

The Long View

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From Spiritual Liberation to Temporal Occupation: on the Coloniality of Meaning



**RANDA
ABDEL-FATTAH**

Terra
Nullius/Nakba

RAMZY BAROUD

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Global South: Why Israel's
'Scramble for Africa' Must
be Countered

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The Qur'an Honours
Women in the Same
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(Re)Connecting with
the Qur'an at the Time
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In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful

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**Faisal Bodi and
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If as the saying goes, history is written by the victor and never the vanquished, it may go some way to explaining the hegemonistic status of western political and academic discourse on colonialism. The process of colonial settlement is accompanied by a rewriting of history such that the appalling evils and suffering inflicted on indigenous peoples is legitimised by academic sleight of hand. It is what the author of our lead article in this issue, **Randa Abdel-Fattah**, calls the "inversion of responsibility" whereby the colonial occupier shifts the burden of blame from the enactors of state violence to the victims. Occupied lands become places without people, as we hear in the case of Palestine, or where native inhabitants couldn't be expunged from the record as in Australia and Africa, they were barbarians who needed subordinating and civilising.

Accepting this rewritten history as a starting point for any discussions or political negotiations on restitution or justice means ceding the status of victim and the moral high ground. There is no morally justifiable case for Israel to exist as an exclusivist ethno-religious state on land belonging to Palestinians but the moment we accept that then we legitimise the outsider and intruder status currently conferred on those that have been dispossessed and colonised. "Every attempt to frame the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict' in the language of a two-state solution, or Israel being represented as a state founded as a refuge against the Nazi Holocaust, or this being a religious conflict is a move to deliberately redact the historical record," writes Abdel Fattah.

This was precisely the problem with the Oslo Accords signed in 1993 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. In return for recognising Israel's right to exist on pre-determined and yet to be determined Palestinian territory, the Palestinian leadership surrendered their position as victims of an illegal occupation to become morally equivalent parties in a land dispute. The subsequent years have vindicated critics of Oslo as the infinitely more powerful party reneged on its commitments under the agreement and exploited the moral equivalence to assist its return into the international fold.

Israel was for long a pariah in many parts of the world, especially those with a colonial past that, naturally, could empathise with the Palestinians. This was certainly the case on the African continent where at one point in the 1970's no African states, other than Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland, had official diplomatic relations with Israel. However, Oslo changed all that, as **Ramzy Baroud** writes in the second article of this issue. The "deal" allowed African leaders to buy into the illusion that Israel had agreed to comply with the international community's demands and a lasting peace was finally at hand. By the late 1990s, Israel had reactivated its ties with 39 African countries. And as Palestinians lost more land under Oslo, Israel gained many new, vital allies in Africa and elsewhere.

What seems to have escaped African leaders is that Israel continues to champion the same colonial mindset that enslaved and subjugated Africa for hundreds of years. Moreover, barefaced anti-African racism that

defines mainstream Israeli politics and society also seems of no consequence to the growing Israel fan club in Africa.

Just as the rewriting of history legitimised colonial settlement it has also sought to erase the histories of its victims. As western empires tightened their grip on their ill-gotten possessions in the era of colonialism a whole new discourse was created – Orientalism – to perpetuate and justify the subjugation of other peoples. This reconstruction of the East through Western eyes extended to cultural and religious beliefs and practices and where it was not possible to recast them, attention turned to misrepresenting them as factually implausible and/or morally repugnant.

Islamic societies were confronted by an onslaught from Western thinkers who now assumed to know how better to interpret their scriptures using more reliable, rigorous techniques. In the Muslim world, these overlaid a pre-existing religious hostility and gave rise to lingering misrepresentations, tropes no less, which helped to set in place a structural western animus to Muslims and Islam in the West.

Some of these distortions have found support in misinterpretations of a key verse of the Qur'an, according to **Imam Muhammad al-Asi**. In our third piece in this issue he analyses the contention that the Qur'an advocates physical violence against women, taking issue with interpretations of the verse in Sura an-Nisa' which has been interpreted as conferring upon a husband the right to physically chastise his wife. Taking a linguistic approach he demonstrates how such interpretations are mistaken, and in any event, fly in the face of Quranic and Prophetic injunctions regarding the status of women.

Understanding correctly the import of Allah's revelation is a *sine qua non* of knowing His Will and drawing closer to Him, which is the ultimate goal of Muslims. Naturally then, from the very outset of Islam, Quranic hermeneutics have occupied a central place in religious literature. However, the sheer scale of *tafseer* or exegeses is such that it is often difficult for the newcomer to this genre to know where to begin. In our final piece, **Shaykh Mohammad Bahmanpour** tries to simplify this task for the uninitiated by providing an outline of the *tafsir* tradition. He takes issue with the prejudices, cultural, sectarian, religious and scientific, that have weighed upon the interpretation of the Qur'an down the centuries arguing that the act of interpreting requires us to look for guidance from within the Qur'an itself, not externally within a preferred sect or culture.

The power of words, it is clear, bears heavily on our current state as citizens of a world beset with ever increasing power imbalances. Whether it is our histories of oppression, ongoing occupations or the languages – divine or secular – through which we seek to reframe our existence and our liberation, understanding this is key. Whilst power has been abused against the many, the many can and must find the counterweight of justice through a continued search for meaning and the concomitant power that goes with it.

Faisal Bodi and Arzu Merali
Editors

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Terra Nullius/Nakba

The political and academic discourse on colonised countries is deliberately framed in such a way that it problematises the victim while exonerating and legitimising the villain. This has involved rewriting the historical record, a *sine qua non* of European colonialism, and for us to confront it requires challenging it and recognising the colonial matrix that binds the oppressors together, argues **Randa Abdel-Fattah**.

In his ground-breaking book *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that the West's failure to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution 'shows us that history is not simply the recording of facts and events, but a process of actively enforced silences, some unconscious, others quite deliberate'.

The settler-colonial logics underpinning the establishment and continuing logics of Israel as an ethno-religious state built on the land of the majority Palestinian population is routinely silenced and suppressed. It is also routinely erased in any understanding of how the governance regimes of Australia as a white settler state are shaped by its colonial origins.

What is at stake in upending this history? In naming the reality of Israel as a settler colonial enterprise? In framing justice for Indigenous people in terms of a deep and systematic project of decolonisation? What is threatened when we assert that the struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and Palestinians, are united in an indivisible anti-colonial struggle?

Silencing the overarching framework of settler colonialism accounts for why we continually see an inversion of responsibility in Australia and Palestine, whereby the white settler state of Australia, and the Israeli settler state, shift blame from the enactors of state violence to the victims. Palestinians are blamed for daring to refuse to acknowledge Israel's so-called right to exist as an ethno-religious state that privileges one ethno-racial group over all others; Palestinians are blamed for daring to refuse to acquiesce, accept, stop resisting. All attempts to shift blame are in effect an 'actively enforced silencing' of those who continue to testify to ethnic cleansing, depopulation, dispossession, massacres.

In Australia we see the ongoing failure of the state to take responsibility for colonial harms against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for systemic and institutionalised state violence, systemic oppression, and brutality. Intergenerational trauma and poverty caused by Commonwealth, state and territory race-based welfare laws and policies of successive governments throughout Australia, land theft, [stolen wages](#) and blackbirding—[Australia's hidden history of slavery](#)—are

never properly and justly accounted for. Poverty, shorter life expectancy, health disparities, [rates of incarceration](#), discrimination are not reckoned with as the ongoing effects of the violence of the settler state. Colonialism is forgotten and the language becomes one of 'lifestyle choices'.

