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Muhammad Asad's Concept of An Islamic State

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Abstract:

Mohammad Asad (originally Leopold Weis) acquired popularity as a diplomat, writer, journalist, social critic, linguist, translator of the Qur'an and author of one of the most outstanding inspirational autobiographies. He was a totally dedicated Muslim whose life purpose was the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual awakening of the world's Muslims. Islam became his life's plan in order to attain these goals. He proposed that a contemporary Islamic republic should be founded on a modern political system that complies with the Quran and Sunnah and the political, social, and economic realities of the moment. However, he favoured the presidential style of administration because he believed it would more closely adhere to the requirements of an ideal Islamic state. The purpose of this study is to examine his concept of an Islamic state in light of his renowned book, *Principles of State and Government in Islam*.

Keywords: Islamic state, Principle of state, government, Shariah, Ijtihad, Quran, Sunnah

Who is Mohammad Asad

During his lifetime, Mohammad Asad was honored by various titles, including "Leopold of Arabia," a reference to Lawrence of Arabia. People in Pakistan addressed him as Allama (a scholar). He is remembered for his role as a religious peacemaker, a mediator between Islam and Christianity and the "Gift of Europe" to the Muslim world.

Following World War II, Mohammad Asad remained to devote himself to the Pakistan Movement. On 14 August 1947, when Pakistan was founded, he made Pakistan his home and was awarded Pakistani citizenship. He began his career as Director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction before moving on to positions as Deputy Secretary for the Middle East and then as Envoy to the United Nations in the Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On 23 March 2013, Pakistan Post issued a stamp as part of their 'Men of Letters' series to honour his writings, and the Islamic Culture Centre named a cultural centre in Lviv after him (Ukraine, 2021).

Early Life

One cannot miss the name of Leopold Weiss who was born in July (1318 A.H) 1900 A.D, in Liviv (Lavan), a city in Austria (present in Ukraine) (Historical Maps of Galicia (1775-1918), 2012). His father's name was Kiwa Weiss (Akiva) who was an Austrian-Jewish lawyer and a descendant of a long line of rabbis, while his mother whose name was Malka was the daughter of a wealthy banker. The young Leopold had a sister and a

brother as siblings. The wealthy family had a home in Lviv and spent the summers at his maternal grandfather's country estate (Muhammad Asad: The Polish Jewish Muslim Intellectual, 2021).

He was no longer Jewish but Muslim, no longer Austrian but Pakistani, and no longer even Leopold but Mohammad Asad when he passed away in Granada, Spain, in 1992. He had also established a solid reputation as a writer, an Islamic scholar, and—most importantly—a Holy Quran translator.

His Early Education and Career

To be able to carry on the family's rabbinical legacy, Leopold Weiss himself got a full religious education. Leopold Weiss had a passing command of Hebrew and Aramaic at the age of 13, in addition to his native German and Polish. He was literate in English, French, Persian, and Arabic by the time he was in his mid-twenties. He had read the Talmud in its text and commentary, as well as the genuine Old Testament., the *Mishna* and *Gemara*, and he had delved into the intricacies of Biblical exegesis, the *Targum*.

When his family relocated to Vienna, where he studied philosophy and art history at the University of Vienna. However, he soon gave up his studies in order to pursue other forms of pleasure. At that time, Vienna developed into one of Europe's most intellectually and culturally exciting cities, a hive of emerging fresh viewpoints on psychology, language, and philosophy. In 1920, he left Vienna and travelled around Central Europe, but very soon, in 1922, he left Europe and headed for the Middle East where he took a quick visit to Jerusalem to meet his uncle. Here he came to know more about the Arabs. He was amazed to know how Islam gave them a sense of purpose, spirituality, and inner tranquility that permeated every aspect of their daily life (Nawwab, 2002).

Reached at the age of 22, he decided to pursue a career in journalism and joined the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of Europe's most prestigious newspapers at the time, as a foreign correspondent in the Near and Far East. By 1922, his journalism career had taken him to Afghanistan, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Persia, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. He visited leaders of state in Palestine, Egypt, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan while working as a journalist, which gave him a unique view on global politics, especially those involving Jews and Arabs (Rahim, Muhammad Asad Visionary Islamic Scholar, 2009).

As a young reporter, he travelled all over the Arab World. In 1926, he decided to convert to Sunni Islam and took the name "Muhammad Asad." Asad is the Arabic version of his birth name, Leo (Lion). Following his conversion to Islam, the Muslim reformation became his life's mission. Mohammad Asad travelled extensively from North Africa to Afghanistan in pursuit of the revitalization of the Muslim world. Throughout his travels "between the Libyan Desert and the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea," he had conversations with royalty and government officials, as well as ordinary citizens. During the course of his prolonged and exhausting tour around the Muslim World, he developed a greater interest in the study of the Hadith and the Quran. He rose to prominence as one of the foremost Muslim scholars of his day after decades of dedicated study (IslamWeb, 2013).

