Reconstructing the Principles of Peace in the Light of Nahj al-Balagha

Asghar Akbari Pourkani[*]

Abstract

War and peace are key issues in international politics, drawing a variety of perspectives from scholars. It seems that in all schools of thought, peace is favored over war, and pacifism is widely accepted as a reasonable principle. Islam, being the final and complete divine religion, places particular emphasis on peace, considering it a core principle, a viewpoint that is also strongly reflected in the actions and teachings of the Imams (peace be upon them). Nahj al-Balagha, a collection of sermons, letters, and maxims attributed to Imam Ali (as), emphasizes the importance of peace. This study seeks to reconstruct the principles of pacifism through a descriptive and analytical examination of Imam Ali's (as) discourses. The findings indicate that peace and reconciliation, which are often considered synonymous, are, in fact, distinct concepts. A close examination of Imam Ali's (as) teachings reveals principles such as guidance, restraint, and prevention of war escalation, vigilance before and after peace agreements, delay of war to convince public to embrace peace and abandon conflict and finally, adherence to peace agreements constitute the framework of pacifism in his teachings.

Keywords

[*]Assistant Professor, Faculty of islamic teachings, Vali-e-Asr University of Rafsanjan, Rafsanjan, Iran   akbari@vru.ac.ir

Introduction

Across all religions, pacifism is regarded as a positive concept. The Holy Quran unequivocally considers peace as a source of goodness and instructs the Muslim community to be peaceful and peace-seeking. the conduct (Sira) of Imam (as) also underscore the importance of pacifism and peaceful coexistence. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) consistently recommended peaceful interactions with others and exemplified this in practice. His gentle and conciliatory response to the offense by the delegation of Banu Tamim serves as an example of pacifism in the Prophet's life (Ibn Hisham, n.d., Vol. 2, pp. 560-562; Ibn Abd al-Barr, 1992, Vol. 1, p. 103; Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, 1995, Vol. 4, p. 418).

Imam Ali (as), as a prominent successor of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), also showed a notable commitment to pacifism in his verbal and practical conduct. This commitment is reflected in Nahj al-Balagha, which encapsulates his teachings. While previous research has addressed the significance of pacifism from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha and its priority over conflict, it lacks a systematic presentation of principles covering the necessary aspects before the initiation of war and following the acceptance of peace. A recurring question regarding the lives of the Imams (as), particularly Imam Ali (as), who also held a governance role, is whether it is possible to derive comprehensive principles of pacifism from their conduct and teachings and present them as a coherent intellectual framework for contemporary humanity. The author believe that a meticulous examination of Nahj al-Balagha provides the opportunity to develop such principles. Hence, this paper employs a descriptive-analytical method to explore the principles of pacifism in the sermons, letters, and maxims of Nahj al-Balagha. Initially, the concept of peace and its related notions are examined, followed by an exploration of peace in the Quran and the traditions of the Imams (as). The second section of the study delves into the principles of pacifism from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha.

1. Conceptual framework

In order to reconstruct the principles of peace through Nahj al-Balagha, it is essential to first address the concept of peace and other related and equivalent terms such as reconciliation and war. This is crucial because, in common usage, these concepts are often used interchangeably, despite their distinct differences that need to be clarified.

According to Dehkhoda's dictionary, "peace" is defined as calmness, reconciliation, compromise, tranquility, and settlement (Dehkhoda, 1998, Vol. 10, p. 15025). Moin defines peace as reconciliation and friendship. In

the Amīd Dictionary, peace is described as reconciliation and compromise with followers of different religions. It differentiates between political peace, which involves ending a war through a treaty, and legal peace, which refers to an agreement where someone grants or relinquishes property, money, or a right to another (Amid, 2000, Vol. 2, p. 1366). Amīd's definition faces two major issues: first, it conflates peace with reconciliation, whereas reconciliation often carries a negative connotation in political contexts, indicating submission and compromise before an adversary. Second, reconciliation with followers of different religions is better termed "religious tolerance" rather than peace (Barani and Dehghani, pp. 7-26).

