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The Origin, the Way and the Goal: Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim's Typology of Conflict

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1. Introduction

One of the most commonly used definitions of conflict focuses on the goals of the conflicting parties and sees conflict as a relationship between parties with perceived incompatible goals.[1] However, the scope of conflict and its roots may be broader than the goals of the parties. In his theory of conflict presented in *The Unleashed Thunderbolts*,[2] the fourteenth-century Islamic scholar Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya[i] provided the basis for a typology of conflict that goes beyond the goals of the parties to include their references and the processes by which they achieve their goals. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim's typology of conflict. It begins with an introduction to the concept of conflict and the duty of conflict transformation in the Islamic tradition; it then presents the conflict typology proposed by Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim, gives some examples of conflicts of different types in Muslim majority contexts, and elaborates on how to deal with each type.

2. Conflict in the Islamic Tradition

2.1. The Concept of Conflict

The literal translation of the word conflict in Arabic is *tadhārub* (striking together); it is close to the Latin *confligere*, the root of the word conflict. But the Arabic term that best corresponds to conflict is *khilāf*[ii], which has several meanings: difference, opposition, diversity, and also the meaning of corruption.[3] When applied to food, for example, the verb *khalafa* means that it has gone bad. Therefore, the term *khilāf* can refer to the corruption of a relationship between two or more parties.

In Qur'ānic and prophetic language, the expression used for peace mediation is "mending bonds" (*islāhu thātil-bayn*). This has important implications for peacemaking; it implies that: (1) conflict is a corrupted relationship between parties who are not necessarily bad in themselves; and (2) the corrupted relationship can be restored, hence the usefulness of peace mediation.

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[i] Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, or Ibn Al-Qayyim, was a Muslim scholar born in Damascus in 1292. His father Abu Bakr was the *qayyim* (superintendent) of the Al-Jawziyya *madrasa*. He was a disciple of Imam Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Al-Qayyim died in 1350.

[ii] The terms *niza'a* and *sirā'a* are commonly used in Arabic literature. They are inappropriate for the concept of conflict and tend to refer to *violent* conflict.

Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim stated in the *The Unleashed Thunderbolts* that "conflict between people is inevitable and unavoidable because of the disparity in their wills, understanding, and keenness of mind. What is reprehensible is aggression and hostility towards each other. Otherwise [...] conflict does not hurt; it is inevitable because it is constitutive of the human creation."[4] He suggests that conflict is a normal human phenomenon and cannot be avoided in a living society, and that what should be avoided is the manifestation of violence, which recalls Johan Galtung's assertion[5] that peace is not the absence of conflict but the absence of violence, and that true peace is the absence of all forms of violence: direct, structural, and cultural.

2.2. The Duty of Conflict Transformation

Peace mediation is not the exclusive preserve of state actors; it is the right and duty of every citizen and the responsibility of civil society in all its diversity (multi-track diplomacy). In several verses, the Qur'ān invites believers to engage in peace mediation, stressing the value of "mending the bonds between people";[6] God promises those who do so "an immense reward."[7] The Qur'ān sets fairness as an essential requirement for peace mediation: "If two groups of believers come to fight each other, mend the ties between them. But if one of them oppresses the other, fight the oppressor until he submits to the command of God. If he submits, then mend the bonds between them with justice and be fair. God loves those who do justice."[8] The hadiths of the Prophet also praise the merit of peacemaking: "What is more valuable than fasting, prayer and almsgiving is to mend the bonds between conflicting parties."[9] "To make peace justly between two parties is an act of charity."[10] "What increases God's reward and erases the sins is to be involved in mending the bonds between people in conflict."[11] The Prophet himself set the example of an effective mediator between individuals and tribes in both Mecca and Medina. The verses and the hadiths suggest that it is the duty of Muslims to mediate not only between Muslims, but between any conflicting parties.