His Famous Works

As a scholar and Islamic academician, Muhammad Asad penned his greatest work, *The Message of the Quran* (1980). After seventeen years of rigorous intellectual investigation, he wrote an English translation and commentary on the Quran. It is widely

considered to be one of the most impactful translations of the contemporary age. Previously, his autobiography, *'The Road to Mecca,'* was his greatest work. *Islam at Crossroads*, published in 1934, Translation of Sahih Al Bukhari: *The Early Years of Islam*, published in 1981, *The Law of Ours and Other Essays*, published in 1987, and *Home Coming of the Heart*, considered to be part II of "*The Road to Mecca*" are some of his other literary works (Ukraine, 2021).

Political Condition of Muslim Countries in 20th Century

The responses to the Ottoman Empire being split into smaller individual nations by the Western Power and to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk abolishing the Caliphate in 1924 were seen by Muslims all over the globe, but particularly in Egypt and the Indian subcontinent. There was a wave of independence for Muslim countries from the British Empire in the decades after World War II. All nations were attempting to form themselves as Islamic countries, but they lacked the theoretical foundation to do so in the real meaning of the word. Pakistan was founded in 1947 as an Islamic nation in which many ideological groups attempted to create the governmental structure pursuant to their own ideology. Mohammad Asad was one of the most prominent personalities who proposed that an Islamic State should be founded on a contemporary governmental framework that satisfies the criteria of the Quran and Sunnah as well as the political, social, and economic circumstances of the day. As a response, Muhammad Asad analyses the Quran and Hadith in order to figure out the structure of the Islamic state and administration. Subsequently, all of his works on the subject were gathered into a book titled *Islamic State and Government Principles*. This work provided the theoretical foundation for a clear vision of the shape of an Islamic governance. Being a convert meant that he was free from all the ideological and sectarian preconceptions that come with being a born Muslim, allowing him to study the Quran and the Hadith with an inquisitive mind and a liberal heart. As he travelled around the Muslim world, he developed intimate relationships with government leaders that informed his knowledge of how these nations were run.

He wrote about the concept of an Islamic state in his aforementioned book. But before disclosing his conclusions, he first discusses whether or not an Islamic state was essential for Muslims to properly practice their religion, and if so, what shape and type it should take (Arshad, 2018).

Contemporary Western political systems (Secular State)

According to Mohammad Asad, contemporary Western political systems (the idea of the secular state) are flawed because they serve the interests of particular groups rather than the interests of all people regardless of race, class, or other divisions. Such states also lack solid norms that may be used to distinguish between right and wrong or between good and evil. Additionally, he believed that none of the modern Western political systems had ever made a sincere effort to evaluate political and social issues in the context of unwavering moral principles, which is why he believed they failed to offer universal order.

In addition, he thought that a secular system overlooked moral and ethical principles that were suppressed in the name of freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of ideology. He used homosexuality as an example, which is wrong according to Islam and other religions but is acceptable in a secular society on the grounds of individual freedom. More instances of how secularism and freedom of expression are used to advance the

social and moral decay of society are available. Muhammad Asad (1961) thinks that a government based on religious principles will be more just and compassionate because of this. He writes:

“It is reasonable, therefore, to presume that a state built on the foundations of religion offers an infinitely better prospect of national happiness than a state founded upon the concept of a “secular” political organism; provided, of course, that the religious doctrine on which such a state rests – and from which it derives its authority -- makes full allowance, first, for man’s biological and social needs, and second, for the law of historical and intellectual evolution to which human society as a whole is subject (Asad, 1961, pp. 4-6).”

Muhammad Asad's Concept of Ijtihad

Muhammad Asad envisioned an Islamic state with a governmental structure based on *Islamic Shariah* (the Quran and the Sunnah), but with *Ijtihad* principles that take into account the demands of contemporary Muslims. Without *ijtihad*, according to Muhammad Asad, Muslims would struggle to live out real Islam, and they would turn into intellectual slaves to those who were also held captive to the past and had little to offer for the revival of Islam in the modern world. He believed that the Muslim community could only advance through *Ijtihad* in order to meet the demands of the day (Ukraine, 2021). He used to declare, "The door of *ijtihad* will always be open, for no one has the power to close it (Rahim, Muhammad Asad Visionary Islamic Scholar, 2002)."