Some scholars classify peace into different types. For instance, Afroogh divides peace into positive and negative categories. Positive peace refers to a state where there is a genuine desire for peace from either or both parties in a conflict. In contrast, negative peace refers to a situation where, despite an outward appearance of peace, there is an underlying readiness for war, with one or both parties remaining in a state of alert and anxiety. According to Afroogh, such a state, where people remain wary despite outward peace, is considered negative peace (Afroogh, 2011, p. 58).

Reconciliation, according to Dehkhoda's dictionary, is defined as the act of making or harmonizing, good behavior, and coordination (Dehkhoda, 1998, Vol. 8, p. 11690). Other definitions include agreement, compatibility, peace, and good conduct (Moin, 2006, p. 64). Reconciliation carries different meanings in various fields. In legal terms, it refers to the peaceful resolution of disputes. In political contexts, however, it often implies submission or capitulation to an adversary. It can also mean leniency or compromise in front of an opponent.

War is another term with multiple meanings. In Dehkhoda's dictionary, war is defined as conflict and battle, engagement, strife, and combat (Dehkhoda, 1998, Vol. 5, p. 6918). In military sciences, war can be categorized based on the extent of conflict into internal and external wars, with external wars further divided into conventional and global wars depending on the scope and scale. Wars can also be divided into "hard" and "soft" based on the methods and tactics used (Nasri, 2008, p. 317). The discussion of war in this study is meant to clarify these terms by their opposites and will be kept concise to avoid excessive elaboration.

2. Peace in Islamic Texts

Another critical aspect of this study is examining Islam's perspective on the concept of peace. Despite some contradictory views, an examination of the Quranic texts and Hadiths indicates that Islam prioritizes peace over war.

War is considered a last resort to address oppression and injustice. This section will separately explore the Quranic perspective and the traditions of the Imams (as), emphasizing the precedence of peace over conflict.

2.1. Peace in the Quran

Several Quranic verses reveal the high value Islam places on peace. The following verses illustrate the Quran's emphasis on peace:

- " If they incline toward peace, then you [too] incline toward it, and put your trust in Allah. Indeed He is the All-hearing, the All-knowing.." (Surah Al-Anfal: 61)

- " O you who have faith! Enter into submission, all together, and do not follow in Satan's steps; he is indeed your manifest enemy.." (Surah Al-Baqarah: 208)

- " The servants of the All-beneficent are those who walk humbly on the earth, and when the ignorant address them, say, 'Peace!'." (Surah Al-Furqan: 63)

The term "peace" in this context is interpreted by some translators as "peaceful words" (Ansarian, 2004, p. 365), "peaceful and non-violent speech" (Meshkini, 2002, p. 365), or "gentle response" (Garmaroudi, 2005, p. 365; Ayati, 1995, p. 365).

- " Fight them until persecution is no more, and religion becomes [exclusively] for Allah. Then if they desist, there shall be no reprisal except against the wrongdoers.." (Surah Al-Baqarah: 193)

- " If a woman fears from her husband misconduct or desertion, there is no sin upon the couple if they reach a reconciliation between themselves; and reconcilement is better. The souls are prone to greed; but if you are virtuous and Godwary, Allah is indeed well aware of what you do.." (Surah An-Nisa: 128)

The Quran also occasionally associates reconciliation with the term "peace": " So do not slacken and [do not] call for peace when you have the upper hand and Allah is with you, and He will not stint [the reward of] your works." (Surah Muhammad: 35)

2-2. Peace in the Traditions of the Imams (as)

Examining the traditions about peace in the hadith literature reveals that what is emphasized in these narrations are historical examples of peace, with only a few narrations explicitly highlighting the absolute precedence of peace over war. Below are some narrations that unequivocally acknowledge the value of peace:

- The Prophet (peace be upon him): "Allah has made peace a greeting for our Ummah and safety for the people of Dhimmi." (Muttaqi Hindi, 1998, p. 120). In this narration, "peace" appears to refer to the pursuit of peace and avoidance of violence.

- The Prophet (peace be upon him): "O people! Do not wish to encounter the enemy. Instead, ask Allah for safety." (Ibn Hanbal, 1934, Vol. 2, p. 323).