Bond mending is considered one of the main categories of charity work,[12] and since any mediation process requires financial resources, Islamic scholars, following the prophetic tradition, have made peace mediators eligible for *zakāt* (religious obligatory almsgiving), and even if the mediators are rich, if they invest resources in a mediation process, they are entitled to be reimbursed for their expenses from the public *zakāt* fund.[13]

3. Types of Conflict according to Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim

Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim distinguished in his theory of conflict between the *origin*, the *way* and the *goal*.
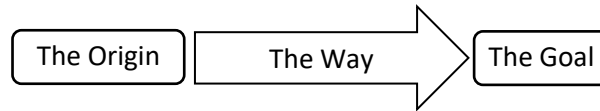

Diagram 1. Conflict can be related to the origin, the way, or the goal.

According to Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim, the absence of conflict is the configuration where "the origin is one, the goal is one and the way followed is one".[14] Therefore, he defines conflict as the situation where the origins are incompatible, or the ways are divergent, or the goals are contradictory. This leads to the eight scenarios or theoretical possibilities shown in Diagram 2, ranging from harmony to discord.
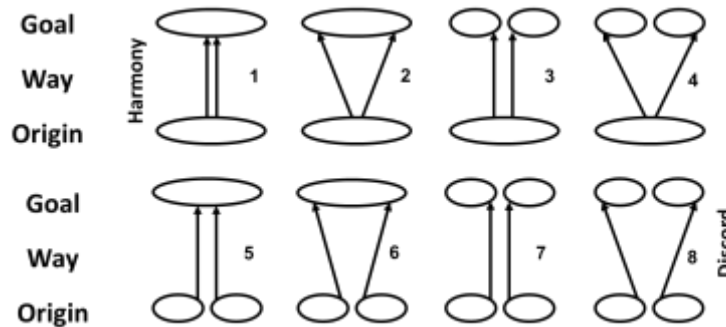

Diagram 2. Conflict scenarios involving the origin, the way, and the goal.

Most of the developments in the theory and practice of peacemaking in recent decades have concerned the case of "conflicting goals". In recent years there has been a growing interest in the case of "incompatible origins", conflicts known as worldview, value system, or reference conflicts.[15] Less studied is the case of "divergent ways", which could be called "process-related conflicts".

In the following sections, three relatively simple cases will be considered (scenarios 3, 5 and 2). Examples of such types of conflict in Islamic contexts and ways of dealing with them will be presented. In real

life, however, conflicts are often a combination of these three "simple" cases, leading to scenarios 4, 6, 7 and 8, with a higher degree of complexity.

4. Dealing with Conflict

4.1. Goal-related Conflicts

As elsewhere, conflicts related to "conflicting goals" are quite common in Muslim majority societies, among and between individuals and groups who may share the same reference and may be willing to share a non-violent process for resolving the conflict, through dialogue and negotiation. These types of conflicts can take the form of disputes over the sharing of land or water resources (e.g. conflicts between farmers and herders), or disputes over inheritance, or political conflicts over the sharing of power, or tensions over identity (language and culture).

There is a great deal of theoretical and practical know-how about transforming this type of conflict. Ideally, the parties to the conflict would work together (sometimes with the help of a mediator) to imagine a new reality that accommodates *all the legitimate goals of all parties*. This "transcend" method[16], which leads to a sustainable outcome, requires a full commitment to dialogue and a great deal of creativity. However, the most common approach to this type of conflict is negotiation, where the aim is to reach a minimum agreement and each party seeks to achieve *part of its goals*. This presupposes that the parties to the conflict are willing to make concessions and accept some mutual dissatisfaction for the sake of agreement. The principled negotiation approach developed at the Harvard School is well suited to dealing with interest-based conflicts. It is based on the following principles[17]: (1) separate the people from the problem; (2) focus on interests, not positions; (3) invent options for mutual gain; (4) insist on the use of objective criteria.

In Arab/Islamic contexts, there are traditional ways, rooted in the history of Arab tribes or inspired by religion, of dealing with such conflicts, especially those between tribes and clans over various issues. Traditional Arab peacemaking has been studied extensively by several scholars, including Mohammed Abu-Nimer,[18] George Irani,[19] Nahla Yassine-Hamdan and Frederic Pearson.[20] This peacemaking is based on mediation and/or arbitration involving tribal and religious leaders, and is preferred to law enforcement, which should only be considered as a last resort. Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattāb used to instruct his appointed judges: "Send the belligerents back to seek reconciliation, for the approach of

justice breeds resentment between people."[21] However, Arab societies lack the capacity and effective mechanisms to deal with political conflict and are still struggling to establish democratic systems to manage power-sharing, alternation in power, political transition and to devise mechanisms to regulate majority-minority relations.