Despite the landmark 'Bringing them home: The 'Stolen Children' report' of 1997, and Australia's National Apology to the [Stolen Generations](#) in 2008, the [majority of the Bringing Them Home recommendations have not yet been implemented](#). Indeed, [the rate of removal of Indigenous children in Australia has increased](#) and activists like [Grandmothers Against Removal](#) are working against the systemic removal of Indigenous children. The language of terra nullius permeates the subtle saviour discourse that underpins the child protection sector. This is a sector where we see a consistent thread of the logic of the colonial protection authority which held the original rights to control Indigenous children. Settler colonial structures underpin law and policy today. It is an example of what anthropologist [Ann Laura Stoller](#) describes as 'the everyday pervasive present-tense and presence of colonial power.'

A deep historical reading of both Black and Palestinian struggles as settler-colonialism problematises many hegemonies. One of these is the 'European/Western' prism of modernity and its refusal to engage with the colonial matrix of power. This colonial matrix of power is fundamental to my positionality as a settler of colour, as the daughter of a dispossessed Palestinian living in Australia on stolen land. The colonial project that created the state of Israel and dispossessed my father and his family from their homeland brought my father to another stolen land, Australia, in 1973—just two years after Indigenous people were counted in the national census for the first time.

A historical analysis is crucial in order to achieve justice and social transformation. We know this in Australia. Indigenous people who call for the abolishment of Australia Day because it marks the beginning of invasion, dispossession and genocide of Indigenous people are told to 'get over it'; accused of fixating on the past, instead of reckoning with it. The appalling

rate of Indigenous deaths in custody tends to be 'counted' from the [1991 Royal Commission](#) report, ignoring the trajectory of deaths by settler state violence since invasion.

We also know history matters to Palestinians. The systematic expunging of Palestinian bodies, identity, history and memory from Israel, as well as the collective forced amnesia around the *Nakba*, confronted me everywhere I turned when I visited Palestine. It's truly a remarkable feat in censorship to construct an entire state around a falsehood: to systematically seek to erase a people's existence, displacement, loss and nostalgia from both the past and present; to maintain the idea that nothing coherent, beautiful, legitimate, meaningful and non-Jewish predated Israel. In Jaffa, the tourist information plaques along the Corniche presented a multi-lingual history of the city covering thousands of years until the present day. There was nothing in Arabic. I took a photo there with my father, a personal stamp of our Palestinian presence. I subsequently found an [article online](#) about these signs which erase Palestinians from Jaffa's history. The only reference to Palestinians is a single line: 'In the year 1936, Arab barbarians attacked the Jewish neighbourhood'. The year 1936, the year of the Arab revolt, is also the year one of my great uncles was hanged by the British. I know nothing more about who he was or why he was killed. Because dispossession robs you of your personal archives.

Both in Australia and Israel, naming history, refusing erasure, provokes reactionary, oppressive political violence. In March 2011, the Israeli Knesset passed a law authorising the Finance Minister to reduce state funding or support to an institution if it engages in an "activity that is contrary to the principles of the state." Relevantly, the activities include "rejecting the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state" and "commemorating Independence Day or the day of the establishment of the state as a day of mourning." Palestinians and their supporters are punished for [commemorating the day they lost their land](#). To insist that the Nakba will not be 'deliberately silenced' is to invoke the wrath of a racist legal system and state apparatus structured on repressing the historical record.

In Australia, Indigenous activists either calling for the abolition of Australia Day or a 'change of date' from 26 January have been silenced, attacked and vilified in some astonishingly egregious ways. To speak truth to power, to resist terra nullius in all its present manifestations and expressions, to properly re-name Australia Day as Invasion Day, is a threat to the white settler state. Consider that in 2018, Indigenous activist 24-year-old Tarneen Onus-Williams delivered a speech at an Invasion Day rally in Melbourne. Addressing a crowd of 60 000, Onus-Williams said, 'Fuck Australia, hope it burns to the ground' and called for the abolition of Australia Day. For this, Onus-Williams was subjected to relentless vitriolic attacks, including from the Victorian state government and Opposition, and 'dozens of fiery news articles, including some attacking her family'. Former Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett attacked Onus-Williams for 'inappropriate language' and suggested she, an Indigenous woman, 'buy a one-way plane ticket'. There were calls for her removal from her role with the government-funded Koori Youth Council, and demands for the Council to be defunded. That the settler state will brook no dissent, and crack down on all decolonisation efforts, is exemplified in the consequences meted out to local councils who have dared to cancel the national ritual of citizenship ceremonies being held on Australia Day. [Such councils have been stripped by the Federal Government of their right to hold such ceremonies.](#)

Every effort to shut down dissent, stifle the terms of discourse and debate, impose punitive measures is exemplary of how settler colonies seek to control the way the past is remembered, and the way the future is imagined.

Palestinians, for example, are repeatedly met with a framing of their struggle for justice and freedom based on terms which mark 1967 as the starting point of the 'conflict' to be 'solved'. This accounts for why negotiations and policies remain focused on conflict, not ethnic cleansing;

occupation, at the expense of the right of return; the Green Line, not 1948 historic Palestine; a 'two-state' solution, not racial apartheid and land theft. In Australia, successive governments continue to insist on advocating a bipartisan policy of support for a two-state solution and, crucially, a commitment to Israel's so-called 'right to exist'. A commitment to the 'right to exist' mantra can only be sustained if ethnic cleansing, depopulation and dispossession are expunged from the terms of debate.

Refugees, the right of return, the trans-

What we are witnessing in Palestine and Australia are extensions of settler colonial violence. Every attempt to frame the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict' in the language of a two-state solution, or Israel being represented as a state founded as a refuge against the Nazi Holocaust, or this being a religious conflict is a move to deliberately redact the historical record

ferral of British mandate colonial frameworks to Israel's control of the Palestinian population from 1948 are ignored. To begin at 1967 automatically signals an ideological position: settler colonialism is extinguished from the narrative. But a historical analysis is everything. Settler colonialism and its racial logics is there, in the historical record, the explicit basis upon which the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, appealed to Cecil Rhodes for support. Rhodes, having colonized the land of the Shona people in Africa and renamed it Rhodesia, was specifically approached because of the (correctly) assumed shared sympathy for a colonial endeavour. Herzl wrote: 'You are being invited to help make history.

[I]t doesn't involve Africa, but a piece of Asia Minor; not Englishmen but Jews... How, then, do I happen to turn to you since this is an out-of-the-way matter for you? How indeed? [Because it is something colonial...](#)'

History matters to both First Nations people in Australia, and Palestinians in historical and occupied Palestine. And these histories are, crucially, connected. That is, after all, how the tentacles of the British empire extended throughout the world. In his book, *Righteous Victims*, Israeli historian [Benny Morris](#) wrote that the early Zionist settlers tended to view the Arabs as 'primitive, dishonest, fatalistic, lazy, savage – much as the European colonists viewed the natives elsewhere in Asia or Africa... [I]n most *moshavot*, Arabs were treated like the indigenous peoples in other places colonised by Europeans.' In Australia, Joseph Banks, the British scientist who accompanied James Cook, described the Indigenous people encountered on invasion as nomadic, wandering 'like Arabs from place to place'. The language of settler colonialism—wielded by the British or European Zionists—was fundamentally expressed through a shared racialized grammar. Consider that Cecil Rhodes is seen as having provided the blueprints for South Africa's system of apartheid. And South Africa's Apartheid system was modelled closely on Queensland's *Aboriginal Protection Act* (1897). This is the settler-colonial matrix of power that is deliberately silenced.

Narratives about history, and collective imaginaries about liberation struggles, are powerful mobilisers of solidarity and activism. What we are witnessing in Palestine and Australia are extensions of settler colonial violence. Every attempt to frame the Israeli-Palestinian 'conflict' in the language of a two-state solution, or Israel being represented as a state founded as a refuge against the Nazi Holocaust, or this being a religious conflict is a move to deliberately redact the historical record. Likewise, in Australia, we see time and time again that white settler state violence is the

New Publication

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engine behind what can be described as martial law in the [Northern Territory Intervention, Indigenous deaths in custody, the carceral system that disproportionality imprisons black bodies, shuts down Indigenous dissent and protests](#). And yet this is routinely denied, obscured, ignored, certainly never leading to any accountability. As [Teela Reid](#), Wiradjuri and Wailwan woman, lawyer and human rights activist, argues in relation to systemic racism and the over-incarceration of Indigenous people: 'The truth is Australia is a colony built on racism, it is written into the laws and operates within its institutions. Systemic racism requires systemic change. If you deny racism exists, then you are part of the problem. This land always was, always will be sovereign Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land, sky and sea'. Unceded sovereignty, structural settler colonial racism and accountability are crucial to any reckoning of justice.

