An Islamic Philosophical Response to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict:
Justice, Mercy, and the Prophet

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He (Allah) has sent me as a mercy for all worlds.

- Sunan Abi Dawud 4659

This is actually the easiest piece for me to write, as I have been thinking about it for a long time. But it is also difficult for me to put out into the world, as I am concerned that I will be misunderstood, by both friends and (soon-to-be) enemies. But as a Muslim, a Philosopher, and more importantly a Human Being, I believe that I must speak the truth (not my truth, but what I take to be The Truth) regardless of what may come, be it abandonment and loneliness, death, loss of job, prison the next time I travel to Iran, or exile. As Mos Def says on his classic album Black on Both Sides, one ought to have no fear of man. Outside of the Prophets, their wives, family, and companions, my immediate moral and philosophical exemplars and heroes are Spinoza, Maimonides, Descartes and Princess Elizabeth, Socrates, al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Sina. I will say what I have to say, in the same way that they said what they had to say.

My task here, then, is to not be technical, and express my philosophical views as simply and as clearly as possible. The intended Muslim audience already has the background knowledge, they just need to be reminded. We all must be reminded sometimes. So this will be short, and (hopefully) sweet. My thesis is this: Given the present political circumstances in the so-called
“Middle East”, a true Muslim following the sunnah of the Prophet should be concessive to the Jewish State of Israel, and that Palestinian Muslims (leaving aside other religious denominations in Palestine), in an effort to uphold the true sunnah of the Prophet, should be as concessive as possible (if not fully concessive) to the state of Israel. And this perhaps means leaving Palestine.

To be clear, this is not a support of Israel coming from a commitment to any Zionist doctrine. Rather, it is an Islamic argument coming solely from a non-controversial and basic understanding of Islam, the life of the Prophet, and his character. Of course, as a scholar of both Islamic and Jewish political philosophy, I have some criticisms of Zionism, Israeli policy, and the occupation. But that is irrelevant for the task at hand. I am not concerned with what Israel ought to do or change in their policies toward the Palestinians, I am speaking to the Muslims and giving an account of what they ought to do, regardless of the behavior of the Israelis.

As in my other Islamic philosophical reflections, let me make two distinct sets of claims clear (that I will not defend here). First, and foremost, let me tell you about myself. For I am certain that there will be a lot of personal attacks on my character, beliefs, and views, which will be a distraction from the argument at hand.

1. I am a professional philosopher.

2. I am a well-studied Sunni Muslim (and I hope that I am a Muslim, through all of my imperfections—Allah knows best the state of my soul).

3. I am Iranian-American (a dual citizen).

4. I am not an Islamic scholar, just a well-read Muslim.

5. I am not a nationalist of any stripe (and therefore not a Zionist or Zionist sympathizer in doctrine).

6. (5) is based on my general antithesis toward any nation states, and I am not (when theoretical push comes to shove) supportive of the dividing up of nation states in the last two centuries or so.

7. I believe that everyone should be able to live wherever they want to on this God given earth.
8. But despite all of these idealistic beliefs, I live in the world of brutal politics, nation states, and mass genocides. Thus, when *practical push comes to shove*, my ultimate aim is securing as much happiness and safety for women, children, men and persons of all walks of life everywhere regardless of religious belief, gender, sexuality, etc. (I am not a utilitarian, but a virtue theorist, and I hope the attentive reader can see why an Islamic virtue theorist would say what I am saying).

Second, for the sake of argument, then, I hope you will grant me the following claims that I will assume. Depending on the reader, I think some of these may be obvious, some controversial, and some problematic. I myself find all of them obvious after one gains a basic understanding of the relevant history and religious tradition:

1. The Jewish People have been historically disenfranchised, oppressed, and have never found a true home in any part of the world where they can fully flourish in safety and harmony with others for an extended period of time. And I would also say, to push things further, that the Jewish State of Israel still hasn’t become a true home for the Jews, for they are still not fully safe.

2. Given everything the Jewish People have been through, they deserve (at least as a general claim) to have an autonomous state where they can live.