4.2. Reference-related Conflicts

An example of conflicts related to "incompatible origins" in Muslim majority societies is the ideological polarisation between Secularists and Islamists in North Africa, which is an obstacle to building a democratic state and perpetuates authoritarianism.

To transform this type of conflict, the parties to the conflict would agree on a common goal to be pursued and on a process to achieve it. The idea behind this approach is that even if the parties to the conflict have different ideological/religious references, they can agree on a common goal and work together to achieve it, while remaining faithful to their respective references. The goal may be, for example, the consolidation of social cohesion and the strengthening of the rule of law and good governance. Jean-Nicolas Bitter et al.[22] proposed the "safe mediation space" (SMS) as an effective tool for dealing with worldview conflicts and recommend that the following principles be taken into account when designing the SMS: (1) formulate a common vision accepted by all sides; (2) establish safety lines agreed by all parties; (3) avoid imposing a worldview on any party; (4) focus on the practical. This has been applied jointly by Cordoba Peace Institute – Geneva (CPI) and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) in various contexts for more than a decade. A two-year process using this approach led to the signing of a "Memorandum Towards a Common Action Space" by 45 political actors from across the ideological spectrum in the MENA region.[23]

4.3. Process-related Conflicts

Conflicts related to "divergent ways" also exist in Muslim majority societies between currents, movements and groups, such as the divisions between different Islamic schools of thought (e.g. Salafi-Sufi tensions), or the tensions between Islamic political movements and militant groups who advocate non-violent means of resisting injustice and those who support armed resistance. This is the scenario where the conflicting parties have the same reference (Islamic foundational sources, Qur'ān and Sunna), the same goal (to be ruled according to Islamic rules), but with

divergent ways, i.e. the processes that make it possible to achieve the common goal while remaining faithful to the common reference.

The divergence of ways is due to the fact that the reference cannot be used in a vacuum; its application is conditioned by the context. As shown in Diagram 3, the intertwining of reference and context triggers a process of interpreting how the reference can be practically used to achieve the desired goal. This interpretation shapes attitudes and behaviour towards others. In the Islamic tradition, the effort of interpretation is called *ijtihād*, a religious duty for Islamic scholars.
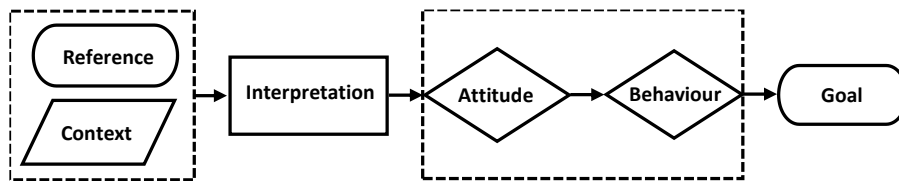

Diagram 3. From origin to goal: A process that relies on interpretation.

In order to deal with the divergence of ways, it is useful to expose the parties to as many interpretations as possible in order to open their eyes to alternatives of *ijtihād* in different contexts, all of which are worth considering if they are issued by trusted religious authorities, even if they do not agree with each other[i]. This will increase and broaden the knowledge of all parties, which is a religious duty in Islam; the Qur'ān commanded the Prophet to say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge."[24] In fact, in Islamic jurisprudence "one *ijtihād* does not invalidate another *ijtihād*", and, according to the Prophet, "if a judge performs *ijtihād* and gets it right, he receives two rewards; and if he gets it wrong, he receives one reward."[25] This opens the space for a diversity of legal opinions.