Last August, 29-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole for his massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in Aotearoa-New Zealand in March 2019. Following mainstream media coverage and commentary, it was not at all surprising that, like the commentary that circulated a year earlier, the very macro structures of settler colonialism that the Christchurch shooting is grounded upon were disregarded. We have here a white supremacist terrorist attack committed by a white Australian male against Muslims in a neighbouring settler state and yet public conversation remains fixated on the false idea that white supremacy is an ugly, violent anomaly to Australia and New Zealand's 'we are better than this'/'this is not us' attitude. It is, to quote Indigenous professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a prime example of how the possessive logics of patriarchal white sovereignty operate to perpetually disavow and disappear Indigenous peoples. Settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty are white discursive possessions, left in or out of public conversations. Race, Moreton-Robinson power-

fully argues, is the organising grammar of Australian society, rooted in patriarchal White sovereignty, in a politics of White anxiety over dispossession shaped by a refusal of Indigenous sovereignty. The patriarchal white sovereignty that refuses Indigenous sovereignty arguably shaped the logic of a young white man who carried out a murderous rampage against Muslims in Australia's settler colony neighbour on the basis of his anxiety over 'invasion'. When, in his manifesto, Tarrant described immigrants as 'invaders' in the midst of a 'white genocide', referring to Muslims as 'the most despised group of invaders in the West', his anxiety over genocide, over dispossession, was a projection of his fears of white people having done to them what they did (and still do) to Indigenous populations and brown people attacked and killed globally in the war on terror. 'The unfinished business of Indigenous sovereignty', Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues, is what 'continues to psychically disturb patriarchal white sovereignty'.

It is not a stretch, in fact it is arguably a diagnosis we have historically seen play out over and over again, that settler violence, whether by white Australia, or by gun-wielding settlers with Brooklyn accents in the West Bank, is rooted in this psychic disturbance. The late academic Patrick Wolfe powerfully argued that settler colonialism is a structure, not a past event. The racial violence against Indigenous people and Palestinian people is enacted through ongoing structures of settler colonialism which are based on a historical matrix of power.

The reason why this analytical framing is so threatening— so 'psychically disturbing'— to white supremacists and Zionists is because it is a framework that instantly opens up a powerful, unyielding transnational, global, collective solidarity movement. The Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement is condemned and dismissed as 'anti-Semitic' in order to obscure the historical roots of Zionism as a settler colonial political project. In [Australia, a historic statement of solidarity for](#)

Palestinian people signed by over 900 academics and artists including prominent Indigenous leaders, elders, artists and writers was ignored and silenced by mainstream Australian media. Shared, global struggles are a threat not only to white supremacy and Zionism, but to liberal multiculturalism which limits anti-racism to diversity politics or interpersonal prejudice, never decolonization, never the dismantling of global power structures, systems and institutions.

Acclaimed philosopher, academic, activist and writer Angela Davis writes, 'When we are engaged in the struggle against racist violence...we can't forget the connections with Palestine. In many ways, we have to engage in an exercise of intersectionality. Of always foregrounding those connections so that people remember that nothing happens in isolation'. The connections and intersections of state-sanctioned violence are key. Nakba/Terra Nullius; 'We are here, because you were there' (Ambalavaner Sivanandan). Recognising this colonial matrix heralds ongoing and historic solidarities between different movements against systemic and institutionalised state violence, systemic oppression, and brutality— and that indeed is a powerful force to be reckoned with.

• Randa Abdel-Fattah

is a prominent Palestinian Egyptian Muslim writer, anti-racism advocate and Islamophobia scholar. She is currently a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Sociology at Macquarie University researching the generational impact of the war on terror on Muslim and non-Muslim youth. Randa's books include *Islamophobia and Everyday Multiculturalism* (2018), the co-edited anthology *Arab, Australian, Other: Stories on Race and Identity and Coming of Age in the War on Terror*, due out with New South Books in 2021. Randa is also the multi-award-winning author of 11 novels published in over 20 countries including multiple translations, stage productions in the US and Australia, and a graphic novel series (China).

NEW publication

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by Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria

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Restoring Palestine in the Global South: Why Israel's 'Scramble for Africa' Must be Countered

Israel's failure to win over European states has been countered with a push to court African nations, with more than a little success. The natural affinity of African governments with Palestine, based on a shared history of colonisation, has seen a marked erosion as the Zionist state has exploited developmental imperatives by dangling economic and military inducements. **Ramzy Baroud** charts the rise of Israel's influence on the continent.

In September 2017, the organizers of the Israel-Africa Summit decided to indefinitely [postpone](#) their event which was scheduled to be held in Lome, the capital of Togo, on October 23-27 of the same year. What was seen by Israeli leaders as a temporary setback was the result of intense, behind-the-scenes [lobbying](#) of several African and Arab countries, including South Africa, Algeria, and Morocco.

The postponement, or the cancellation of the conference, was hardly the end of the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to court Africa. In January 2019, news reports announced that Tel Aviv [had established](#) diplomatic relations with Chad and that Mali, a Muslim majority country, [would follow suit](#) in the near future.

Israel's interests in Africa have historically aimed at breaking the Zionist State's political isolation, especially in the Middle East, and also exploiting Africa's rich resources. Presently, much more technologically advanced, Israel is able to [offer](#) its superior 'security' and irrigation technology to poor African countries in exchange for diplomatic ties and support at the United Nations. The Israeli gambit is working, especially as African leaders, many of whom lack any true democratic credentials, hope that their closeness to Israel will protect them against Western - especially American - meddling and scrutiny.

But will Israel succeed in reversing its own isolation in Africa and, by extension, isolate Palestine and the Palestinians?

Embracing, then Rejecting Israel

Israel's influence on the African continent is growing and, as a direct result, Africa's historically vocal support for the Palestinian struggle on the international arena is dwindling. The continent's rapprochement with Israel comes at a diplomatic and political cost for Palestine because, for decades, Africa has stood as a

vanguard against all racist ideologies, including Zionism - the ideology behind Israel's establishment on the ruins of historic Palestine. If Africa succumbs to Israeli enticement and pressures, thus fully embracing the Zionist state, the Palestinian people would lose a treasured partner in their struggle for freedom and human rights.

[According to](#) Israeli political analyst, Pinhas Anbari, Israel's current "charm offensive in Africa" started after Israel failed to convince European states to support its policies vis-a-vis the Palestinians. "When Europe openly expressed its support for the establishment of a Palestinian state, Israel made a strategic decision to focus on Africa." But Europe's continued [support](#) for a Palestinian state and occasional criticism of the illegal Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories was not the only reason behind Israel's decision to turn its focus towards Africa.

Most African countries - like most countries in the Global South - have long been [voting](#) in favour of pro-Palestinian resolutions at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), further contributing to Israel's sense of isolation on the international stage. As a result, winning back Africa became a key goal in Israeli international affairs - "winning back", because Africa has not always been hostile towards Israel.

The initial African affinity for Israel began in the 1950s but ceased abruptly in the early 1970s. Ghana officially [recognized](#) Israel in 1956, just eight years after the latter's inception, initiating a trend that continued amongst African countries for years to come. By the early 1970s, Israel had established a strong position for itself on the continent. On the eve of the 1973 Israel-Arab war, Israel had [full diplomatic ties](#) with 33 African countries.

