

Imam Ali's Internal and External Policy

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Internal Policy

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AIMS OF ISLAM was to restrain the strong from oppressing the weak, and to put an end to exploitation in all its forms. When Ali took charge of the caliphate, he dismissed the governors who had been appointed by Uthman. He was told that it would not be expedient to do so, and that he ought to consolidate his own position before

dismissing them. But his reply to these suggestions was:

"O Muslims! Do you wish that I should make an alliance with cruelty, tyranny, treachery and perfidy? Do you wish that I should become an accomplice in the exploitation of the umma of Muhammad? By God, I shall never do so as long as the heavenly orbs are pulling each other. I

shall wrest from the hands of the usurper the rights of the weak, and will restore it to them."

The fundamental criterion for comparing social, economic and political systems, ought to be, not the criterion of hegemony and imperialism but the humanistic criterion, namely, the measure in which each system is really capable of reducing, restraining, and eliminating, as far as possible, the various forms of exploitation of man.

Ali was the most implacable enemy of exploitation in all its forms, and he eradicated it from his dominions during his caliphate. Social organization, he believed, existed only for the service of man and for the protection of his dignity.

Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, had knocked down all man-made distinctions between human beings but after his death, they all came back. Ali declared that he was going to demolish those distinctions again. Abu Ishaq Madaini, the historian, writes as follows, in this connection:

"Some companions of the Prophet told Ali that when distributing the revenues of the public treasury to the Muslims, he ought to give a larger share to the Arab nobles than to the Arab commoners; and he ought to give a larger share to the Arabs than to the non-Arabs. They hinted that doing so would be in his own interest, and they drew his attention to the example of Muawiya who had won the friendship of many rich and powerful figures through his 'generosity.' Ali said to them: 'Are you asking me to be unfair and unjust to the poor and the weak of the Arabs and the non-Arabs?

Doing so may be good politics but is not good ethics. If I were to act upon your advice, I would, in effect, be imitating the pagans. Is that what you want me to do? What is important for me, is

the pleasure of God, and not the pleasure of the Arab nobles. If I were distributing my personal wealth to the Muslims, I could not discriminate against the non-Arabs and the clients. But the wealth that I am distributing to them now, is not mine; it's their own. How can I show discrimination? How can I deprive a man of his share only because he is a non-Arab, and give it to someone else only because he is an Arab? This I shall never do."

Not only the Quraysh and the Arab aristocracy did not receive any preferential treatment from Ali over the non-Quraysh and the non-Arab in the distribution of public funds, but the members of his own family received less than anyone else in his dominions. One of them was his own elder brother, Aqeel.

He considered his stipend to be so small that he could not live on it, and he left Kufa and went to Syria where he lived in style and luxury at the court of Muawiya. Ali repeatedly warned Muslims of the dangers of moral compromise and of subverting their worth to materialism.

When Ali ascended the throne of khilafat, he committed himself to putting an end to the economic caste-system of the Arabs, and their unIslamic capitalist system. Within four years of his incumbency, he had fulfilled his commitment. The caste-system of the Muslims and their new capitalist system, both had vanished from his dominions.

All the 'high priests' of the economic caste-system of the Arabs, and their neo-capitalists found sanctuary in Damascus. If Muslims are equal, then their equality ought to be an obvious thing but it was not. Ali made it obvious. And if Islam prides itself on its attachment to justice, then it (justice) ought to be a visible thing but it was not. Ali made it visible. He made equality obvious and justice visible.

From his own officials, Ali demanded and exacted personal and fiscal integrity of the highest order. He served notice to everyone that even the most powerful office in the government cannot be used as a sanctuary for miscreants nor its legitimate privileges employed to withhold evidence of wrong-doing.

What were the mainsprings of Ali's actions and policies? It appears that every detail of his life was governed by taqwa (the fear of doing something that would displease God). He entertained only that thought, he uttered only that word, and he performed only that deed which he knew, would win for him the pleasure of God. His every thought, his every word, and his every deed, was tested on the touchstone of taqwa. His whole existence revolved around one question, viz., what shall I think or what shall I say or what shall I do that will please my Creator.

To the Machiavellians of all times the ends have justified the means. To them, all means, fair or foul, are legitimate, if they can achieve a certain end. But if Ali had to employ a certain means

to achieve an end, it had to have the sanction of Al-Qur'an al-Majid. On numerous occasions, the so-called worldly wisdom and prudence dictated a certain course of action. But if such a course of action was repugnant to Qur'an, Ali spurned it, and he did so with utter disregard to consequences.