Of course, any *ijtihād* must be consistent with the core Islamic principles and higher goals of Islamic law, and as Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim states in his *Information for Those Who Write on Behalf of the Lord of the Worlds*, "Any matter that deviates from justice to injustice, from mercy to its

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[i] A scholar who practices *ijtihād* must take into account the context of time and space and the audience when giving a legal opinion. In early Islamic history, it happened that the founders of the four Islamic schools of jurisprudence gave four different legal opinions on one issue, based on the same *hadīth* of the Prophet. There are also recorded cases where the same scholar gave different legal opinions on the same issue, adapted to different people seeking a *fatwa*.

opposite, from benefit to harm, and from wisdom to absurdity, is not from the Shari'a, even if it has been introduced into it through interpretation."[26] In *The Paths of Governance, [a Treatise] on the Politics of Divine Law*, Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim emphasises the central role of justice in divine law: "God Almighty sent His messengers and revealed His books to establish justice for mankind, and it is the justice on which the earth and the heavens are based. If the signs and manifestations of justice appear in any way, it is God's law and religion."[27]

Let's take the use of violence, for example. Islam as a set of values, like other religions, calls for peace. But it does not advocate pacifism. In fact, although war is considered a disliked enterprise, it is permitted under certain circumstances and under strict conditions. It is a right and a duty to resist aggression, oppression, marginalisation, or any other form of injustice suffered by oneself or imposed on others, and to pursue grievances. The Prophet said: "Anyone who is killed for redressing his grievance is a martyr."[28] The question is what means should be used to resist and stand up, and is violence always the best way?

To be permissible, violence must be legitimate and legal, and must comply with the Islamic Law of War (ILW) which is in many ways comparable to International Humanitarian Law (IHL). But even if the conditions of *legitimacy*, *legality* and *compliance* are met, the *effectiveness* of violence must be considered. In many situations, violence may not be the most effective way to achieve the goal, and non-violent struggle may prove to be a better option. The Qur'ān commands the believer to "resist with *ihsān*, then your enemy will become as if he were a close friend."[29] *Ihsān* is here the overarching principle that can be seen as the sum total of virtues, encompassing the good, the fair, the true, the right and the beautiful. This verse is about the transformative power of non-violence. Therefore, although in theory the reference allows for the use of violence, when it is legitimate, legal and in accordance with ILW, the practical interpretation of the reference in a particular context may reject violence as a means to achieve the legitimate goal, on grounds of effectiveness.

In the same context, based on different *ijtihād*, some scholars would support violent action, while others would reject it, all using the same sources of Islamic law. The more complex the issue, which is the case with the use of violence, the more diverse the opinions.

One conflict transformation approach to dealing with the use of violence by some groups with an Islamic reference is to present legal opinions rooted in sound *ijtihād* that indicate a preference for non-violent

means to achieve the desired goal. In this spirit, CPI and the FDFA have in recent years jointly launched a project called "Fiqhi Pathways" to facilitate open and respectful Islamic jurisprudential exchanges between scholars close to armed groups in various geographical contexts and prominent, credible Islamic scholars who are respected and trusted in these contexts. These exchanges focus on issues related to the use of violence, the conduct of hostilities, the practice of governance, and the attitudes towards dialogue, with the aim of expanding knowledge and generating options and alternative interpretations of religious texts, taking into account the local and international context.

5. Conclusion

In the Islamic tradition, conflict is seen as a human phenomenon. According to Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim, it "necessarily and inevitably occurs between human beings" and "it does no harm" as long as it does not turn into "aggression and hostility towards each other". For Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim, conflict occurs when "the origins are incompatible, or the ways are divergent, or the goals are contradictory", suggesting three basic types of conflict: reference-related, process-related and goal-related. In order to transform these types of conflicts peacefully, peace mediators have different approaches adapted to each type of conflict, all of which use genuine dialogue based on mutual trust and respect. If in Islam peace mediation is a religious duty for every man and woman, it is even more an obligation for scholars, who are considered by the Prophet as "heirs of the prophets".[30] Religious scholars are the key to peacemaking in societies and with communities and groups of high religiosity.

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[6] Qur'ān, 2:224 and 8:1.

[7] Qur'ān, 4:114.

[8] Qur'ān, 49:9.

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[10] Reported by Imam Bukhāri and Imam Muslim.

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