"The October War", however, changed all of this. Back then, under Egyptian leadership, Arab countries functioned, to some extent, with a unified political strategy. When African countries had to choose be-

tween Israel - a country born out of Western colonial designs - and the Arabs - who had suffered at the hands of Western colonialism, as much as Africa did - they, naturally backed the Arabs. One after the other, African countries began severing their ties with Israel. Soon enough, no African state, other than Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland, [had](#) official diplomatic relations with Israel.

Oslo, the End of Solidarity

As Israel exited the stage in Africa in the mid-1970s, solidarity with Palestine began to rise - especially as it was rightly understood that the struggle in Palestine was integral to the pan-African liberation project. The Organization of African Unity - the precursor to the African Union - in its 12th ordinary session held in Kampala in 1975, became the first international body to recognize, on a large scale, the inherent racism in Israel's Zionist ideology by adopting [Resolution 77 \(XII\)](#). This very Resolution was cited in [UNGA Resolution 3379](#), adopted in November of that same year, which determined that "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination".

"Taking note also of resolution 77 (XII) adopted by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Organization of African Unity at its twelfth ordinary session,^{2/} held at Kampala from 28 July to 1 August 1975, which considered 'that the racist regime in occupied Palestine and the racist regimes in Zimbabwe and South Africa have a common imperialist origin, forming a whole and having the same racist structure and being organically linked in their policy aimed at repression of the dignity and integrity of the human being', ... determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination."

Resolution 3379 remained in effect until it was revoked by the General Assembly in 1991, under intense US pressure.

Regrettably, Africa's solidarity with Palestine began to erode in the 1990s. It was during this time that the US-sponsored so-called 'peace process' gained serious momentum, resulting in the [Oslo Accords](#) and other agreements that normalized the Israeli occupation without Palestinians attaining their freedom and basic human rights. With many meetings and handshakes between beaming Israeli and Palestinian officials featuring regularly in news media, many African nations bought into the illusion that a lasting peace was finally at hand. By the late 1990s, Israel [had reactivated](#) its ties with 39 African countries. As Palestinians lost more land under Oslo, Israel gained many new, vital allies in Africa; in fact, all over the world. Yet, Israel's full-fledged 'scramble for Africa' - as a political ally, economic partner and a client for its 'security' and weapons technologies - did not fully manifest itself until recently.

Israel's success in recapturing the support of many African countries was not entirely of its own making. Arab politics have shifted massively since the mid-1970s. Not only are Arab countries no longer speaking in one voice, but they have no unified strategy regarding Africa - or anywhere else, for that matter. On the contrary, some Arab governments are actively siding with Tel Aviv and Washington against Palestinians. The Bahrain Economic Conference, [held](#) in Manama on June 25-26, 2019, was a case in point. While the Conference provided no tangible economic support to Palestinians, it eventually resulted in further normalization between Israel and Arab countries. On August 13, 2020, Israel and the United Arab Emirates signed a [joint statement](#) in Washington, opening the stage for full diplomatic normalization, a route subsequently followed by Bahrain also.

Moreover, the Palestinian leadership has itself shifted its political focus away from the Global South, especially since the signing of the Oslo Accords. For decades, Africa was insignificant in the limited and self-serving calculations of the Palestinian Authority (PA). For the PA, only Washington, London, Madrid, Oslo and Paris carried any geopolitical importance - arguably one of the greatest political miscalculations made by the Palestinian leadership.

Palestine and Africa: Shared History

The reason that solidarity for Palestine in Africa remains strong is directly related to the shared past and present experiences between the long-oppressed Palestinians and the African peoples, whereas Israel, like Europe, represents the cruel colonizer with an insatiable appetite for resources and cheap labour.

Additionally, European exploitation of Africa has never truly ended. The attempt at dominating the continent using old and new strategies continues to define Western relationships with the rich continent. This ongoing exploitation has given new life to classic anti-colonial and liberation discourse, still visible in academic and intellectual circles. As opposed to traditional colonialism, neocolonialism now defines the relationship between many independent African countries and their former colonists. Political meddling, economic control and, at times, military interventions - as in the recent cases of [Libya](#) and [Mali](#) - point to the unfortunate reality that Africa remains, in myriad ways, hostage to Western priorities, interests and diktats.

Netanyahu attempted not only to redefine the actual mission of Zionist colonialism, but to rob Palestinians of their own history as well

In the infamous [Berlin Conference](#) of 1884, Western colonial regimes attempted to mediate among the various powers that were competing over Africa's riches, a period known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. It apportioned to each a share of the African continent, as if Africa was uninhabited and the property of the West and its white colonists to do with as they please. Millions of Africans died in this protracted, bloody chapter unleashed by the West, which shamelessly promoted its genocidal oppression as a civilizational project.

Like most colonized peoples in the southern hemisphere, Africans fought battles against disproportionate odds to gain their precious freedom. In Kenya - Israel's early access point to Africa - for example, Kenya's freedom fighters rose in rebellion against the brutality of their British oppressors who colonized the country in the 1920s. Most notable among the various resistance campaigns, the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s [remains](#) a stark example of the courage of Kenyans and the cruelty of colonial Britain. The British colonial administration responded to the uprising with a fierce crackdown, including the declara-

tion of a State of Emergency in 1952 which lasted until 1960. This [resulted](#) in thousands of Kenyans being wounded, imprisoned in concentration camps, killed or disappearing, under the harshest of conditions.

Palestine [fell](#) under British occupation, the so-called British Mandate, at around the same period that Kenya also became a British colony. Palestinians too fought and fell in their thousands as they employed various methods of collective resistance, including the legendary strike and rebellion of 1936-39. The same British killing machine that operated in Palestine and Kenya during that period also operated, with the same degree of senseless violence against numerous other nations around the world. While Palestine [was handed over](#) to the Zionist movement to establish the State of Israel in May 1948, Kenya achieved its independence in December 1963.

Rewriting History

On July 5, 2016, Netanyahu kick-started Israel's own 'Scramble for Africa' with a historic visit to Kenya, which made him the first Israeli Prime Minister to [visit](#) Africa in the last 50 years. After spending some time in Nairobi, where he attended the Israel-Kenya Economic Forum alongside hundreds of Israeli and Kenyan business leaders, he moved on to Uganda, where he met leaders from other African countries including South Sudan, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Within the same month, Israel announced the [renewal](#) of diplomatic ties with Guinea.

The new Israeli strategy flowed from there with more high-level visits to Africa and triumphant announcements about new joint economic ventures and investments. However, diplomatic and economic efforts to win over Africa soon proved insufficient for Israel's leaders. So Netanyahu resorted to rewriting history as a way to bolster the budding Israeli narrative in the continent.

In June 2017, Netanyahu [took part](#) in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), held in the Liberian capital, Monrovia. "Africa and Israel share a natural affinity," Netanyahu [claimed](#) in his speech. "We have, in many ways, similar histories. Your nations toiled under foreign rule. You experienced horrific wars and slaughters. This is very much our history." With these words, Netanyahu attempted not only to redefine the actual mission of Zionist colonialism, but to rob Palestinians of their own history as well.

Despite Netanyahu's blatant distortions about "similar histories", Israel's charm offensive in Africa has gone from success to success. In January 2019, for example, Chad, a Muslim-majority nation and central Africa's geo-strategically most important country, [established](#) economic ties with Israel.

Price Tag

As it tried to establish itself as a partner to African nations, Israel did make some contributions that benefited Africans, such as [delivering](#) solar, water and agricultural technologies to regions in need. However, these contributions came at a significant cost. When, for example, in December 2016, Senegal co-sponsored UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which condemned the construction of illegal Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, Netanyahu recalled Israel's ambassador to Dakar and swiftly cancelled the Mashav drip-irrigation projects. The projects had previously been, as [described](#) by Ras Mubarak, "widely promoted as a major part of Israel's contribution to the 'fight against poverty in Africa'."