This policy made Ali extremely predictable and vulnerable. It is said that if one has the ability to predict, then one has a certain amount of control over a situation or a person, and control means power. The enemies of Ali knew exactly what he would or what he would not do in a given situation. This foreknowledge of his actions and reactions gave them an advantage over him, and they were ever ready to exploit it. They also took the maximum advantage of his chivalry and gallantry.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Ali's government was its "transparency" and its openness. If ever there was a government that was "transparent," it was his government. He was suspicious of secretiveness, and believed only in "open covenants openly arrived at." Muawiya himself boasted that the key to his own "success" was in his secretiveness, and he attributed Ali's "failure" to the fact that he (Ali) did not hide anything from his subjects.

From the Machiavellian point of view, Muawiya was right. He kept others guessing about each of his moves whereas in the case of Ali, no guesswork was necessary. In dealing with Ali, his enemies could dispense with speculation of all kinds. To him, secretiveness smacked of deviousness, and if anything was devious, it was not acceptable to him.

From the first day, he placed the credo of snooping and secrecy under interdiction in his dominions. When a friend asked Ali why he had agreed to take charge of the government with its myriad's of problems, he said that he did so to restore the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, knowing that no one else in Dar-ul-Islam had this ability. After the battle of Siffin, Ali said in one of his prayers:

"O God! You know well that the struggle we have waged, has not been for the sake of winning political power, nor for acquiring territory nor for worldly goods; rather, it is my aim to implement the luminous principles of Your exalted religion, and to reform the conduct of affairs in Your land, so that Your humble slaves may live in security, and Your laws which have remained unfulfilled, might be established and executed once again as they were in the time of Your Messenger and Friend, Muhammad."

Ali was unable to conceal his contempt for and his hostility to those Arabs who, as "the gluttons of privilege" had become immensely rich and powerful. He and they "repelled" each other. On the other hand, he was irresistibly drawn toward the poor and the powerless. They were his friends. Among the rich and the powerful, Abu Sufyan and Mughira bin Shaaba, had

made tentative attempts to ingratiate themselves with him but he had snubbed them, and had put an unbridgeable distance between himself and them. Ali turned his caliphate into a "school" in which he educated or rather reeducated the Muslim umma. He faced an enormous reeducation job, but he carried it out with consummate style and characteristic flair. He was a "one-man university" in Islam. The "curriculum" in his "university" laid the greatest emphasis on character-building of the Muslims. He found the "blueprint" for character-building in the Book of God, and he found "precedents" for it in the life of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. At the "university," he interpreted the "blueprint" and the "precedents" for the edification and the education of his "pupils" – the Muslim umma. Ali was the champion of the vision that united mankind in obedience to its Creator. He was the champion of our Creator's vision of justice, truthfulness, purity and peace. The central dedication of his life was to restore absolute justice to the Dar-ul-Islam. In this quest, he was eminently successful.

Ali's External Policy

Ali's critics often point out that he did not attack other countries as both his predecessors and successors did, and he did not push the frontiers of the empire of the Muslims in any direction. Ali was caliph for four years, and those years were shot with rebellions and civil war, and all his time was taken up in his efforts to restore peace to Dar-ul-Islam. But if there had been no rebellions and no civil war, and if Ali's reign at home had been peaceful and tranquil, would he have embarked upon invasions and conquests of neighboring countries? There is no way of answering this question, but judging by his character and temperament, it appears highly unlikely that he would have done so. It appears highly improbable that he would have sought "glory" for himself or for Islam by overrunning other countries. Quest for such "glory" ran counter to his nature. The key to the understanding of Ali's policy at home and abroad, is in the fact that he was the heir and successor of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and the Messenger of peace. Muhammad was the last Messenger of God to mankind. He was the embodiment of the highest attributes of character and personality. In his life, there is the most perfect example for all Muslims to imitate, and his program for the welfare, happiness and salvation of mankind, is the most comprehensive. Apostleship and Prophethood are the greatest honors that any mortal can receive in this world. To be an apostle or a prophet means to be chosen by God. A man must indeed be endowed

with most extraordinary qualities to be picked by the Creator Himself out of the immense mass of humanity to be His messenger to mankind.

