIGHTS OF FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT, FREEDOM OF WORSHIP AND THE FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY.

³⁸ BBC News, *Medina Explosion: Suicide bombing near Saudi holy site*, 5 July 2016 available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36706761> (accessed 24 July 2020).

worth based on their religiosity has enabled ISIS terrorists to publicly behead, shoot, and stone civilians, including women and children, mutilating and publicly displaying the bodies.

According to a report published by Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, intentional attacks on civilians killed at least 6,310 people in 2017. At least 47 violent Islamist extremist groups deliberately orchestrated fatal campaigns against civilians, designed to instil fear and erode public morale. Seventy-one per cent of Boko Haram's violent actions targeted the public, affirming it as the group most engaged in a violent campaign against civilians. ISIS in Iraq and Syria's sectarian agenda and harsh interpretation of Islam led to the intentional killing of 2,080 civilians. An additional 15,613 civilians were killed by the actions of extremists and efforts to combat them.³⁹

The justification for these attacks is often through "the practice of *takfir*, that is declaring someone to be a heretic." Essentially this mean that heretics are viewed to be disassociated from their usual human rights by virtue of their disbelief. Hence, the practice of *takfir* can be extensively seen in militant groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁴⁰ ISIS also force communities into their ideologies by public executions, displaying the corpses on crosses for days, or place heads on spikes, to intimidate local populaces.⁴¹

Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in a statement in March 2016 described that the fact is that ISIS kills Christians because they are Christians; Yazidis because they are Yazidis; Shia because they are Shia.⁴² ISIS has carried out a slew of deadly anti-Christian attacks in Egypt, which hosts the largest Christian population in the Middle East. On May 26, 2017, the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, gunmen opened fire on a bus of Coptic Christians in the southern Egyptian city of Minya, killing at least 29 people and wounding 25 others. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack the following day, saying that a "security team of caliphate soldiers" had "set up an ambush" for the victims, who were on their way to visit a monastery south of Cairo.⁴³

ISIS justified these attacks by claiming that the West has distorted the human dignity principle and these attacks were retaliatory attacks in defence of extraordinary Muslim suffering and ravaging their human dignity in this crisis-saturated world. Drawing on Islamic scripture and

³⁹ *Violent Islamist Extremism: A Global Problem*, Tony Blair Institute For Global Change available at <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/Violent-Islamist-Extremism-A-Global-Problem.pdf> (accessed 5 September 2020).

⁴⁰ SEE MOHAMED BIN ALI, "AL-WALA' WAL BARA' IN WAHHABISM: FROM A TOOL TO FIGHT SHIRK TO TAKFIR OF MUSLIM LEADERS", JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC STUDIES AND CULTURE, AMERICAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT, VOL. 7 NO.1, JUNE 2019, PP 28-43.

⁴¹ Mantilla, Yuri Ph.D, LL.M., LL.B. (2016) "ISIS'S Crimes Against Humanity And The Assyrian People: Religious Totalitarianism And The Protection Of Fundamental Human Rights," *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1, Article 2 available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/ilsajournal/vol23/iss1/2> (2 (accessed 2 September 2020).

⁴² *ISIS's Persecution of Religion*, Counter Extremism Project Report, May 2017 available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/isiss-persecution-religions> (accessed 2 September 2020).

⁴³ Ibid

numerous other sources, including Muslim historiography, ISIS has formulated a subjective ontological and epistemological cosmos in which it is the supreme redeemer.⁴⁴

While Islam fully encourages its adherents to stand up to injustice, there is no room to justify random attacks on civilians and human beings by ISIS and other groups. This deployment of strategy is a clear violation of the Islamic concept of human dignity which views each life as sacred. Violence and terrorism simply do not go hand-in-hand with religion. Extending religious concepts like *Jihad* and accomplishing a holy mission, to justify chaos and destruction can be likened to the devil's whispers to Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. The fruit is tempting, but the consequences are bitter and misleading. This myopic vision is why these perpetrators are able to indulge in torture, cold-blooded killing, and mutilation of their victim's bodies.

