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Islamic Pacifism in the Middle East: Khāliṣ Jalabī as a Proponent of Post-Islamist Ethics

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary Middle Eastern context, Islamist violence has been undermining security and development of the region for decades. This violence revived academic interest in the problem of war and peace in Islamic ethics; research in Islamic studies has explored and examined some key contributions to Islamic pacifism. Nevertheless, no research has been conducted on the contribution of the Syrian thinker Khāliṣ Jalabī (born in 1945). This article uses the tools of textual analysis and intellectual history to study Jalabī's project of science and peace. Jalabī's contribution to Islamic pacifism is shown to be based on belief in science, the need for gradual societal change, and application of a historical-critical approach to the Islamic legacy. One of the implications of these findings is that Islamic pacifism is proactive rather than defeatist. In the current transformations in Islamic thought and societies, despite its limitations, taking seriously the promises and resources of post-Islamist ethics of peace could be beneficial and effective.

Keywords: *Post-Islamist Ethics, Pacifism, Khāliṣ Jalabī, Non-Violence, Change, Critique*

Introduction

During the Gaza War of 2023–2025, some Islamic Palestinian voices denounced Hamas and the armed resistance, accusing them of aggression against Israeli civilians and violating Islamic war ethics, which ultimately provoked an Israeli retaliation, killing thousands of Palestinians and leading to a worse outcome for Palestinians. Maḥmūd al-Habbāsh, the chief judge, Islamic scholar, minister of Islamic affairs, and significant member of the Palestinian government in Ramallah, and an opponent of Hamas contended that the number of Palestinian deaths in Gaza war and the complete devastation of Gaza demonstrate that, in contrast to Hamas, the Israeli army its objectives (Skynewsarabia, 2024). Additionally, Salman al-Dayah, a well-known Islamic Salafi scholar in Gaza, has issued a fatwa denouncing the October 7 attack on Israel led by Hamas. He considers that this attack caused harm to people in Israel and Gaza, violating Islamic rules guiding jihad (Hargreaves, 2024). This Salafi fatwa could support Islamic pacifism despite the challenges traditional Salafism poses to peace, harmony and pluralism (Tais, 2024). Muhammad Abu Nimer, himself a Palestinian Islamic pacifist who lives in the USA, urges people to consider this conflict from the standpoint of peace, justice, and nonviolent resistance and to recognize that militarization, wars, and violence cannot truly be the solution for conflicts pertaining to a request for freedom, dignity, and security (Minges and Abu Nimer, 2023).

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This criticism of Hamas can be considered a type of post-Islamist pacifism since, by advocating a non-confrontational ethics of peace, it challenges the Islamist ideology of confrontation, which has predominated in the Middle East at least since the 1970s. It also introduces a realism that contests the suicidal-radical nature of some Islamist movements and opposes the use of violence to promote human rights. This type of pacifism can be said to be post-Islamist pacifism because it rejects Islamist assumptions about the use of jihad to create an Islamic state or polity, whether they are embraced by radical groups (al-Qaida and ISIS), mass movements (the Muslim Brotherhood), or resistance movements (Hamas). Therefore, post-Islamism is a critique of Islamism regarding its tactics of action, world division, and political goals. The phrase "post-Islamism" was coined by Asef Bayat to describe how Islamist leadership might transform into a re-secularized worldview, creating a pious society within a civil nonreligious state and combining secular ideals (rights, freedom, and democracy) with Islam (Bayat, 2013; Bayat, 1996).

The Syrian Jawdat Saʿīd (d. 2022) and the Indian Wahiduddin Khan (d. 2021) laid the grounds for post-Islamist pacifism between the 1960s and the 1990s. In recent years, researchers have extensively studied the contributions of Jawdat Saʿīd (Lohlker, 2022; Pizzi, 2024; Abdulaev, 2024; Moussa, 2024) as well as of Wahiduddin Khan to Islamic pacifism (Omar, 2001; Quadir Wani, 2017; Lindgren, 2018; Okawa, 2019; Dahlkvist, 2019; Saeed & Naeem, 2020; Anwer, 2023; Ahmad, 2023). Nevertheless, the well-known Syrian Islamic thinker Khāliṣ Jalabī (born in 1945), one of the main proponents of post-Islamism since the 1980s, was not studied except in Karim Douglas Crow's article "Nurturing Islamic Peace Discourse," which was released in 2000. Crow discussed Khāliṣ Jalabī together with Jawdat Saʿīd as two cases of Islamic peace discourse, dedicating only two pages of attention to Jalabī (Crow, 2000). For Jalabī, the problem of Islamist violence is essentially an ethical problem that should be addressed through a historical-critical approach to the Islamic legacy, a process of gradual societal transformation, and endorsement of science.