In place of adhering to *Fiqhi* deductions made by scholars 1,000 years ago, Muhammad Asad urges Muslims to turn to *Ijtihad* in the construction of the new *Shariah*, taking into account all the requirements and needs of the period and the issues encountered by modern Muslims. According to him, God wants Muslims to be a critically minded people since the Quran repeatedly commands them to reflect, mull, and conduct research. In other words, the Quran forbids Muslims from becoming mindless automatons or a people incapable of original thought.

In order to resolve the dispute between the various schools of *fiqh*, such as *Shafi'i*, *Hambali*, *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, and *Jafria*, he suggests that the *Majlis-e-Shura* of the Islamic state appoint scholars from all of the schools of *fiqh* to work on the creation of a common *fiq'h* that will be acceptable to the followers of all of the schools of *fiqh*. He writes:

“The *Majlis as Shurah* shall elect a small panel of scholars representing the various schools of *Fiqh*, fully conversant with the methodology and history of the *Quran* and the science of *Hadith* and entrust them with the codification of *Shariah laws*.”

As Muhammad Asad saw it, a fully Islamic society and state could only be established if Muslim scholars interpreted the Quran and Sunnah in accordance with the spirit of *Ijtihad*. In this excerpt, Muhammad Asad argues that those who believe that an Islamic state should only have a *Khilafat* as its system of administration are stuck in the experimental period of the sixth century and are thus unable to adapt to the new difficulties and concerns facing Muslims in the twenty-first (Arshad, 2018).

Concept of Khilafat

Almost all Muslim scholars of the mediaeval and even twentieth centuries felt that the Caliphate (government) of the four correctly guided caliphates was the most effective type of administration that enabled Muslims to reach the highest degree of worldly and

spiritual success and wealth. People who disagreed were labelled anti-Muslim, and their regard for the rightly directed caliphs was called into doubt.

He was opposed to Muslims' obsession with Khilafat and their idea that only via the Khilafat model of administration could Muslims attain the power and grandeur that the first generation of Muslims possessed. Muhammad Asad was vehemently opposed to the orthodox Islamic academics' ideology and viewpoint. He argued that since the sixth century has passed and the Muslims are now living in the twentieth or twenty-first century, it is time for them to redesign their state to meet the needs of the modern era, since Khilafat was the first and only temporary form of government (Arshad, 2018).

Mohammad Asad felt that multiparty parliamentary system and Islam could coexist. "Both the executive and legislative institutions must be constituted via election," he claims (Asad, 1961, p. 43). He comes to the conclusion that a hypothetical Islamic state would be more likely to demand the presidential form of government. On the basis of this idea, the Islamic state is considered as being compatible with modern democratic systems of administration. He argues that a state may still maintain its Islamic identity even if it departs from the practises of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and that the progress made by mankind in the social and intellectual spheres should be fully utilised (Asad, 1961, p. 22). The Amir or imam, who is in charge of the community, makes decisions after consulting with members of his inner circle. The Amir will serve as the head of state and work with his cabinet members, who are answerable to the populace for their decisions and deeds (Arshad, 2018).

The Concept of Consultation (Shūrā)

The idea of consultation (shura), which is now a crucial one in modern political theory, is another crucial component for Mohammad Asad. The fundamental tenet of Muslim affairs is consultation. *Amruhum Shura Baynahum*, the Qur'an states (Their all communal businesses are concluded in consultation among themselves) (Qur'an, 42:38). The state's organs must be evaluated based on *amruhum shura baynahum*. According to the requirement *amruhum shura baynahum* for Mohammad Asad, all governmental actions must be the result of dialogue between the community's authorised representatives (Asad, 1961, p. 52).

He claims that Islamic Shariah must be universally codified in order for its rules to be implemented in the regions under its control. Due of the different orthodox schools of Islamic thinking, this is a challenging task. While rejecting the use of *fiqh* teachings to which the majority population adheres, Mohammad Asad argued that "an Islamic state must have at its disposal a Shariah code which (a) would be generally acceptable to all its Muslim citizens without distinction of the *fiqh* schools to which they may belong, and (b) would bring out the eternal, unchangeable quality of the Divine Law in such a way as to demonstrate its applicability to all times and all sages (Asad, 1961, p. 101)."

Islamic State as the Guarantor of Rights

Mohammad Asad says that an Islamic state gives its citizens the following rights, no matter what religion or faith group they belong to (this includes atheists and agnostics who live in the state): freedom of opinion (with some limits), protection from external and internal enemies, and free access to knowledge for both men and women. After all, according to Mohammad Asad, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that its population have access to basic necessities like food, clothing, and shelter (Asad, 1961, pp. 83-91).