3. The establishment of the Jewish State of Israel in 1948 did, at least in part, create severe injustices to the native Palestinian population.

4. There are severe injustices in Israeli policy toward the current Palestinian population in the occupied territories, and in Israel.

5. A subset of the Palestinian population has engaged in unjust war practices against the Israeli population (and vice versa).

6. I don’t know what to say about Judaism here, but my view is that Islam does not support nationalism (as Seyyed Qutb has argued), and all Islamic nation states are un-Islamic. Therefore, a Muslim Palestinian nation state would be, all things considered and ideally, un-Islamic.
7. Muslims should strive for what is ideal: a Muslim ought to strive for what is best in the next life, not what is best in the \textit{dunya} (present life).

8. The Prophet Muhammad is a mercy to all of the worlds, and he should be understood, primarily, as a vehicle of mercy to everyone. Consequently, Muslims should follow suit.

9. From an Islamic perspective, there is no Muslim in human history who has ever been more oppressed and harmed than the Prophet.

10. Despite his oppression in both the Meccan and Medinan years, the Prophet was not, by nature or character, a violent man, but a gentle man. He only engaged in violence as a last resort to protect his community, when absolutely necessary. And he did not engage in any unjust war practices, not using fire, poison, etc. in any of his battles. \textit{A fortiori} I maintain that guns, bombs, and any use of fire in warfare is anti-Islamic. Finally, the Prophet himself was not (at least immediately) a conqueror, political revolutionary, or liberator of peoples from their economic and material circumstances. He came to liberate and revolutionize souls, regardless of their contingent material circumstances in the finite world.

I hope the reader can see where I’m going. Given everything about myself and my assumptions, one can see that I am committed to the following claim:

\textbf{Prophetic Mercy}: If the Prophet were a Palestinian today, he would have made \textit{hijrah} to another land immediately, and he would not have stayed in Palestine and come close to any of the violent or non-violent revolutionary activities of the Palestinians. He would have had better things to do.

\textit{(This is based on an argument by analogy from his reaction to the oppression in the Meccan years, and I will not really spell out that argument fully, it should be obvious to the attentive Muslim reader).}

Again, to be clear: I am speaking to the Muslims here. I have nothing to say here about what the Israelis ought to do—there are excellent Jewish thinkers who are already doing that. I only have things to say about what the Muslims
categorically ought to do given their religious, spiritual, and ethical tradition. Their moral obligations to God and the Prophet is in no way contingent on the behavior of anyone else (Israeli or not).

First things first: Muslims ought not be concerned with all forms of justice, especially in this case. When we look at the life of the Prophet, we find that he never complained about any injustices done to him. The Prophet was simply a man that never complained, and if he did want to complain, he directed those complaints to his Lord. Although, of course, he did seek justice on behalf of others, this was always balanced with a sense of mercy (which I want to discuss more below). Muslims believe (or at least we need to be reminded about what we ought to believe) that full justice will only be delivered on the Day of Resurrection and Judgment. While we need legal systems, and crimes of both a domestic and international nature ought to be tracked and reported, the best form of justice will be delivered at the hands of God when we all stand before Him. And if there is anyone who had injustices done to him, it was the Prophet. He lost family, companions, and children. But he moved on. He moved on with the certainty that God would one day take care of his affairs. The best defender of the Muslim is Allah, in both this world and the next. And we need to remember that. So, I am not denying that there are vast injustices that have been done to the Palestinians (Muslim and non-Muslim alike, but I am speaking to the Muslim ones here). And there have been vast injustices done to the Muslim world due to colonialism and the rise of nation states, and the power dynamics that have shifted in the so-called “West.” But remember that your pain and suffering is not forgotten or unnoticed: Allah knows and sees everything (from pre-eternity), and he will handle your affairs God Willing. Leave it to Allah, it is ultimately under his providence. The Muslim ought not be obsessed with justice (especially when justice is delivered by the efforts of faulty human beings), but with enacting something else entirely.

