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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ وَالصَّلَاةُ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ
*In the name of Allah, praise be to Allah and
Peace and Blessings upon the Messenger of Allah*

Justice: The Measure of Our Faith

Human Rights and Justice in Islam

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ

Islam, the world's second-largest religion with nearly two billion adherents across every region of the globe, places justice at the very heart of its message. The Qur'an teaches that the ultimate purpose of sending prophets, messengers, and divine scriptures is so that humanity may uphold justice in all aspects of life.

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"We had been sending Our messengers with clear signs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that people may uphold justice." [al-Hadīd, 57:25]

But what is justice?

In Islamic jurisprudence, justice ('adl) is defined as giving every being its due right. Islam does not limit this to human rights alone. Rather, everything in the vast universe, every creature and every element of the natural world, has divinely endowed rights.

The environment, for example, has the right to be protected from pollution and harmful waste. Cutting down trees without benefit or necessity is an injustice. Killing animals for sport is an injustice. The Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) illustrated this moral truth vividly: he told of a prostitute who earned God's forgiveness by giving water to a thirsty dog, and of a pious woman who was deprived of Paradise for imprisoning a cat and causing it to die of starvation. These accounts make clear that compassion and moral responsibility extend far beyond human beings.

Plants, animals, birds, oceans, rivers, and even the air we breathe, all are God's creation, and all possess rights. Humans, the noblest of God's creatures, endowed with intellect and moral discernment, therefore bear the responsibility of stewardship. They are entrusted with honoring and safeguarding the rights of all creation.

This leads to a fundamental question: Who defines these rights?

In Islam, the answer is unambiguous. The rights of every created thing are defined by its Creator. Allah (SWT), Lord of the heavens and the earth, holds the authority to determine the rights of human beings, animals, and all other forms of creation. Our task is to recognize those rights, uphold them, and strive for justice in all that we do.

Introduction

Human rights are not the invention of governments. They are not granted by kings. They are not bestowed by constitutions. They are not gifts from the United Nations. They are a trust from Allah, the Creator of every human being.

It is often claimed that the concept of basic human rights began with Britain's Magna Carta, issued in 1215, and that notions of civil and individual rights were only gradually articulated by Western philosophers in the seventeenth century. Even then, these ideas did not gain legal expression until the late eighteenth century, most notably in the American Declaration of Independence and

the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. The famous proclamation, “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” reflects a growing recognition of inherent human dignity and universal rights.

Yet, more than fourteen centuries earlier, Islam had already established a comprehensive framework for human rights grounded in divine revelation. The Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) addressed both the individual and collective dimensions of human life, laying out principles that protect human dignity, ensure justice, and safeguard the rights of all members of society. Long before modern charters and constitutions, Islam articulated rights, responsibilities, and ethical standards designed to uphold justice and promote the welfare of humanity.

Basic Human Rights – The Right to Life

The right to life is the most fundamental of all human rights. In Islam, this right begins at the very moment of a person’s inception, even before entering this world. Thus, unless a pregnancy poses a genuine threat to the life of the mother or falls under other legitimate exceptions recognized by Islamic law, abortion is prohibited.

Before Islam, infanticide—particularly the killing of newborn girls, was tragically common in parts of Arabia. Islam categorically abolished this practice, condemning the taking of life whether immediately after birth or through prenatal harm. Allah declares:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا كَبِيرًا ۝

“And do not kill your children for fear of poverty. We provide for them and for you. Indeed, their killing is ever a great sin.” [al-Isrā’, 17:31]

Islam, therefore, affirms the rights of the unborn and protects them from harm.

Human life is sacred. Every person has the right to live a dignified and honorable life. The Qur’an emphasizes this sanctity when it warns that killing a single innocent human being is akin to killing all of humanity:

مَنْ قَتَلَ نَفْسًا بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ أَوْ فَسَادٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَكَأَنَّمَا قَتَلَ النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا ۚ وَمَنْ أَحْيَاهَا فَكَأَنَّمَا أَحْيَا النَّاسَ جَمِيعًا ۝

“Whoever kills a soul for other than manslaughter or corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had killed all mankind. And whoever saves a life, it is as though he had saved the lives of all mankind.” [al-Mā’idah, 5:32]

Allah (SWT) further commands:

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَنْفُسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ ۝

“Do not kill a soul which God has made sacred except through the due process of law.” [al-An’ām, 6:151]

The Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) reinforced this principle by declaring homicide the gravest sin after associating partners with Allah (SWT). He said: “The greatest sins are to associate something with Allah and to kill human beings.”

Islam unequivocally condemns the unlawful killing of any person regardless of their religion, ethnicity, race, or gender. Every human being has the inherent right to life and security.

Equality and the Dignity of All People

Human equality is central to Islamic teaching. The Declaration of Independence asserts that “all men are created equal” and endowed with “unalienable Rights... among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These profound words echo principles articulated in the Qur’an more than fourteen centuries earlier.