Such a man was Muhammad. He was picked out by God to be His instrument in implementing His plan and program for the world. He lifted the human race out of its moral and spiritual captivity, and put it beyond the ignorance, fear and isolation which beset it. God had sent many other messengers before him but he was the last one of them all, and the message he brought, was not subject to the limitations of time and place; it was for all time, and its keynote was universalism.

Muhammad was indeed endowed with the most extraordinary qualities of head, hand and heart. Anyone of these qualities could easily make him the most remarkable man in history. But at this point, we shall consider only one of his many qualities – the quality of mercy. He personified mercy. Al-Qur'an al-Majid has called Muhammad "a mercy for all creatures."

We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all Creatures. (Chapter 21; verse 107)

This quality of mercy in Muhammad as Messenger of God, is incompatible with aggression and lust for conquest. Warfare and bloodshed cannot coexist with mercy.

The message that Muhammad brought from Heaven, and which he promulgated on earth, is called Islam, and Islam means "peace and security." Islam is the religion of peace. A man who accepts Islam is known as a Muslim, i.e., one who has made peace. Muhammad himself defined a Muslim as a person from whose tongue and hands, other peaceful citizens are safe. One of the key words in Islamic terminology is Iman which means "the principles of peace," and the person who has Iman is called a Momin which means "a man who abides by the principles of peace." Muhammad who brought God's last message to this earth, is called al-Rasul al-Amin, i.e., "the Messenger of Trust." Makkah, the city in which he delivered this message, is called al-Baladul-Amin, i.e., "the City of Peace." Makkah, therefore, is a sanctuary, and whoever enters it, is safe from harm.

The name of the mother of Muhammad is Amina which again means "peace." The name of his father is Abdullah which means "the slave of God." As slave of God, he obeys God, and does not trespass on the rights of others – the other slaves of God. Amina and Abdullah brought the Messenger of Peace into the world to put an end to bloodshed and to spread the blessing of peace on earth.

The name of Muhammad's nurse was Umm Ayman which means "the mother of Fortune." The angel who brought the message of Heaven to Muhammad, is called al-Rooh-ul-Amin i.e., "the Spirit of Trust." His successor is called Amir al-Mominin i.e., "the leader of the peaceful believers." Therefore, from beginning to end, Islam is peace and security.

Another key word in Islamic terminology is jihad. There is so much fog around this word that it can hardly be seen for what it is. In most non-Muslim circles, the jihad of Islam is equated with wanton aggression which it is not. Literally, jihad means effort or struggle. One of the most commendable forms of jihad imposed upon a Muslim is to fight against ignorance and injustice, and to overcome one's own lusts and baser instincts. Islam has recognized war as an institution but has allowed its followers to fight only:

(a) either in self-defense,
(b) or, to impose penalties for breach of peace, also called Qisas in Arabic which means "retaliation." Qisas is permitted only to check aggression. Islam does not allow Muslims to wage war for any third reason.

In Makkah, Muhammad presented to the Arabs a program of religious, ethical, moral and social reconstruction. After the migration to Medina, he added an economic and a political component to it. It had taken him thirteen years in Makkah to lay the groundwork of Islam, and it took him another ten years in Medina to build and to complete its "edifice." These 23 years were the most crucial years in the career of Islam as a universal system.

When Muhammad began to implement his program, he was immediately and inevitably confronted by multiple challenges. Characteristically, Islam produced Ali ibn Abi Talib as its response to those challenges. The 23 years of the ministry of Muhammad as the Messenger of God, were a long series of crises – both of war and of peace – and Ali surmounted them all. Ali was the heir and successor of Muhammad. When he began to implement Muhammad's program, he too was confronted by multiple challenges. A quarter-century had passed since the death of his master, Muhammad, and since then many Muslims had begun to worship economic and political power as their new "idols.

" Idol-smashing was nothing new to Ali. Many years earlier, he and his master, Muhammad, had destroyed the idols of Quraysh in the Kaaba. Now he was called upon once again to destroy the new "idols" of the Arabs. But he realized that the champions of the new "idols" would rise in their defense just as the champions of the old idols had risen in their defense in the times of Muhammad.