The Muslim—and this is the sunnah of the Prophet—ought to be obsessed with mercy. For true justice is simply not attainable through the actions of men. But we can, almost instantaneously decide to act mercifully to everyone (regardless of faith). Let me say a little bit more about mercy. ‘Mercy’ in its real conceptual definition (at least as I understand it from an Islamic perspective), is delivered to exactly the people who have wronged you. Those who have done injustices to you. Mercy is delivered to those who have wronged you, and a condition on mercy is not their recognizing that they have wronged you. It is an unconditional kind of love, by which you
act with kindness, patience, respect, attention, and wise words to those who have oppressed you, with the aim of rectifying their condition. And that’s what we see in the life of the Prophet. The Meccans terrorized the Prophet, but when he entered Mecca at the end of his Prophetic career to reclaim his rightful home, he came not as a conqueror proud and boastful, but bowing down to God on his camel as he entered the blessed city of God. He did not ride in with swords, aiming to kill everyone in sight. All Muslims should know this story. But it is not merely a historical story. It is a deep lesson that we all ought to learn from. The Prophet, as our epigraph tells us, was a Mercy to all of the Worlds. Everything in existence was an object of the Prophet’s Mercy. And as followers of the Prophet, we need to be merciful to everyone, regardless of the injustices they may have done to us. If we don’t, we will have failed him, and we will not be able to look him in the eye on the Day of Judgment, when all we have is blood spilled on our hands. And precious blood at that: we are talking about the people of the book: Jews and Christians. We should love them like we love our own souls. And be as concessive as possible. God will take care of us.

So, why are we not merciful to others in the region? We are not merciful to others and each other because we do not know who our Prophet is, and because we do not have that knowledge, we are weak people. The Prophet’s Mercy comes from a place of knowledge, and thus a place of power. As Leibniz so clearly spells out throughout his metaphysical and moral writings, knowledge is intimately connected to power. As we acquire more knowledge about ourselves and the world, we increase in our potential for virtuous activity and actual virtuous activity. Mercy is the ultimate sign of power. Seeking justice (at least as an obsession and almost a psychosis I would say) is a sign of weakness. We need to learn who we are as Muslims. And the only way to know who we are is by gaining knowledge of the character of our beloved Prophet. And out of that knowledge should be borne the seeds of love. And that love ought to be spread to every corner of the world, regardless of what other people are doing. Our home, we hope, is in the next life. The *dunyā*, in its root meaning in Arabic, means a “lowly place”. But we must not forget that the *dunyā* also has a foot in the divine, for every human being and creature in this universe was created by God, and thus is deserving of love and respect (regardless of their current condition, and regardless of how they treat us).

So, I take my thesis to be sufficiently defended. Of course, the Palestinians have suffered. But they have not suffered more than the Prophet, and to act
otherwise is to disgrace our beloved. So, as your brother in Islam, I ask Palestinians (at least the Muslim ones) to be merciful to your neighbors. Invite as many Jews as possible into your homes: cook for them, serve them, ask them what they need to be healthy, happy, and safe. And if giving up your property and land is the cost of being merciful to the beloved Jewish people (who again, have been historically oppressed), then do it. As Imam Ali tells us, this world is a dream and an illusion. Life, in short, is like a video game. We keep playing the same level the same way over and over again, and not succeeding. We need to switch up. For we have already tried the path of justice, and all we have seen is more blood spilled on both sides. How about we try to imagine what the Prophet would do (while remembering that ultimately every success and calamity occurs through the Will of God—*Inshallah* should mean something right?)

This is a difficult truth, and I write this with a lot of pain in my heart for I love my Palestinian Muslim brothers and sisters, in the same way that I love my Jewish and Christian brothers and sisters. But we cannot live a life in vengeance and hate. If the unexamined life is not worth living, then the hateful, violent, and vengeful life is definitely not worth living either. If anyone had a right to be vengeful, it was the Prophet. But he wasn’t. He cried, sobbed, and worried about the people who harmed him the most, and those who still had not understood the message of God. So let us first free ourselves from our own oppression, so that we can become people of love that can deliver the kind of love to our (alleged) oppressors that will free them from their own souls. A crushed rose still offers fragrance to the hand that crushes it. And the key is this: being a crushed rose is a choice. I hope we all make that choice, regardless of what the future holds.