It is widely known that ISIS justifies attacks and killings by manipulating Quranic verses on *Jihad*. As mentioned in the early part of the paper, ISIS and many other violent Islamist groups believe in the concept of *al-wala' wal bara'* which has resulted in how they define their enemies and attacking them through what they believe as an act of *Jihad*.⁴⁵ They claim that they are in a state of war engaging *Jihad* on their adversaries. As the concept of *al-wala' wal bara'* forms the fundamental belief in their ideology, ISIS militants developed a deep sense of hatred and enmity to the Religious Other and claim that Muslims can only give their loyalty and associate with their co-religionists and perform disavowal of the Religious Other. According to them, the Quran provides the instruction for Muslims to hate and disavow people of the Religious Other. Verses of the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet have been skewed to justify their hatred and even their killings. In particular, the sixtieth chapter of the Quran known as Surah *Al-Mumtahanah* (literally: Chapter of „The Woman Who is Examined“) is often used by them to justify their hatred of the Religious Other. The chapter has played an important role in conceptualizing violent Islamists' perception of the Religious Other.⁴⁶

ISIS random attacks are at variance with the merciful teachings of Islam as the Quran does not specifically define the difference between combatants and non-combatants. The verses dealing with combat permit the waging of war only against those who are also waging war. This prohibition against attacks on civilians is in line with the Quranic revelation that decisions

⁴⁴ JAN A. ALI, *SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF JIHAD AND HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE LANGUAGE OF ISIS IN CONTESTING THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ISLAMISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM*, MANSOURI, FETHI, KESKIN, ZULEYHA (EDS.), PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2019, PP 53-72.

⁴⁵ FOR MORE ON THE CONCEPT OF *AL-WALA' WAL BARA'*, SEE MOHAMED BIN ALI, "*AL-WALA' WAL BARA' (LOYALTY AND DISAVOWAL) IN MODERN SALAFISM: ANALYSING THE POSITIONS OF PURIST, POLITICO AND JIHADI SALAFIS*" IN ROHAN GUNARATNA AND MOHAMED BIN ALI (EDS.), *TERRORIST REHABILITATION: A NEW FRONTIER IN COUNTER TERRORISM*, IMPERIAL COLLEGE PRESS (INSURGENCY AND TERRORISM SERIES VOLUME 7), WORLD SCIENTIFIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, MAY 2015. SEE ALSO WAGEMAKERS, JOAS, "*THE TRANSFORMATION OF A RADICAL CONCEPT: AL-WALA' WAL BARA' IN THE IDEOLOGY OF ABU MUHAMMAD AL-MAQDISI*" IN ROEL MEIJER (ED), *GLOBAL SALAFISM: ISLAM'S NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT*, C. HURST & COMPANY, LONDON, 2009; AL-SARHAN, SAUD BIN SALEH, *AL-WALA' WAL BARA': IDEOLOJIYAH AL-JADIDAH (LOYALTY AND DISAVOWAL... THE NEW IDEOLOGY OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS)*, AL-SHARQ AL-AWSAT (LONDON), ISSUE NO. 9192, JANUARY, 28, 2004.

⁴⁶ Mohamed Bin Ali, "*Defining the "Enemies" of God: Muslim Extremists Perception of the Religious Other*", p 80.

regarding life and death are the exclusive domain of God, and God has proclaimed that life is a "sacred gift" which must not be taken without a just cause.

As mentioned earlier, ISIS has waged a cruel and brutal war against the Yazidis, a group of people whom ISIS regards as devil worshippers. Their relentless ambition to destroy the Yazidi people of Iraq is violative of the Quranic messages of human dignity and as well as it fits the international legal definition of genocide. In Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) states that "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part ; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."⁴⁷

ISLAM'S RESPONSE TO THE VIOLATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

These erroneous interpretations do not reflect the essence and spirit of Islam, which upholds moderation, enshrines respect for human dignity and the right to life.⁴⁸ Islam also asserts adherence to a complete set of ethics, including the ethics of warfare, whereby fighters may not mutilate dead bodies, kill children, woman, and the elderly or destroy places of worship, and must guarantee a humane treatment of prisoners of war. ISIS overlooks these principles and perpetrates heinous crimes.⁴⁹

The brutality and savagery of ISIS emanate from the fact that violence and terrorism are founded on incorrect and deviated religious interpretations, and are built on the socially constructed frustrations of its members making them prone to embrace this violent ideology. Furthermore, the organization's keen interest in securing its gains and establishing control through the terrorizing of local populations, as well as the widespread culture of violence and terrorism taking place throughout the region creates a hotbed for recruiting, inducting, brainwashing and pushing new recruits into committing bloody acts.

Prophet Muhammad gave importance to the lives of individuals as well as the lives of the larger humanity, and took steps to ensure that not only human beings as individuals have their

⁴⁷ SEE DOCUMENT ON THE CONVENTION ON THE PREVENTION AND PUNISHMENT OF THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.UN.ORG/EN/GENOCIDEPREVENTION/GENOCIDE-CONVENTION.SHTML](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide-convention.shtml) (ACCESSED 6 SEPTEMBER 2020). SEE ALSO IS YAZIDI ATTACKS MAY BE GENOCIDE, SAYS UN, BBC NEWS, 19 MARCH 2015 AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.BBC.COM/NEWS/WORLD-MIDDLE-EAST-31962755](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31962755) (ACCESSED 8 SEPTEMBER 2020).