The Status of Minorities in Islamic State

Regarding the status of non-Muslims and other religious minorities in an Islamic state, Muhammad Asad has his own opinions based on his reading of the Quran and Sunnah. He avoids using the names 'Dhimmy' and 'Jizya' when describing their position in an Islamic state (Arshad, 2018).

According to Islamic law, non-Muslim citizens are categorised as "inhabitants" or "aliens" (musta'man), Contractees, and Conquered and are regarded as a protected minority (ahl al-dhimmah). They all have equal rights under Islamic Shariah, despite the fact that it sees each group as slightly distinct from the others. They are exactly like the minority residing in a contemporary nation-state, with the primary difference being that the majority is in charge of formulating policy while the latter are classed based on numbers. Although Mohammad Asad accepts the religious categorization of Islamic state citizens, he contends that in general, these people are those who fight for justice and equity and advance the welfare of society. Asad believes that there should be mutual tolerance among people despite religion differences. (Asad, 1961, p. 41).

He challenged the theories of those academics who believed that non-Muslims face discrimination in an Islamic state with regard to the issue of minorities being treated unfairly. According to Mohammad Asad, such discrimination is simply theoretical and has no bearing on real government activity. Additionally, he is of the opinion that this discrimination does not call for treating non-Muslim citizens unfairly in the regular course of affairs; rather, "they must be accorded all the freedom and protection which a Muslim citizen can legitimately claim," with the exception of positions of authority. He emphasises that only a Muslim may hold the position of head of state, despite the fact that Islam's sociopolitical structure encourages fairness for everyone. Asad seems to have thought that a non-Muslim could only lead their country by sincerely becoming a Muslim (Dar, 2016).

He thinks that non-Muslims should be treated equally in all aspects of social life. He also supports granting them major government positions. But he says that in an Islamic state, the position of Amir should not be given to a non-Muslim. He makes the following case for his point of view:

“They must be accorded all the freedom and protection which a Muslim citizen can legitimate claim: only the may not be entrusted with the key position of leadership. One cannot escape the fact that no non-Muslim citizen – however great his personal integrity and his loyalty to the state – could, on psychological grounds, ever be supposed to work wholeheartedly for the ideological objectives of Islam (Arshad, 2018).”

But in all other areas of political life, non-Muslims will have complete freedom and protection because Muslims are referred to as the best Ummah that looks out for all of humanity and not just Muslims. Also he wrote,

“In order to overcome the apprehensions of the non-Muslim world in general and of our non-Muslim citizens in particular, we must be able to show that the socio-political scheme of Islam aims at justice for Muslim and non-Muslim alike and that in our endeavour to set up a truly Islamic state we Muslims are move by moral considerations alone” (Arshad, 2018)

In brief, it is our responsibility to show to the whole world that we aim to live according to these Quranic instructions:

“You are the best community, raised for the welfare of humanity because you enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and have faith in God.” (Al-Quran 3:110)

The Status of Women

As far as preserving human pleasure and dignity is concerned, women and men have equal standing, and it is the responsibility of the state to provide its people physical welfare and economic opportunities without engaging in gender-based discernment (Hasan, 1998, p. 130). In addition to ensuring women's physical well-being, the state should work to foster a God-consciousness inside them so that they do not reject religion for the life force ambitions of materialism. The state must make sure that "justice prevails within the society, ensuring that every citizen—man, woman and child—should have enough to eat and to clothe, shall be succoured in case of sickness and have a respectable house in which to reside (Asad, 1961, pp. 90-91).

However, there is debate over whether women in Islamic states have a claim to political rights, including the ability to vote and engage in other relevant activities, such as holding the office of head of state. Some claim that women are only allowed to perform domestic duties and have no political rights. Others assert that they have full political rights because religion has no bearing on politics or that they have political rights but are not eligible to be the head of state. Asad adopts a moderate course while keeping these viewpoints in mind: Islam grants women only limited political rights. Regarding women's political engagement, Mohammad Asad's ideas seem pretty open-minded. For instance, he says that "women" can be elected as members of the legislative assembly and meet the requirements to be members of the Majlis al-Shura (Hasan, 1998, p. 146). Regarding the position of head of state, he states that the candidate should be a Muslim, sage and experienced, and have faith in the divinity of Shariah. He neglected to address the fact that women are qualified candidates for this role (Asad, 1961, pp. 39-42).