Islam was a revolutionary movement in the sense that it was an emphatic end of an old and fossilized, i.e., polytheistic era, and the beginning of a new and dynamic, i.e., monotheistic era. Its aims are set forth in Al-Qur'an al-Majid, and its Prophet has been charged with specific duties, as we read in the following verse:

A similar (favor have you already received) in that We have sent among you an Apostle of your own, rehearsing to you Our signs, and sanctifying you, and instructing you in scripture and good

sense, and in new knowledge. (Chapter 2; verse 151)

These aims, obviously, are so important that they have been repeated, for emphasis, on three other occasions. They occur in the following verses of Qur'an:

1. Chapter 2; verse 129

2. Chapter 3; verse 164

3. Chapter 62; verse 2

The aims of Ali's government were the same as the aims of Qur'an. His policy, therefore, was:

1. to rehearse the Signs of God (before the Muslims);

2. to sanctify them (the Muslims);

3. to instruct them (the Muslims) in Scripture, and in good sense;

4. to instruct them (the Muslims) in new knowledge.

As stated above, when Ali tried to enforce this policy, he met resistance, but not from the pagans. Most incredibly, he met resistance from the Muslims. The Muslims, and not the pagans, thwarted him in the execution of his plans, and in the realization of his aims.

The aims set forth in Qur'an for the Muslim umma do not comprehend conquest of other lands by force of arms. Those critics of Ali who lament that he did not add new territories to the map of Islam, will also have to lament the uniform silence of Qur'an on the subject of expanding the dominions of Islam through war and aggression. In fact, judging by its text, Qur'an appears to have no interest in military adventures of any kind.

Most of the political and military leaders of the world agree with President Charles de Gaulle when he said: "The sword is the axis of the world," which means that the world revolves around the sword. The medieval French called this concept the "fort mayne" – the strong arm; i.e., whoever has the strongest arm, rules.

Many leaders also agree with the political philosophy summed up in the maxim that all is fair in love and war. In pursuit of their ambitions, they have considered it quite fair to wage war upon other nations, to kill their men, and to enslave their women and children. If some of these leaders have soaked the world in blood, and have obliterated cities and civilizations, they have been acclaimed as the greatest heroes and the greatest military geniuses of history. And yet, their heroism and genius have only proved Gibbon right when he said:

"What is history but a register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind."

Does Islam also equate its program with lust for the conquest of alien nations? If it does, then how is it different from the programs for world conquest of such military leaders as Alexander

the Great, Julius Caesar, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Hulago Khan, Tamerlane, Napoleon and Hitler all of whom marched with those "sisters of victory – murder, pillage, fire, destruction, captivity, loot and rape?

" All wars are alike in at least three particulars: death, destruction and rape. The pages of history are stained with the blood of the weak and the innocent shed by the powerful and the ruthless.

If Muslims also stained the pages of history with blood, is it the proof of the truthfulness or even of the greatness of Islam? Can Muslims take pride in unprovoked wars of aggression and conquests? If they do, they would find themselves at odds with the Book of God which states: There has come to you from God a new light , and a perspicuous Book – wherewith God guideth all who seek His good pleasure to ways of peace and safety, and leadeth them out of darkness, by His will, unto the light – guideth them to a path that is straight. (Chapter 5; verses 17,18) Many Muslims are held in fascination by the "military glories" of the century 632-732 of their history. President Lincoln put military "glories" in correct perspective for the glory buffs when he said:

"Military glory is the attractive rainbow that rises in showers of blood."

Whose blood? The blood of the weak, the inoffensive, and in most cases, the innocent! President Truman once called war "the ugliest invention of man." Is there any invention uglier than war? What invention other than war has the power to kill men on mass scale, and to make children orphans and women widows? What other invention of man has the power to reduce cities to rubble and cinders, and to breed undying hatred and hostility among nations? The truth is that Islam and war do not blend. Islam is a blessing of God. In fact, it's the greatest blessing of God on earth. Its name means peace; and peace and security are blessings whereas fighting and bloodshed are a curse. The wars and the conquests of the Arabs did not exactly jibe with the program of Islam. Many of these wars were prompted by political necessity or expediency, or by sheer lust for conquest.

Most of the Arabs who went out of Arabia, after the death of the Prophet, were not Islam's missionaries. They were plain conquerors. Most of them lacked the knowledge of Islam, and they lacked interest in spreading Islam. Most of them were born and bred in the pagan tradition, and they had been fighting against the Muslims only two or three years earlier.