- Imam Ali (as): "Whoever among you requests peace and reconciliation, accept it from him." (Sheikh Hur Amili, 1990, Vol. 11, p. 73). However, the most explicit aspect in the traditions is the practical example set by the Imams (as), which includes:

- Imam Baqir (as): The Prophet (peace be upon him) had a peaceful approach with the people of Mecca during the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah. The Imam or his appointed representative should decide on peace based on the welfare of the Muslims, whether or not it involves taking money from the polytheists. (Nuri, 1989, Vol. 11, p. 43).

- The Treaty with the Christians of Najran: The Prophet's peace treaty with the Christians of Najran is another example of preferring peace over war. The event of Mubahila and the Christians' acceptance of peace instead of engaging in Mubahila with the Prophet and his family is another indicator of the Imams' inclination towards peace. (Ya'qubi, n.d., Vol. 2, pp. 82-83; Ibn Kathir, 1986, Vol. 5, pp. 52-56).

- Imam Sadiq (as): Imam Ali (as) said The Prophet (peace be upon him) sent me to Yemen and instructed, "O Ali! Certainly, do not engage in battle with anyone unless you have first invited them to Islam." (Kulayni, 2008, Vol. 5, p. 36; Fayz Kashani, 1985, Vol. 15, p. 91).

- The Peace Treaty of Hasan and Husayn (as) with Muawiya: The avoidance of war by Imam Hasan (as) and Imam Husayn (as) when the survival of Islam was at stake is another notable example of their commitment to peace.

3. Principles of Peace from Nahj al-Balagha

What has been outlined so far includes the conceptual understanding of peace and reconciliation and their significance in religious texts, demonstrating that Islam prioritizes peace over war, as confirmed by both the Quran and the traditions of the Imams (as). The core focus of this study is to recover the principles of peace and reconciliation from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha. Based on a detailed analysis of Imam Ali's (as) statements in Nahj al-Balagha, the following principles of peace are extracted:

3-1. Principle of Guidance

One of the principles of peace in Nahj al-Balagha is the principle of prevention and avoidance of war before inviting to guidance. Imam Ali (as) in sermon 55, addressing rumors about avoiding war, points out that he is never afraid of facing the enemy. However, when the choice between war and peace is clear, the goal of guidance must not be neglected. What is emphasized in Imam Ali's (as) words and actions is the importance of guidance as a strategic goal in both peace and war. Unlike non-religious ideologies that focus on selfish and expansionist goals in wars and peaces, the approach of Imam Ali (as) was centered on fulfilling the mission of guiding people and rescuing humanity from misguidance. This principle is highlighted in the following excerpt from sermon 55:

"As for your saying, 'Is all this out of hatred for death?' By Allah, I do not care whether I enter into death or death comes to me. And as for your saying that I have doubts about the people of Levant, by Allah, I have never postponed war except in the hope that a group from the opposition would join me and be guided by me and see the light of my guidance. That is more preferable to me than killing them in their error, even if they bear their sins." (Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 55) This passage responds to some companions who questioned why Imam Ali (as) delayed in the Battle of Siffin. Imam Ali (as) explains that his delay was motivated by the hope that some of his opponents might be guided through him rather than being killed in their ignorance.

3.2. Principle of Restraint prevention of war escalation

The second principle of peace in Imam Ali's (as) teachings is the principle of restraint and preventing the escalation of war. The Quran repeatedly emphasizes this principle, urging Muslims not to instigate conflict but to pursue justice. In Surah Al-Ma'idah, verse 8, Muslims are advised not to let the aggression of enemies lead them to deviate from justice or exacerbate the flames of war. Surah Al-Isra, verse 33, also warns against excessive retribution and expanding the scope of killing. Imam Ali (as) instructed his followers on how to handle enemies before the Battle of Siffin: "Do not fight them until they initiate the battle against you. For you are, by the grace of Allah, on a clear proof, and leaving them until they start will serve as another proof of your rightfulness against them." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 14).