Israel not only used projects like these to punish African nations when they failed to give blind support to Israel in international forums, it also used this new relationship to turn Africa into a new market for its arms sales. African countries such as Chad, Niger, Mali, Nigeria and Cameroon, among others, became clients of Israel's "counterterrorism" technologies, the same deadly tools that are actively used to suppress Palestinians in their ongoing struggle for freedom.

All of this as Israel continues to champion the same colonial mindset that enslaved and subjugated Africa for hundreds of years. This fact seems to have escaped some African leaders who are lining up to receive Israeli handouts and support in their specious "wars on terror". Moreover, barefaced [anti-African racism](#) that defines mainstream Israeli politics and society also seems of no consequence to the growing Israel fan club in Africa.

Many African governments, including those of Muslim-majority nations, are now giving Israel exactly what it wants - a way to break out of its isolation and legitimize its Apartheid. "Israel is making inroads into the Islamic world," [said](#) Netanyahu during the first visit by an Israeli leader to

Chad's capital, Ndjamena, on January 20, 2019. "We are making history and we are turning Israel into a rising global power."

Conclusion

When the Palestine Liberation Organisation [signed](#) the Oslo Accords starting in September 1993, it, expectedly, abandoned a decades' long Palestinian discourse of resistance and liberation. Instead, it subscribed to a whole new discourse, riddled with carefully-worded language sanctioned by Washington and its European allies. Whenever Palestinians dared to deviate from their assigned role, the West would decree that they had to return to the 'negotiating table', as the latter became a metaphor for obedience and submission.

Certainly, Israel has won the support of some of Africa's ruling classes, but it has failed to win the African people, who remain supportive of Palestinians.

Throughout these years, Palestinians mostly abandoned their far more meaningful alliances in Africa. Instead, they endlessly appealed to the goodwill of the West, hoping that the very colonial powers that have primarily created, sustained and armed Israel, would miraculously become more balanced and humane. However, this has turned out to be a devastating mistake and something that must be remedied be-

fore Israel's success story denies Palestinians any leverage in Africa and throughout the rest of the Global South.

On the other hand, despite its many successes in luring African governments to its web of allies, Israel has failed to tap into the hearts of ordinary Africans who still view the Palestinian fight for justice and freedom as an extension of their own struggle for democracy, equality and human rights. Certainly, Israel has won the support of some of Africa's ruling classes, but it has failed to win the African people, who [remain supportive](#) of Palestinians.

Quite often, Palestinians and their allies recall such historic proclamations as those of the iconic anti-Apartheid leader, Nelson Mandela, who [said](#) "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians"; or, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere who [said](#) "We have never hesitated in our support for the right of the people of Palestine to have their own land". However, these sentiments, which reflected the anti-Apartheid and revolutionary spirit in many African countries in the past, are no longer adequate to ensure African solidarity for Palestine and the Palestinian people. It will take years for Israel to diminish the rooted sympathy for Palestine in Africa, but if the comprehensive, centralized, and well-funded Israeli strategy is not countered with an equally cohesive and determined pro-Palestine strategy, it will only be a matter of time before the African continent, at least most of it, falls under the spell of Israel - beholden to Zionism and the lofty promises made by Tel Aviv in the name of aid and 'security'.

• Ramzy Baroud

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The Qur'an Honours Women in the Same Way it Honours Men

Enemies and critics of Islam have often isolated a particular verse from the Qur'an that seemingly sanctions male physical violence against women. However, as **Imam Muhammad al-Asi** argues, their understanding is based on a failure to grasp the nuances of the Arabic language and assign necessary weight to numerous strictures prohibiting it.

And as for those women [wives] whose protuberant behaviour [*nush za-hunna*] you have reason to fear, reprove them [first]; then desert them in bed; then jolt them; and if thereupon they pay you heed, do not seek to harm them. Behold, Allah is certainly most High, Great! (4:34).

It is this *ayah* that has caused so many attacks on Islam as being a religion that oppresses women by giving men the right to beat their wives and that sanctions violence in the family. However, the *ayah* simply states the fact that men have an initiative position regarding their wives. That is it. It does not agitate for men becoming torturers of their wives and feeling religious about it. Nor does it negate a woman altogether, rendering her the slave of her husband as a matter of faith. At the same time, it does not blur the line between a feminine wife and a masculine husband.

A person by the name of Mu'awiyah ibn aydah al-Qushayri came to the Prophet (pbuh) and asked, "O Messenger of Allah! What right does a wife have over us [the husbands]?" He replied, "To feed her as you feed yourself, to clothe her as you clothe yourself. [And if discipline is the issue] you avoid her face, [and] do not use foul language. If you abandon her it is

only in the bedroom [sexual intercourse]." The Prophet (pbuh) is also reported to have said speaking to men,

"Do not hit the gentle servants of Allah [meaning women]." Then 'Umar ibn al-Khattab came to the Prophet (pbuh) and complained of a type of mutiny by wives against their husbands. At this point, the Prophet (pbuh) tolerated men disciplining their wives by impinging on them [or nudging them]. Following this, a procession of women gathered around the Prophet's (pbuh) household complaining about their husbands' behaviour. So the Prophet (pbuh) finally said, "Many women circled the household of Muhammad complaining about their husbands. Those [husbands] are not your noblemen."

He also said, "The best of you is the best to his wife and family, and I am the best to my wife and family."

These incidents at the dawn of Islamic history in the time of Allah's final Prophet (pbuh) reveal the influences of materialistic and power-centric societies. During the time of the Prophet (pbuh), people had to be gradually weaned off their cultural and traditional practices. That took time but

eventually the Islamic generations that followed were rooted deeply in a sense of equality for both sexes and equal treatment between husband and wife. So long as Islamic standards are not violated by cultural residuals or economic interests these standards exemplify the coextensive relationship that binds in perpetuity the two complementary halves of the human soul: wife and husband.

The word *fa-idribuhunna* in *ayah* 4:34 has an alternative meaning, which is not normally associated with the mainstream understanding of the word. To explain how this meaning can be extracted, the word will have to be linguistically deconstructed down to its root level and then reconstructed to carry another, perhaps more pertinent, interpretation that still lies within the range of derivatives from the original root.

The Arabic language has a derivative system that organizes and determines how other words can be extracted from a root word. In this instance, the root word is the past-tense verb *daraba*. The most common, general, and denotative meaning of the word is to hit, to strike, or to poke. But given that many other words can be derived from the root *daraba*, its nucleus meaning lends itself to a wide range of connotations. For instance, it can also be used as a phrase word: in the Arabic language



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the phrase *daraba fi al-ard* means *he goes out to make a living*; the phrase *daraba al-lahu mathalan*, meaning *Allah has coined a similitude*, occurs in the Qur'an; and the phrase *daraba 'anhu* means *he averted him*.

Continuing in this direction, other verbs can be extracted from *daraba*, such as *idtaraba*: the phrase *yadtaribu al-mawj* refers to *waves colliding or moving wildly*, the word *idtirab* means *incoherent movement*, and *an issue out of balance* is referred to as *amr mudtarib*. And there are still more derivatives of the same root: in financial circles the word *mudarabah* refers to loaning someone money, and *arb* in some context may mean *a sort*. Suffice it to say that an undiversified explanation of the meaning of *daraba* and its derivatives is simplistic, uninformed, and misleading. This explains to some extent why some people have misconstrued the all-encompassing meaning of this *ayah*.

One of the nouns that can be derived from the verb *daraba* is *dirab*, a word mostly used to describe copulating animals. In Arabic, no one ever refers to the act of two animals mating as a marriage or *nikah*; the word *nikah* only applies to the union of a husband and wife in matrimony and wedlock. This *ayah* alludes to a damaged husband and wife relationship in which the sexual intimacy that comes with *nikah* is no longer there. Each spouse is at an emotional distance from the other, and frigidity has set in between them. So, if they were to be instructed to rejoin in what used to be the intimacy, the affection, and the passion of love, they would be told to have a *dirab* and not a *nikah*. Therefore, the wording of the *ayah* takes into consideration the reticence and remoteness that now characterizes the relationship between an unromantic husband and a frigid wife. Corresponding to this fact, it could be said that the word *fa-idribuhunna* replaced the word *fa-inkihuhunna*.