Allah proclaims:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ۝

“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female (Adam and Eve) and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. And Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.” [al-Hujurat, 49:13]

This āyah introduces two foundational concepts:

1. Equality: The āyah begins with a reminder that all human beings descend from a single pair, Adam and Eve. Regardless of race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender, or social status, all people are equal before Allah (SWT). No one has the right to claim superiority over another.
2. Fraternity: The second part of the āyah, “and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another,” teaches that diversity is intentional and divinely ordained. Differences in race, culture, and language are meant to enrich humanity, foster

understanding, and cultivate a spirit of mutual respect and brotherhood.

In Islam, superiority is not determined by lineage, wealth, or social standing. The only measure of virtue is piety and righteousness, and even that is known only to Allah and will be revealed on the Day of Judgment.

Islam, therefore, transcends racial, ethnic, and social barriers, sweeping away all forms of unjust distinction within society and laying the foundation for a universal human community built on justice, dignity, and equality.

Women's Rights

Islam affirms the full spiritual equality of men and women. God declares:

فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ أَنِّي لَا أُضِيعُ عَمَلَ عَامِلٍ مِنْكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ ۖ بَعْضُكُمْ مِنْ بَعْضٍ ۚ

“And their Lord responded to them, ‘Never will I allow to be lost the work of any worker among you, whether male or female; you are of one another.’” [Āl ‘Imrān, 3:195]

This principle is echoed elsewhere in the Qur’an:

وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا ۝

“As for those who lead a righteous life, male or female, while believing, they will enter Paradise without the slightest injustice.” [al-Nisā’, 4:124]

In Islamic law, Muslim women possess rights equal in value to those of men, though at times complementary in function. A Muslim woman chooses her husband freely, retains her property and financial assets, and enjoys inheritance rights established explicitly by revelation. She may conduct her own business, pursue education at every level, maintain her maiden name after marriage, and participate fully in civic life, including the right to vote and engage in community affairs.

The Rights of Parents

Parents occupy an honored and exalted position in Islam. The duty owed to them is placed immediately after the duty owed to Allah (SWT), underscoring the magnitude of their right. Allah proclaims:

وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ۚ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۖ إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِنْدَكَ الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ۝

“And your Lord has decreed that you worship none except Him, and that you treat your parents with kindness. When one or both of them reach old age, do not utter a word of disrespect nor repel them; rather, speak to them kindly and graciously. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say, ‘My Lord, have mercy upon them as they raised me when I was a child.’” [al-Isrā’, 17:23]

The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes tenderness, gratitude, and compassion toward parents, especially mothers, whose sacrifices begin before birth and continue long after. Allah states:

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهْنًا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفَصَّلَتْهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنِ اشْكُرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَىٰ الْمَصِيرِ ۝

“And We have enjoined upon man care for his parents. His mother carried him, bearing weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents, for to Me is the final return.” [Luqmān, 31:14]

The Elevated Status of Mothers:

Islam gives extraordinary honor to mothers due to the immeasurable sacrifices they endure. A man once asked the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), “O Messenger of God, who is most entitled to my good companionship?” The Prophet replied, “Your mother.” The man asked again, “Who next?” The Prophet said, “Your mother.” He asked a third time, “Who next?” The Prophet said, “Your mother.” Only on the fourth inquiry did he answer, “Your father.” [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī]

The Prophet further proclaimed that “Paradise lies under the feet of mothers,” highlighting her unparalleled status and the spiritual reward in serving her with love and devotion.

Prayers for Parents:

The Qur’an teaches believers numerous supplications for their parents, reflecting the deep bond between children and their guardians. One such prayer is:

رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيَّ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَوْمَ يَقُومُ الْحِسَابُ ۝

“My Lord, forgive me, my parents, and the believers on the Day when the reckoning is established.” [Ibrāhīm, 14:41]

Another is the previously mentioned, “My Lord, have mercy upon them as they raised me when I was a child.” These prayers cultivate gratitude and humility, anchoring the believer’s heart in compassion.

Neglecting Parents: A Serious Sin

To neglect, mistreat, or deprive parents of their rights is considered a major sin in Islam. The Prophet (ﷺ) repeatedly warned against severing ties with one’s parents or treating them harshly. Kindness, respect, and dutiful care, especially as parents age, are essential acts of worship and a pathway to divine mercy.

Islam thus places tremendous emphasis on honoring parents, recognizing their sacrifices, and treating them with unwavering respect. This ethic preserves strong families and builds a compassionate society rooted in gratitude, humility, and love.

Freedom of Religion and Expression

Islam upholds the fundamental principle of religious freedom for all people. Coercing, persecuting, or harming individuals for their beliefs is categorically forbidden. Allah declares:

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ ۚ

“And say, ‘The truth is from your Lord; so whoever wills, let him believe, and whoever wills, let him disbelieve.’” [al-Kahf, 18:29]

While Islam encourages the sharing and propagation of its message, it absolutely prohibits forcing anyone to accept the faith. Guidance belongs to Allah alone, and the human being must approach belief freely and consciously. The Qur’an states unambiguously:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ ۚ

“Let there be no compulsion in religion.” [al-Baqarah, 2:256]

This āyah affirms that faith loses its value when imposed rather than chosen.