In a similar advisory to his son, Imam Hasan (as), he stated: "Do not invite anyone to a duel, and if someone invites you, respond to him. For the one who calls for a duel is an oppressor, and the oppressor is defeated."

(Nahj al-Balagha, Wisdom 233). Imam Ali (as) also advised Maqal ibn Qays Rayahi, whom he sent to the forces of the Levant: "Do not approach the enemy as one who desires to ignite the war." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 12). Additionally, he instructed not to let enmity lead to combat before calling them to the right path and providing them with excuses: "Do not let their animosity push you to fight them before inviting them to guidance and making excuses for them." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 12). These principles from Nahj al-Balagha illustrate a strategic approach to peace that emphasizes the prevention of unnecessary conflict and prioritizing guidance and justice over aggression.

3.3. Principle of Vigilance

In the realm of peace and reconciliation, the principle of vigilance is another key concept derived from the teachings of Imam Ali (as). This principle can be divided into two parts: vigilance before and after peace. Imam Ali's (as) statements in Nahj al-Balagha clearly illustrate these two types of vigilance when dealing with adversaries.

3.3.1. Vigilance Before Peace

In one of his letters to the people of distant regions from the caliphate, Imam Ali (as) elaborates on the events of the Battle of Siffin and underscores the importance of vigilant observation of events during wartime. Although various principles can be extracted from his letters in Nahj al-Balagha, a notable example is found in Letter 58. In this letter, beyond emphasizing the need to control and prevent the expansion of war—as mentioned earlier— Imam Ali (as) places special emphasis on the vigilance of one's own forces before reaching peace to avoid enemy plots. He writes: "The situation began when we met with the people of Levant who, on the surface, had one Lord, one Prophet, and one invitation in Islam. In faith in God and acknowledgment of His Prophet, none of us were superior to the other, and we were united except for the blood of Uthman, from which we were disassociated. We then said to them: 'Let us extinguish the fire of war and calm the people so that the affairs of the Muslims may be stabilized and unity achieved, and we may become powerful in executing justice.' However, the people of Levant responded, 'We have no solution other than war.' Thus, war ensued and continued, and its flames spread. When the claws of war deeply embedded themselves in us and them, they submitted to our call for peace and dialogue. We also responded to their request promptly to complete the argument against them and close the door to excuses. Those who remained steadfast to their pledge were saved from destruction, while

those who persisted in their obstinacy were covered by God's veil of ignorance and plagued by dark misfortune." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 58).

3.3.2.Vigilance After Peace

The second phase of the principle of vigilance involves monitoring military affairs after peace has been accepted. This aspect of vigilance is discussed in Imam Ali's (as) advice to Malik al-Ashtar: "However, be extremely cautious of your enemy even after peace is established, for the enemy may come close and appear peaceful to deceive you. Therefore, be more diligent and do not place too much trust in the enemy's apparent goodwill; instead, handle their cunning with suspicion and mistrust." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53). In this valuable advice, Imam Ali (as) strongly recommends that government officials maintain vigilance after peace and never be complacent about the enemy's schemes, always viewing the adversary with skepticism.

3.4. Adherence to the foundations of peace

The Adherence to the foundations of peace is another crucial principle, which can be divided into two sub-principles: honorable peace and adherence to peace. Imam Ali (as) emphasizes these principles in various contexts, advocating for their implementation in military confrontations and subsequent events. From Letter 14 of Nahj al-Balagha, addressed to his companions during the Battle of Siffin, it is evident that even in the heat of war, ethics should not be forgotten. This reflects the peace-seeking approach of Islam and the Imams (as).

3.4.1. Honorable Peace

While peace is highly recommended in Islam, it is only acceptable when it secures the benefits of the Islamic community and preserves the dignity and honor of Muslims. Honorable peace and heroic flexibility hold a significant place in the lives of the Imams (as). Examples include the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) flexible approach in the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah, which led to the Conquest of Mecca, and Imam Hasan's (as) honorable peace with Muawiya, which ensured the survival of Islam and Muslims. In his managerial charter to Malik al-Ashtar, Imam Ali (as) advises on the conditions of peace: "Do not reject a peace that your enemy offers if it pleases God, for peace will ease your soldiers, relieve you from worries, and ensure security for your lands." (Nahj al-Balagha). Imam Ali (as) stipulates that any peace proposed by the enemy must be conditional on the approval of God, which constitutes an honorable peace.