This gives a new meaning to the required behaviour that should be initiated by a husband toward a wife that is disposed to keeping an emotional distance from him. Still, however, there is no contradiction between the two understood meanings of the word *fa-idribuhunna*. Human nature is complex, and the range of meanings encompassed by the word is fine-tuned by a delicate understanding of Allah's (swt) choice of wording and instruction as they relate to our ambivalent feelings toward each other...

...It must be reiterated that a man's *quwama* [*initiative position*] does not give him an open-ended permit to strike, hit, and beat his wife. Some of this untoward behaviour is justified by hadiths that are largely discordant with the Qur'an. One such hadith is from al-Shaybani's book, *Taysir al-Wusul ilaa Jami' al-Usul min Hadith al-Rasul*, Volume 3, in which 'Umar ibn al-Khattab is reported to have relayed the following quote from the Prophet (pbuh), *"A man is not to be asked:*

for what reason did you hit your wife?" This is a prime example of how a purported hadith stands in stark contradiction to the meaning, intent, and purpose of Allah's (swt) words in the Qur'an. Whatever erroneous implications that may be derived from this assumed hadith are also contrary to other hadiths. A man cannot administer corporal punishment to his wife without compunction. This amounts to a type of aggression, and a man cannot aggress against his wife, or for that matter

Can a husband hit his wife simply because "he wants to take it out on her?" All such interpretations are ridiculous, unreasonable, insane, and not in keeping with any guidance or mercy that comes from Allah (swt)

anyone else, without just cause. This type of rancorous behaviour is unacceptable by the standards of scripture, logic, and justice. But in the body of hadiths there are some that are incompatible with the Qur'an and other well-established quotations of Allah's Prophet (pbuh).

The hadith quoted above says in effect that a husband is completely unaccountable for his actions. Is this not placing such a husband above the law? How can people, who want to justify this kind of licence to beat without any qualms of conscience, selectively forget other *ayat* in the Qur'an and well-known hadiths such as,

And so, he who shall have done an atom's weight of good, shall behold it; and he who shall have done an atom's weight of evil, shall behold it (99:7-8).

...and befitting to them [the women] is in proportion to what is required of them... (2:228).

...either retain them [the wives] in a fair manner or let them go in a fair manner... (2:231).

I counsel you to be copious [and considerate] to women, they are your dependents...

Are those who make a secure commitment to Allah (swt) expected to violate this *ayah* and exempt the husband from accountability just because of a historical culture that demeans women? Can a husband hit his wife just because he feels like it? Can a husband hit his wife because he needs to satisfy a sadistic urge? Can a husband hit his wife simply because "he wants to take

it out on her?" All such interpretations are ridiculous, unreasonable, insane, and not in keeping with any guidance or mercy that comes from Allah(A).

This whole lesson in a sense is meant to try to head off and refrain from the worst permissible license Allah (swt) has given man: divorce. In present society there is a tendency to see divorce both as a source of individual unhappiness and as an index or cause of wider social disorder. However divorce might be evaluated, few people in conducting these debates have any doubts as to the meaning of the term. To be divorced represents a clear legal status, the outcome of which is usually accompanied by clearly defined practices such as the establishment of separate households and agreements over the division of property and the maintenance of, custody over, or access to any children. Divorce is frequently equated with marital breakdown although it is clear that the two need not be the same.

In summarizing what can be deduced from *ayat* 4:34-35, the six points below have been established:

1. Even though this fact — the *quwamah* of men over women — has been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and still continues to be misrepresented, men are in a position of initiative, of taking the first step when compared to women. But this does not suggest men are automatically, genetically, or sexually paramount to women.

2. If a man fails to live up to his role as the person who is responsible for the physical safety and financial security of the family, the wife has the right to dissolve the marriage. Marriage is sustained in an important way, among other things, by the man (the husband) living up to his masculine "first step" and financially supporting his family, **"men are in an initiative position vis-a-vis women: that is because of what Allah has given them in excess and due to what they spend of their wealth [to fund their families]..."** However, if he is encountering temporary difficulties in providing for his family, then this does not qualify as a basis for a wife to choose divorce as a remedy, **"And if he is in hard times then the provision is for better times..." (2:280).**

3. A husband may duly expect his wife to protect their mutual love trust in his absence, **"And the virtuous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy Allah has [ordained to be] guarded."** She is expected to comply to him within the domain of their joint obedience to Allah (A), and as such, she is entrusted with his possessions, her feelings, and a fetus who may be in her womb.

4. The husband is duty bound to provide all necessities and amenities to his wife on par with what he provides for himself.

5. There is a process the two spouses are required to follow in order to prevail over their incompatibilities: advice, bedroom abandonment, and a husband to wife jolt. And if none of that works they are to refer the matter to two arbiters who will try to impartially settle the whole affair.

6. Once a wife reconciles her emotions with her husband's and her behaviour blends back into compatibility with him, the husband no longer has the right to take any action against her. Circumstances like these tend to generate an attitude of revenge; and the *ayah* clearly prohibits such conduct.

The equality and equal treatment of both men and women is a theme that runs throughout the Qur'an. No Muslim — male or female — who fuses into the spirit of the Qur'an can reconcile himself or herself with the macho image of a male dictator in the family. Impossible. Some pertinent *ayat* underscore the equality of men and women in their own gender roles, in their family postures, and in their social positions. The biological parity of male and female are established in the *ayah*,

[He] created you [male and female] from one bio-entity; and from it He created its mate and from both of them He dispersed many men and women... (4:1).

The words of heaven in the Qur'an establish man's and woman's equal share of responsibility, for example, with regard to the "original sin" in paradise, both man and woman — Adam *and* Eve (pbut) — are equally admonished,

Thereupon Satan whispered to the two [Adam and Eve] with a view to making them conscious of their nakedness, of which [hitherto] they had been unaware; and he said, "Your Sustainer has but forbidden you this tree lest you two become [as] angels, or lest you live forever." And he swore to them, "Verily, I am of those who wish you well indeed!" And thus he led them on with deluding thoughts. But as soon as the two had tasted [the fruit] of the tree, they became conscious of their nakedness; and they began to cover themselves with pieced-together leaves from the garden. And their Sustainer called out to them, "Did I not forbid that tree to you and tell you [that], verily, Satan is your open foe?" The two replied, "O our Sustainer! We have sinned against ourselves, and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall most

certainly be lost!" (7:20-23).

In other *ayat* Allah (swt) makes it known that their human responsibility is on the same level,

Whoever does what is good and right — whether male or female — as long as there is commitment to Allah, will live a favourable life... (16:97). Whoever does wrong shall not be compensated except by its equivalent, and whoever does what is right and good whether male or female — in a state of commitment to Allah — they are the ones who will enter paradise with an infinite providence (40:40).

The nonpartisan words of the Qur'an have enshrined the equal responsibility of men and women in implementing Allah's (swt) instructions and in carrying out His orders,

A committed Muslim man and a committed Muslim woman have no choice [but to obey] when Allah and His Apostle determine something... (33:36).

Once both return to Allah (A), Muslim men and women may look forward to equal rewards for the same actions done on earth,

Verily, for all men and women who have acquiesced to Allah, and all committed men and committed women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves [before Allah], and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember Allah unceasingly: for [all of] them has Allah readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward (33:35).

This Book of equality has also placed men and women on comparable political grounds,

Committed Muslim men and committed Muslim women are allies of each other; they work on constructing the self-evident good and they work on deconstructing the self-evident wrong... (9:71).

The Qur'an has given men and women the same right of ownership and acquisition. They both are entitled to the fruits of their own labour and legitimate means of possession,

Men have a share of what they have gained and women have a share of what they have gained... (4:32).