Freedom of Expression and Moral Responsibility

In Islam, freedom of expression is not only a right but also a moral responsibility, particularly when it comes to advocating justice, virtue, and ethical conduct. The Qur’an describes believers as those who

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ يَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

“The believers, men and women, support each other; they enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong.” [al-Tawbah, 9:71]

This establishes a principle of constructive expression rooted in moral integrity and public welfare. Speech is therefore protected, but also guided by courtesy, honesty, and social responsibility.

Dialogue With Other Faiths

Islam strongly encourages respectful interfaith dialogue. Engagement with people of other religions is viewed as an opportunity to share insights, clarify misunderstandings, and promote mutual understanding. Such discussions must be conducted with dignity, gentleness, and wisdom. Allah (SWT) commands:

وَلَا تَجِدِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

“Do not argue with the People of the Book except in the best (and politest) manner.” [al-Ankabūt, 29:46]

Although “People of the Book” refers specifically to Jews and Christians, the ethic of respectful dialogue applies to adherents of all faith traditions. Islam envisions a society where differences in belief do not justify hostility but inspire meaningful conversation and cooperation.

Other Rights

Islam also recognizes the right to basic necessities of life. The wealthy have an obligation toward the poor, for there is a known right in their wealth for those in need. Allah (SWT) says:

وَفِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِّلْسَائِلِ وَالْمَحْرُومِ

“And in their wealth there is an acknowledged right for the needy and the destitute.” [al-Dhāriyāt, 51:19]

Islam likewise affirms human rights even in times of war. On the rights of enemies at war, the modern Islamic thinker Abul A‘lā Maudūdī states: “In the days when Islam came into focus the world was completely unaware of the concept of humane and decent rules of war. The West became conscious of this concept for the first time through the works of the 17th-century thinker Grotius. But the actual codification of ‘international law’ in war began in the middle of the 19th century. Prior to this no concept of civilized behavior in war was found in the West.”

Fourteen centuries ago, Islam drew a clear line between combatants and non-combatants in the enemy ranks. Non-combatants include women, children, the elderly, and the religious. The Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) gave clear and binding instructions to the believers during war. In one ḥadīth he says, “Do not kill any old person, any child, or any woman.” In another report we find, “Do not kill the monks in monasteries,” and, “Do not kill the people who are sitting in places of worship.”

Islamic Rights of Combatants

Islam granted numerous rights to enemy combatants, including:

1. Prohibition of torture once captured. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Punishment by fire does not behoove anyone except the Master of the Fire.”
 2. Protection of the wounded. Muslim soldiers are forbidden from attacking wounded enemy fighters who are no longer able to participate in combat.
 3. Prohibition of killing prisoners of war.
 4. Prohibition of tying a person to execute them.
 5. Prohibition of looting or wanton destruction in enemy lands.
 6. Prohibition of taking property from the general public of a conquered area without fair payment.
 7. Sanctity of the dead. Islam categorically forbids mutilating or disgracing corpses, common practices in pre-Islamic Arabia. The bodies of fallen enemies must be treated respectfully and returned without ransom.
- Prohibition of breaching treaties.** The Prophet (ﷺ) repeatedly reminded Muslim soldiers, “Do not be guilty of breach of faith,” and the Qur’an strongly emphasizes this command.

Summary

In Islam, human rights are neither granted by monarchs nor produced by legislative bodies, they originate from Allah (SWT) Himself. As such, no authority has the power to amend, revoke, or redefine the rights Allah has conferred. These rights are not merely philosophical ideals to admire; they are practical obligations meant to be upheld and enforced. When they are implemented, justice is established; and when justice prevails, peace naturally follows.

Allah (SWT) entrusted His prophets with the responsibility of conveying the principles, guidance, and moral framework necessary for human beings to uphold justice. As the Qur’an states:

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ

“We had been sending Our messengers with clear signs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that people may uphold justice.” [al-Ḥadīd, 57:25]

Scholars John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad note: “Muḥammad granted women rights and privileges in the sphere of family life, marriage, education, and economic endeavors, rights that helped improve women’s status in society.” These rights were revolutionary in the seventh-century Arabian context, where women were often marginalized or deprived of basic protections. Islam confronted these injustices head-on, restoring to women the inherent dignity and God-given rights that had long been denied to them.

Spiritually, morally, and socially, women hold an equal status before Allah (SWT). The early Muslim community included respected female scholars, business leaders, and transmitters of ḥadīth, most notably ‘Ā’ishah (RA), who remains one of the most authoritative scholars in Islamic history.

It is also noteworthy that, in many parts of the world today, women make up a significant portion, and often the majority, of those who embrace Islam. Many cite the religion’s clarity on spiritual equality, personal dignity, and moral purpose as central reasons for their conversion.

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