⁴⁸ THE QURAN STATES THAT ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE CREATED EQUAL AND THAT ALL HUMAN LIFE IS PRECIOUS. IN 5:32, IT SAYS: *"BECAUSE OF THAT, WE DECREED UPON THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL THAT WHOEVER KILLS A SOUL UNLESS FOR A SOUL OR FOR CORRUPTION [DONE] IN THE LAND - IT IS AS IF HE HAD SLAIN MANKIND ENTIRELY. AND WHOEVER SAVES ONE - IT IS AS IF HE HAD SAVED MANKIND ENTIRELY. AND OUR MESSENGERS HAD CERTAINLY COME TO THEM WITH CLEAR PROOFS. THEN INDEED MANY OF THEM, [EVEN] AFTER THAT, THROUGHOUT THE LAND, WERE TRANSGRESSORS."*

⁴⁹ DR. HASSANEIN TAWFIQ IBRAHIM, *WHY DOES ISIS ACT SO BRUTALLY?*, FUTURE FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH AND STUDIES, TRENDING EVENTS, ISSUE 3, OCTOBER 2014 AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://FUTUREUAE.COM/EN-US/RELEASE/RELEASEARTICLE/148/WHY-DOES-ISIS-ACT-SO-BRUTALLY](https://futureuae.com/en-us/release/releasearticle/148/why-does-isis-act-so-brutally) (ACCESSED 5 SEPTEMBER 2020).

personal rights but the society and the system ensure security to their lives. To him, the security of life was paramount, and human rights in violation of human security had no justification. Without the system safeguarding the individuals, human rights are often exploited by the forces for their own interests. Rights without duties and prohibitions are an open invitation to exploitation. This is what differentiates Islam from the current ideologies where human rights are used less to safeguard the dignity of the people and more to exploit them.

Soon after receiving the first revelation, and conveying the primary message of total submission to One God, Prophet Muhammad embarked upon his social agenda where every individual's dignity was to be secured through organized efforts. The plan to emancipate slaves in stages was initiated, the campaign to restore dignity of women was launched, the female infanticide was condemned in the strongest possible words, there were clear injunctions against forcing slave girls into prostitution, and the forces of hegemony in Makkah were challenged.⁵⁰ Even in wars, there were instructions not to kill the wounded and the captives, and there were clear instructions not to engage in war except in certain conditions, and if war has begun, to return to ceasefire as soon as possible.

It is clear from their actions that ISIS militants, their followers and their sympathisers do not appreciate and care about humanity. In reality, they are the antithesis of humanity. The attack by ISIS in Medina is a crude distortion of the teachings of Islam which are full of mercy and compassion as exemplified by the Prophet. The Prophet has shown how he treated and respected the dead while ISIS militants are the cause for death of innocents through their indiscriminate and inhumane killings and actions.

Anyone with a sound mind is able to understand that there is nothing Islamic about killing oneself and others in a brutal manner. After all, the Quran is unequivocal when it says "You shall not kill yourselves"⁵¹. Suicide operation is logically far beyond the boundaries of the true and normative Islam that some people – Muslims and non-Muslims alike - have started to seriously question whether IS and their sympathisers are "anti-Islamic", and not simply "un-Islamic", as they are popularly described.⁵² There is a difference between these concepts. "Un-Islamic" means that Muslims are acting in a way that goes against the basic principles of Islam. "Anti-Islam" means that the actions of some Muslims are actually a threat to other Muslims and to the very essence of Islam – mercy, compassion, justice and peace.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Muslims believe the Quran informs and instructs humans on the various aspects of their lives, including social interaction and responsibilities between them in order to live meaningful lives.

⁵⁰ Dr Javed Jamil, Muhammad (PBUH): *The Pivot of Human Dignity*, The Siasat Daily, December 4, 2017 available at <https://archive.siasat.com/news/muhammad-pbuh-pivot-human-dignity-1271955/> (accessed 6 September 2020).

⁵¹ Quran 4:29.

⁵² Craig Considine, *Prophet Muhammad Stood for Humanity in Medina, While ISIS Tries To Destroy It*, Islam and Pluralism, NewAgeIslam.com, 11 July 2016 available at <https://www.newageislam.com/islam-and-pluralism/craig-considine/prophet-muhammad-stood-for-humanity-in-medina-while-isis-tries-to-destroy-it/d/107947> (accessed 24 September 2020).

⁵³ IBID.