Men and women also have the right to inherit their family's surpluses at the time of death; the shares though are allocated in accordance with their respective financial responsibilities, almost all of which are assigned to men,

Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, whether it be little or much — a share ordained [by Allah] (4:7).

Furthermore, the Qur'an equally requires both men and women to mutually safeguard each other's reputation and social status. Neither men, nor women may assassinate another's character or backbite each other,

O you who are committed to Allah! No men shall deride [other] men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves; and no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets; evil is all imputation of iniquity after [one has attained to] commitment; and they who [become guilty thereof and] do not repent, it is they, they who are evildoers! (49:11).

After reading all these *ayat* and many more in this fair Qur'an how can anyone have the audacity to say that Islam sanctions male bigotry or considers men to be superior and women to be inferior?

These types of accusations can only come from individuals who have an axe to grind against the Qur'an, the Prophet (pbuh), and Islam.

• Imam Muhammad al-Asi

is currently working on the first-ever English Tafsir of the Qur'an titled: *The Ascendant Qur'an: Realigning Man to the Divine Power Culture*. This article is comprised of extracts from Volume 6. Imam Asi has a translation of the Qur'an also forthcoming. Both the tafseer volumes and translation are published by ICIT. Imam is based in Washington D.C.

(Re)Connecting with the Qur'an at the Time of Coronavirus

We are in extraordinary times. As difficult and challenging as this is, it nevertheless provides us with time and opportunities to (re)connect with the Qur'an. However, for the uninitiated, the sheer volume of interpretive works can prove daunting. Below, **Shaykh Mohammad Bahmanpour** provides an overview of the various approaches to interpreting Allah's final revelation and explains how we can improve our own understanding of it.

Whilst translations are aplenty, *tafseer* or interpretative works of the Qur'an have become sidelined in an era of instant information. Along with this, and perhaps due to a longer history of educational decline in the Islamic world, the process of interpreting the Qur'an has become more obscure to ordinary Muslims while discussions are increasingly prone to sectarianised polemics.

This is a brief introduction to some approaches in the hope that it will help readers overcome some fears and misunderstandings and open the way for them to connect with interpretative work through discussion of the process I use when doing *tafseer*.

Tafseer from the start

Right from the beginning of the revelation, there was great eagerness among the companions of the Prophet and those who came after them to understand the meanings of verses of the Qur'an as correctly and as accurately as possible. They sought the best methods and tried different approaches to better understand the meaning of this revelation.

Obviously, at the time of the Prophet, the best source for better understanding was the Prophet himself. Should there have been any ambiguities in understanding the verses, the companions could go directly to the Prophet and ask him about their meanings. They could ask him about how a verse regarding a specific practice like *salat*, or *zakat* or the like had to be carried out. They would have requested explanation from the Messenger of God because the Qur'an had explicitly assigned him that duty.

And We sent down the reminder to you so that you may clarify for the people that which has been sent down to them, so that they may reflect. (16:44)

But after the Prophet's demise, the matter was not as easy. The commentators of the Qur'an disagreed on almost each

and every single verse. There were reports and counter reports, views and counter views, which made life difficult for anyone who sought a simple straightforward understanding of the Qur'an. You only need to go to a comprehensive *tafseer* like *Jami' al-Bayan* of Tabari or *Majm' al-Bayaan* of Tabarsi to see how the opinions of the Companions and their Successors and of the later *mufasssireen* differ from and sometimes oppose each other regarding the majority of the verses. This certainly leaves the reader of the Qur'an in confusion.

The Shias, of course, could have sought explanation from their infallible Imams, but that was also a limited resource, because the Imams, peace be on them, were not always available, especially to people who were living far away with little means of communication. So, what they had at their disposal were reports and counter reports from the Imams as it was in the case of the Prophet after his death. Thus, the confusion was widespread both in the Shia as well as the Sunni world. This situation necessitated the need for methods which could reasonably produce reliable interpretation of the Qur'an to understand the true meaning of the communication of God, a communication that is so important that whatever effort is expended for its in-depth understanding is worth it. Misunderstanding this book, or sometimes even a single verse of it, might affect the whole spiritual, personal and social life of individuals and communities.

As a resort to narrations of the Prophet and the Imams did not help very much, so the scholars tried to find other ways of understanding the Qur'an. They tried to establish a set of criteria by which they could judge between different understandings and distinguish between their rights and wrongs. Thus, different methods of understanding sprang up. The philosophically inclined scholars thought the best method for understanding the Book was the rational method. By rational method, they did not mean 'common sense', because

that is what everyone must use in understanding any text. Rather, they meant understanding it in terms of philosophical schools of thought. In other words, they did not see the Qur'an as an original source of knowledge, but as a secondary source which would corroborate the knowledge found by their respective philosophical schools. That is, after establishing an idea by their rational demonstrative arguments, they would go to the Qur'an to find confirmation from the verses, and if the verses did not confirm their findings, they interpreted them in such a way as to comply with what they had rationally laid down.

Another approach was the theological approach. Like philosophers, the theologians tried to understand the Qur'an within the framework of their pre-set conceptual boundaries. They used the same method in a different way. They tried to understand the communications of God through the filter of their established theological schools. Thus, an Ash'ari would interpret all the verses in a way so that they fit in their perception of human action as an involuntary occurrence, while a Mu'tazili would interpret them to give exactly the opposite meaning. Fa'id Kashani, the author of the classic *tafsir al-Safi*, warns the reader of the Qur'an of this type of approach and regards it as one of the main hindrances towards understanding the Qur'an.

Another approach, which has been in use for several centuries and more so in our modern age is to resort to scientific theories for understanding the Qur'an. Thus, when a theory is suggested in scientific circles, the followers of this approach take its truth for granted and go to the Qur'an to see if the Qur'an says the same thing. And if the verses are not compatible with the theory, they try to interpret them in such a way as to make them compatible. In other words, the Qur'an is understood in the framework of scientific theories in the same way as the theologians or philosophers tried to understand the

Qur'an within the framework of their theological or philosophical dogmas. Thus, in the age of Euclidean astronomy the Qur'an was a testimony to Euclid's veracity and in the modern age it is a testimony to the Big Bang and Evolution theory.

Finally, some resorted to mystical interpretation of the Qur'an believing that there are much deeper meanings under the apparent veil of the words and letters of the Book. Although the Qur'an has spoken in our norms of communication, it has hidden its true meanings under the guise of our spoken language. However, this method is more problematic than the previous methods. Although there is no denial that there are deeper levels and layers of meanings of the verses of the Qur'an, nevertheless, one should first understand the apparent meaning or the *tafseer* of them. Mystical interpretation is highly subjective and precarious and cannot be regarded as a mode of collective understanding.

The Qur'an on the Qur'an

Thus, one can easily judge that none of these methods are satisfying and free from unbiased understanding of the Book of God. But if, in the interpretation of the Qur'an, the traditions are not of much benefit, if we could not use our philosophical schools, if we should not seek help from our theological disciplines, if we could not resort to scientific theories, and if mystical method is too subjective and precarious, then what is left for us? What kind of method could we use to understand the meaning of this important communication?

The safest method is the method which was used by Shi'a Imams - peace be on them - and by many exegetes from the early history of *tafseer* in both the Sunni and Shi'i world. It is the method of interpreting the verses of the Qur'an by seeking help from the Qur'an itself. That is, find-

ing the meaning of a verse by considering other verses and cross-referencing them in a comprehensive manner. Even those who argue that the Imams did not need such a method agree that they used the method to show how the Qur'an is to be understood and that this is the safest methodology for understanding the Book of God.