Numerous Islamic scholars have used passages from the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet to support their position that women cannot serve as head of state, members of the court, in Parliament or comparable organisations, or as military leaders (Fahad, 2007, p. 225).

The Qur'an claims: “men shall take full care of women” (Al- Qur'an, 4:32) and it is mentioned in a prophetic saying that: “A nation that hands its affairs over to a woman will not prosper (Bukhari, 4425).

Concept of Jihad

Today the word ‘*Jihad*’ (struggle) is associated with “fighting in a war,” even though the Qur'an uses the term *qitāl* for that aspect. Mohammad Asad supports jihad in an already-existing Islamic state. He thought that engaging in jihad (in this case, combat) is solely defensive. He quotes the following verses of Al-Quran that forbid a war of aggression:

أُذِنَ لِلَّذِينَ يُقَاتَلُونَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ظَلَمُوا ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ نَصْرِهِمْ لَقَدِيرٌ

Permission 'to fight back' is 'hereby' granted to those being fought, for they have been wronged.¹ And Allah is truly Most Capable of helping them 'prevail'. (Qur'an, 22:39).

الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَقُولُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ۗ وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ لَهَدَمَتْ صَوْمِعَ
وَبَيْعَ وَصَلُوتَ وَمَسْجِدَ يُذَكَّرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا ۗ وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَنْصُرُهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ۝ ٤٠

Those who have been expelled from their homes unjustly only because they said: "Our Lord is Allah." - For had it not been that Allah checks one set of people by means of another, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, wherein the Name of Allah is mentioned much would surely have been pulled down. Verily, Allah will help those who help His (Cause). Truly, Allah is All-Strong, All-Mighty. (Qur'an, 22:40).

Asad emphatically holds that Islam not only negates but also forbids its followers to wage a war of aggression, for the Holy Qur'an claims:

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ

And fight in God's cause against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression - for, verily, God does not love aggressors. (Qur'an, 2:190).

He claims that this verse "unambiguously permits Muslims to combat only defensive wars—defence of man's freedom of religion, of his country, and of the liberty of his community," and that all relevant Traditions (particularly those cited by Tabari and Ibn Kathir) demonstrate that this is the earliest Qur'anic reference to the troubles of war as such.

Further, he defends war as a means of eradicating persecution and enabling people to worship Allah without fear of oppression and tyranny. He quotes the Qur'an as:

وَقَاتِلُوهُمْ حَتَّى لَا تَكُونَ فِتْنَةً وَيَكُونَ الدِّينُ كُلُّهُ لِلَّهِ

"And fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone". (Al-Quran, Surah Anfal: 39).

Mohammad Asad thought that the basic premise of self-defence as the sole viable justification for war is perpetuated throughout the Qur'an, as is Allah's permission for His followers to be courteous and just to those unbelievers who do not conduct war against or persecute Muslims:

لَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ

"Allah does not forbid you with regard to those who did not fight you because of religion nor expel you from your homes from being kind to them and being just to them Indeed Allah loves those who are just". (Al-Quran, Surah [Al-Mumtahinah](#) 8)

According to Mohammad Asad, who mentions these verses in his book *The Principles of State and Government in Islam*, they are clear, self-explanatory Qur'anic regulations, and any Teachings that call for *jihad* must be interpreted in the context of them. In other words, since it is primarily for defence reasons, both Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants may actively engage in it. He claims that the only distinction between them in this situation is that Muslims are required to give their lives in defence of the state, whilst non-Muslims are not required to do so but have the option to do so. According to Asad, they are excused from fighting if doing so would violate their conscience, but they must pay the *jizya* unless they are women, young males under teenage, old men, sick or crippled individuals, poor people, priests, or men who wish to serve in the military (Asad, 1961, pp. 72-75).

Conclusion

According to Mohammad Asad, the feasibility of Islam's worldview is contingent on the Muslims' ability to make it functional. If we continue to confine our knowledge of Islamic law to prior Fiqhi principles, it will remain unworkable; but, if we have the courage and imagination to approach it from a fresh, impartial viewpoint and reject all conventional Fiqhi "deductions," it will become instantaneously feasible.

Above all, despite his accomplishments, he is not given due recognition, especially among Muslims. According to many who have followed his career via his books and articles, no one in our time has worked more to build a bridge between the East and the West or contributed more to the knowledge of Islam and the awakening of Muslims than Muhammad Asad. Muhammad Asad was unique among contemporary Muslims because of his profound insights into Islam and his significant contributions to the religion. Because of his command of the English language, familiarity with the Bible and biblical sources, and awareness of Jewish history and culture, Asad was more successful than others in reaching both Muslim and non-Muslim readers.

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