Among the common basic themes in this life manual is the observation of each other's rights to honour and dignity. Since humans are purposefully created in different forms and orientations, this means that their differences should be celebrated in deep reverence to their Creator. The Quranic vision of human dignity is manifested in various ways and contexts; the starting point being the direct and unqualified affirmation of all dignity of man in Quran 17:70.

In the Islamic tradition, the superiority of all humans over the entire creation can be observed from the conversations between God and the angels. God says in the Quran: *"Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am about to create a human being out of clay; and when I have formed him fully and breathed My spirit into him, prostrate yourselves before him.'"*⁵⁴ Here, the Quran speaks about the creation of men with a partly divine component by virtue of which the angels bow down to him. This exhibits the honour God has placed on mankind and points us to the fact that we should honour our fellow men equally for they all share the spirit of the Divine. This clear instruction to respect one and all must be made distinct from the honour and respect a believer can add on to himself in the eyes of God by virtue of his deeds and conducts (acquired *karamah*).

The hadith of Prophet Muhammad further corroborates and modelled for the Muslims the best way to interact and engage with the non-Muslims. Among the more luminous examples are the wisdom behind the constitution of the Medina Charter, his interaction and engagement with the Christians of Najran and his promise of protection for the Christian monks at Saint Catherine's monastery.⁵⁵ All these exhibit his depth of genuine concern for human dignity irrespective of their religious orientations. The Prophet persisted with the Medina Charter despite objections by some Companions, for he was a visionary who appreciated the value of long-term peaceful interactions over shorter term personal objectives and desires. His engagement with the Christians displayed a deep reverence for personal beliefs which are in variance from his own.

The nobility of the human race is also emphasised in other religions. For example, for the Catholics, the principle of human dignity is the foundation of their social teaching principles. *"When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27)."*⁵⁶

All religious traditions recognize human beings as essentially equivalent, whether this is understood as a consequence of their status as children of God (Judaism, Christianity), of their manifestation of the Divine (Hinduism), or of their common original nature and desire for

⁵⁴ QURAN 38:71.

⁵⁵ CRAIG CONSIDINE, *THE HUMANITY OF MUHAMMAD: A CHRISTIAN VIEW*, BLUE DOME PRESS, NEW JERSEY, 2020, PP 29-39. SEE ALSO FROM THE SAME AUTHOR, *RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND CIVIC RIGHTS IN A 'MUSLIM NATION': AN ANALYSIS OF PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S COVENANTS WITH CHRISTIANS*, RELIGIONS 2016, 7, 15.

⁵⁶ *THE PRINCIPLE OF HUMAN DIGNITY, THE 10 SECOND SUMMARY* AVAILABLE AT [HTTPS://WWW.CARITAS.ORG.AU/DOCS/CST/EDUCATION-FOR-JUSTICE-DIGNITY.PDF](https://www.caritas.org.au/docs/cst/education-for-justice-dignity.pdf) (ACCESSED 25 SEPTEMBER 2020).

happiness (Buddhism).⁵⁷ With that equality comes a shared belief that all humans deserve a basic level of respect and dignity, regardless of their background.

This universal and inter-religiously shared belief is an antidote in today's increasingly-divisive world. First, the world religions must come together, and promote their shared belief on human dignity in ever bigger and more prominent circles. Second, instilling the concept of human dignity as a core value in the young is paramount to promote social unity, religious and ultimately world harmony in the future. Third, more can be done to counter the voices of superiority/exclusivity in its many shapes and disguises. The vision is for people from diverse backgrounds to be able to stand together as humans and collectively speak up and act whenever and wherever human dignity is violated in its various forms without fear or favour. When they truly believe in the sanctity of each and every life, inevitably the ripple effect of that care and concern will reverberate to the rest of the community. Ultimately, Man as the most capable and sentient being of the universe, must fully return to their stewardship roles on earth, beginning with being true stewards of the safety and well-being of their fellow humans.

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⁵⁷ JUST LIKE THE QURAN EMPHASIZES THE VALUE OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN 17:70, OTHER RELIGIOUS SCRIPTURES HAVE ALSO HIGHLIGHTED THE SAME. FOR EXAMPLE IN GENESIS: 1:27 FOR JUDAISM IS MENTIONED "SO GOD CREATED HUMANITY IN GOD'S IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD GOD CREATED THEM", IN 1 CORINTHIANS 3:16 FOR CHRISTIANITY "DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT YOU ARE THE TEMPLE OF GOD?", IN NIRVANA SUTRA FOR BUDDHISM "ALL SENTIENT BEINGS WITHOUT EXCEPTION HAVE THE BUDDHA-NATURE", AND IN RIG VEDA FOR HINDUISM "THE HUMAN BODY IS THE TEMPLE OF GOD."

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