The Qur'an is a coherent book, and those who believe in it believe too that it contains no contradictions. As such the reader of the Qur'an can take any sentence of this book to be an evidence for another sentence

This is the method which is used extensively by Allamah Tabatabai in his massive commentary of the Qur'an, *al-Mizan*. He believed that, basically, the Qur'an is self-explanatory and is not in need of anything else to explain it. It is *clarification for everything* (16: 89) so how could it need clarification? The verses which may need clarification both in terms of terminology or their conceptual meanings could be clarified by other verses. It is as Amir al-Mu'minin Imam Ali said: "*some parts of it speak with the help of other parts and some pieces testify for other pieces.*" (*Nahj al-Balaghah*, sermon 133).

Obviously using this method does not mean that we ignore any other source which may clarify the meaning of a verse further. We may refer to any evidence, in

the light of which the meaning of a verse may become richer and more accurate, like scientific evidence, hadith sources, philosophical or theological arguments, or even mystical experiences. However, all these must be regarded as subsidiary supporting evidence.

The Qur'an is a coherent book, and those who believe in it believe too that it contains no contradictions. As such the reader of the Qur'an can take any sentence of this book to be an evidence for another sentence, because we know that there is no room here for contradiction, and if in one place it says something and in another place it apparently contradicts it, since we have established that there is no contradiction, we may use the two to construct a fuller perspective of what the author would have meant by them. It is as if one and the same thing is seen from different perspectives. From one angle you see one thing and from another angle you see another thing; the two may seem contradictory while together they create a multi-dimensional picture and a richer understanding of what the author of the text may have meant to convey.

This is the reason why we have repetition of many stories in the Qur'an. If we ponder deeply on these repetitions we would see that they are not in fact repetitions but are the same story looked at from different perspectives to give us the full picture of the event. For example, one of the most famous stories of the Holy Qur'an which is oft-repeated in many chapters is the story of Nabi Musa (pbah). One may wonder why God repeats this story again and again in the Qur'an. However, on deeper reflection it becomes clear that these are not repetitions but changes of perspective. This type of approach in the text is necessary, especially because the Qur'an talks about super-natural beings, concepts, and realms, like, Allah, the angels, the *arsh*, the *kursi*, the *lawh*, the *qalam*, the Hereafter, Paradise and Hell,

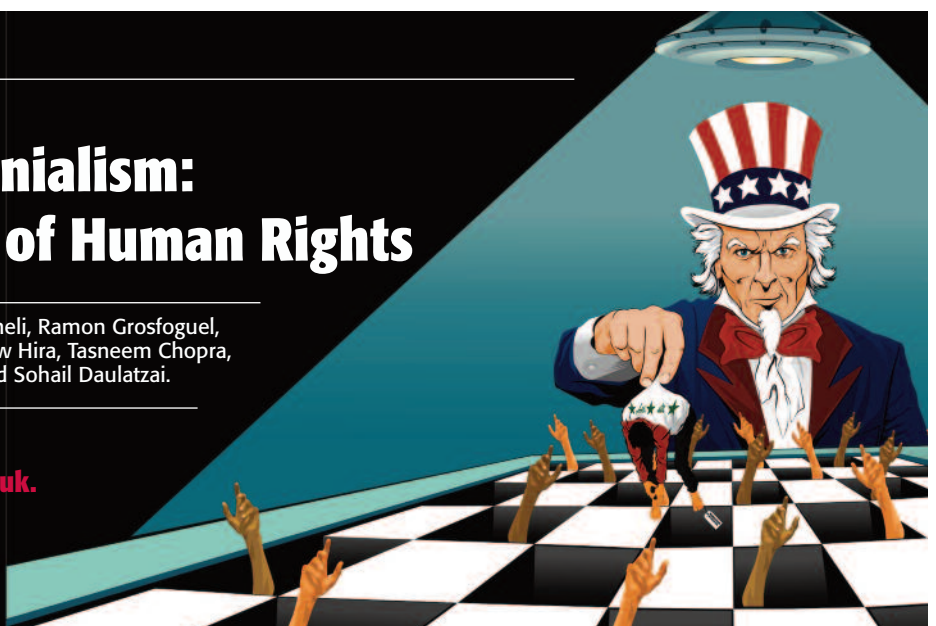
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which cannot be easily grasped by our conceptual tools. Unless these concepts are looked at from different perspectives and explored from different dimensions our minds cannot grasp them. For this reason, the verses of the Qur'an regarding one concept or event should be considered in their totality. This is called the tafseer of the Qur'an by the Qur'an, and this is the method that I mainly try to use. Eventually, all those outside sources, like hadith, philosophy, theology, mystical experience, etc. must be judged and evaluated by the Qur'an and not vice versa.

We may also need to refer to reports from the Companions and the Successors about the occasion of the revelation of verses if available, or to know about the order of revelation so that we know what happened at what time, or to know about the abrogating verses and those which were abrogated. However, these reports too sometimes contradict each other and again we need to judge them by the content of the Qur'an itself.

One may also seek help from other revealed Books, like the Bible, to understand better certain details of some stories or historical accounts in the Qur'an. This is fine so long as the Qur'an is taken as a benchmark for the authenticity of those materials and not the other way round; as the Qur'an says itself, *"We have sent down to you the Book with the truth, confirming what was before it of the Book and as a guardian over it."* (5: 48)

On the salaf

Referring to the views of the *salaf* (the predecessors) is certainly a great resource for *tafsir*. Such a reference is in accordance with what our great scholars like Tabari, Sheikh Tusi, Sheikh Tabarsi, Fakhr al-din al-Razi and others have done. However, we have to bear in mind that referring to those views does not mean that we

take them for granted

With all due respect to the opinions of some *Salafiyyah* scholars, I have to say that the idea that *salaf* understood the Qur'an and understood the faith better than us is an erroneous concept. It is based on the idea that the *salaf* were infallible, that they knew everything and could understand everything that the Prophet would want to convey to them. However, such a view ignores the fact that the *salaf* did not have 1400 years of continuous accumulation of knowledge and experience about the Qur'an, about fiqh, and about different aspects of faith. Saying that all these are in vain and the people who lived in the past knew better than those who came after them and after the cumulation of centuries of knowledge is a rationally unacceptable statement.

Of course, the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet and the Prophet conveyed it to the Companions, and the Companions to the Successors; each companion or Successor formed an understanding of it and these understandings sometimes differed from one another. But they didn't have the privilege of hundreds of years of reflection, deliberation and elaboration on the understanding of these verses of the Qur'an. So as time passes by, our understanding of the verses of the Qur'an, our understanding of different aspects of faith become clearer, sharper and more accurate.

Those who say we have to go back to the *salaf* to understand the Qur'an may argue that the baggage that different cultures brought with them to Islam has polluted the purity of Islam and we now need to purge Islam of these impurities by going back to the *salaf*. Of course that is true. However, different cultures didn't only bring their cultural baggage, they brought their knowledge, their experience and intelligence to Islam as well, and we would be doing a disservice to the Qur'an

if we were to deprive ourselves of all that.

Additionally, why should we think that the *salaf* didn't have their own baggage when they came to Islam? Obviously, they had their own backgrounds and their cultural baggage was not any less or any more than the cultural baggage of other nations and other people who later converted to Islam.

This again becomes a reason why using the Qur'an as a benchmark for understanding the Qur'an is the key to both providing an open, integrative and interpretive space and ensuring that erroneous modes of interpretation are not allowed to hold sway.

Concluding thoughts

When we want to interpret the Qur'an we have to be comprehensive, we have to be inclusive. The Qur'an is not something that we can interpret by prejudice - whether this prejudice is cultural, or sectarian, religious or scientific. We should look for guidance from the Qur'an, not interpret the Qur'an according to what we believe and our sect or culture allows.

To be able to understand the Qur'an in a comprehensive and unbiased manner, the first step is to be highly conversant with its verses. To that end, we need to allocate some time to read and reflect on the Qur'an on a daily basis. Referring to different interpretations of the Qur'an, regardless of the authors' denomination, approach and inclination, would help to broaden our perspective and our reflective ability. Fortunately, many of these tafsirs are available to us online.

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