3.4.2. Adherence to Peace

Adherence to agreements and commitments, in general, and specifically to peace agreements, is a significant emphasis in Islam. The Quran highlights the necessity of upholding agreements in the first verse of Surah Al-Ma'idah: "O you who have faith! Keep your agreements. You are permitted animals of grazing livestock, except what is [now] announced to you, disallowing game while you are in pilgrim sanctity. Indeed Allah decrees whatever He desires." (Quran 5:1). Additionally, the Prophet Muhammad's (s) life illustrates the importance of fidelity to agreements. A key point in Imam Ali's (as) discourse on peace is the absolute necessity of adhering to agreements and promises: "Hold fast to your pledges, especially with those who are faithful... For there is no obligation more universally agreed upon, despite diverse desires and opinions, than the importance of honoring agreements..." (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 53). Imam Ali (as) emphasizes that even non-believers are committed to their agreements, and thus, Muslims, who claim faith, should be even more committed. Adherence to peace and fulfillment of promises is both a religious and natural principle that Islam, which is based on human nature, firmly upholds.

3.5. Principle of Delay of war to embrace peace and abandon conflict

This principle refers to postponing war and granting the enemy time to convince their public to embrace peace and abandon conflict. Essentially, restraint and avoiding facilitating the conditions for war, as well as not rushing into conflict, were among the strategies employed by the Imams (as) to prepare the ground for peace or delay warfare. Numerous examples of adherence to this principle can be observed in the prophetic (peace be upon him) and Ali's (as) practices. In one of his letters to Muawiya, Imam Ali (as) highlights his capability to defeat Muawiya, citing his adherence to delaying war as the reason for not confronting him at a specific time. He states: "By Allah, if it were not for some considerations of restraint, you would have received a crushing blow that would shatter bones and spill flesh…" (Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 73). This illustrates that the avoidance of bloodshed and the respect for a designated period of restraint were deliberate decisions. Before the Battle of Siffin, Imam Ali (as) explained to his companions, who were astonished by his leniency towards the Levant, that the primary reason for delaying the conflict was to find a chance of hope for avoiding confrontation with Muawiya's army and for them to join the ranks of the righteous (Nahj al-Balagha, Sermon 55). Thus, delaying war increases the likelihood of persuading some of the deceived adversaries to return to the

righteous side and supports the notion of peace-seeking in Islam and the conduct of the Imams (as), who epitomize the true teachings of Islam.

Conclusion

This study has endeavored to present the principles of peace from the perspective of Nahj al-Balagha. It began with an exploration of the concept of peace and its related and opposing terms. It clarified that peace, as opposed to mere conciliation, is highly praised while the latter is condemned. Unlike Western thinkers who view human nature as inherently conflictual and justify peace within their own interests, even endorsing betrayal in peace when deemed necessary, the precedence of peace over war is emphasized as a fundamental and religious principle. A detailed examination of Imam Ali's (as) sayings in Nahj al-Balagha reveals that he addressed the principles of dealing with enemies, both before and after the outbreak of war, and emphasized the pursuit of peace and the efforts of his military commanders. The principles of peace according to Nahj al-Balagha can be summarized into five distinct and profound principles: guidance, restraint and prevention of war escalation, vigilance before and after peace agreements, Adherence to the foundations of peace and delay of war to convince public to embrace peace and abandon conflict. These principles should serve as a guiding framework for contemporary governments, both religious and secular, which have deviated from their original principles due to their immersion in material pleasures and sensual desires, and their relentless pursuit of power at any cost. It is imperative for researchers in this field to conduct in-depth studies and comparisons of the principles outlined with Imam Ali's (as) actions. This will demonstrate to humanity that his words and deeds are consistently aligned, highlighting a unique and unparalleled truth in political history.

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