G. E. Grunebaum

Mohammed himself was quite aware that the Bedouin had been only superficially won over. "The Arabs (i.e. the Bedouin) say, we have adopted the faith (amanna). Say (to them): Faith ye

have not. Rather say: We have become Muslim (aslamna). For faith has not yet entered your hearts." (Koran 49:15) (Classical Islam – A History 600 – 1258, p. 51, 1970)

Though at the beginning, the Arabs were sent out of the peninsula for political reasons, as stated above, soon they found reasons of their own to maintain the momentum of conquest. The propulsive force in their case was the love of booty. Arabs were invincible in war if they had the assurance of obtaining booty. Apart from this, there was little else that interested them. If they had no hope of obtaining booty, they had no interest in fighting. The attitude of the Muslims of Medina toward Uthman during the last days of his life, makes this point quite clear. They were the same Muslims who had repeatedly repulsed the attacks of the pagans. But now in their city, the head of their state was besieged in his own palace. The besiegers were only a few hundred strangers, with no roots in town, and with no support of any armed force. The siege lasted for 49 days, and was raised only when Uthman was killed. But the Muslims of Medina were not roused to act. Why not? They were not roused to act in defense of their khalifa because they had no hope of obtaining booty. The love of the Arabs for plunder was an old addiction. It was this love which was responsible for the disaster of Uhud. The lovers of booty abandoned a strategic pass, in defiance of the orders of the Prophet, and by doing so, they changed victory into defeat. Qur'an has also borne testimony to this predilection of the Arabs in verses 152 and 153 of its third chapter.

M. Shibli

A most complex problem was the love of the Arabs for plunder. It was this love which triggered most of their wars. In pagan times, the love of booty was an obsession for them. But when they became Muslim, their love for booty did not diminish in them. It is reported that on one occasion, the Apostle of God sent some of his Companions to a certain tribe for taking punitive action. The leaders of the tribe in question came to ask if the Muslims would negotiate terms of peace with them. The captain of the group of the Companions said that peace was very welcome to him if they accepted Islam. The tribe accepted Islam whereupon the Companions returned to Medina. But they were very unhappy at this outcome, and they reproached their captain for depriving them of the opportunity to obtain booty for themselves. They were not content merely with reproaching him, but also, upon arrival in Medina, complained to the Apostle against him (their captain). But the Apostle applauded the decision of the captain, and said that God would reward him for saving the lives of many people. (Life of

the Prophet, Vol. II, 1976, Azamgarh, India).

These companions of the Prophet were the "model" Muslims. They were supposed to be "unworldly." It would be entirely logical to assume that since they were the personal friends of the Messenger of God, they would not be contaminated with the lust for riches. Or, if, at one time, they were contaminated with such lust, it would be logical to assume that his companionship modified their character to such a degree that the love of booty was no longer an obsession with them that it once was. But they proved these assumptions to be wrong. It were these "pious" and "devout" companions who were eager to plunder a tribe. But the tribe in question accepted Islam just in time, and thus escaped their clutches. The love of the rank-and-file Arabs (the non-companions, the commoners) for plunder, was even less restrained.

Sir John Glubb

While the Bedouins had formed the mass of those Arab armies which had conquered Persia and Byzantium for the faith, the instinct for plunder was ineradicably implanted in their nature.

(The Great Arab Conquests, p. 313, 1967)

Love of plunder was an instinct of the Arabs. Ali wanted to change, or, at least, to sublimate this instinct, and he tried. But the attempt was only partially successful, and the cost was prohibitively high.

Both during and after the battle of Basra (the battle of the Camel), Ali had forbidden his troops to plunder the camp of the enemy and the city of Basra. It was a great disappointment to them. They, however, had no intention of giving up the fruits of their labors so easily. They believed that the city of Basra was their prize as conquerors, and that they had a right to make prisoners of the enemy. When this right was denied to them by Ali, they threatened to disobey his orders. It was a dangerous situation for Ali. He had to squelch mutiny of his troops. This he succeeded in doing when he posed the following question to the potential mutineers: "Which one among you will take Ayesha, the mother of the believers, as his share of the prisoners of war?"

This question had never occurred to the mutineers, and they were left utterly bewildered and speechless by it. How could a Muslim make Ayesha, the widow of his Prophet, a prisoner, and still remain a Muslim? They then acquiesced into accepting Ali's fiat – no plunder and no captives!

Nevertheless, the loss of opportunity to plunder Basra, rankled in the hearts of many of Ali's soldiers, and they also resented the curbs he had imposed upon them. Their resentment

simmered until it flared up in the battle of Siffin. It was this resentment which was so deftly exploited by Muawiya that it broke out as mutiny, and Ali was compelled to call off the battle which he had almost won.

Source:

A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims

CE 570 to 661

By: Sayed Ali Asgher Razwy