Methods

In terms of methodology, this article relies on a textual analysis of Jalabī's pacifist arguments while simultaneously using an intellectual history approach that situates these arguments within the historical processes that have occurred in the Middle East over the past forty years. I have collected data for analysis from his eight books published between 1982 and 2014 on nonviolence. Moreover, I examined three journal articles he published between 1997 and 2006 on the same topic. Thus, the guiding process in selecting these writings was the topic of nonviolence which makes this study comprehensive in covering all his pacifist texts, as it relied on his complete bibliography list on his website. Thus, the research design follows a conceptual-deductive plan whereby I first analyze the recurring concepts of pacifism in Jalabī' writings and subsequently deduce from this analysis the implications of these concepts for his vision of politics and society. I will then discuss the resources and promises of Jalabī's project of science and peace. In the last section, I will explore some of the limit of his ideas.

Literature Review

I use post-Islamism here in a somewhat different way from Bayat's definition of post-Islamism. In contrast to Bayat, who characterizes post-Islamism as a transformation among Islamists (in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, such as Turkey and Egypt), I refer to post-Islamism as anti-Islamist, that is, a critical attitude of thinkers who are not affiliated with Islamist movements (no more or never) and who aim to completely liberate Islamic thought from Islamist ideologies in the same way that post-communist societies abandoned communism, and thus post-Islamism could be seen as non-Islamism (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 78) or anti-Islamism (Lynch, 2022, p. 7) and not just a new variant of Islamism (Fahim, 2022, p. 158) a transformed Islamism that is seriously concerned with democracy (Kassab, 2013, p. 32), an Islamism that is able to

participate in elections and governmental bodies (Cavatorta and Merone, 2015; Shahibzadeh, 2016) or a 'politicalistion' of armed Islamist movements that do not renounce violence or engage with democratic processes but adopt more pragmatic stands (Drevon, 2017; Almustafa, 2022) or combining Islam and democracy and emphasizing both religiosity and rights (Harmakaputra, 2015). Some researchers who do not endorse the phrase of Post-Islamist ethics promote the tenets of a Quranic ethics of peace based on human stewardship of the earth and justice tempered by mercy, ultimately joining post-Islamism in the same perspective (Afsaruddin, 2025; Woerner-Powell, 2025; Osman and Omar, 2025).

Result and Discussion

Jalabī: Life and Works

Jalabī is a Syrian physician and surgeon and an Islamic thinker, of Kurdish origin (born in Qamishli), and a Canadian citizen. He shares with many Muslim pacifists a past of involvement in Islamist political action. While he was a student, he was a member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s. He graduated with university degrees in medicine (1971) and Islamic law (1974). In 1975, he left Syria to pursue his medical studies in Germany before heading to Saudi Arabia to work as a surgeon for over three decades until his retirement (Crow, 2000, p. 63). When Jalabī released his *al-Naqd al-dhātī: ḍarūrat al-naqd al-dhātī li-l-ḥaraka al-Islāmiyya* in 1982, he was one of the first Islamists to engage in self-criticism and a pioneer in post-Islamist thought. He began to write his book after four arrests and torture in Damascus by the Baath regime amidst violent confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood (Jalabī, 1982, p. 2). The fact that he was Jawdat Sa'īd's brother-in-law further encouraged him to choose the path of nonviolence. Since the 1960s, Jawdat Sa'īd has been a strong advocate for nonviolence, and he inspired his sister Leyla Sa'īd, his brother-in-law Jalabī, and their daughter Afra Jalabi to become prominent thinkers and activists of nonviolence of their own in Syria and elsewhere (Jalabī, 2006). Jalabī also carried on the dissemination of Sa'īd's legacy after the latter passed away in 2022.

Since the 1980s, Jalabī has been a political commentator on Arab political affairs, featuring in various media outlets in the Middle East and North Africa. In particular, he witnessed firsthand the bloody struggle between the authorities in Egypt and Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood. For him, the Islamist movements are responsible for seeking confrontation with the Arab regimes, even if these regimes are oppressive and authoritarian (Jalabī, 2012). In particular, he published an unyielding criticism of Islamist organizations in Algeria that participated in the 1991–2002 Algerian civil war, which claimed the lives of tens of thousands of people (Jalabī, 1998). Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing Middle East wars and conflicts that exposed the limits of Islamist violence, Jalabī's nonviolence discourse gained a lot more popularity and readership, especially in the Gulf countries in the 2000s. Jalabī was also a close observer of the Afghan civil war, in which many Afghan factions engaged in combat and provided a foundation for al-Qaida, which later evolved into an international terrorist organization (Jalabī, 2003a). In addition, he researched and studied the Arab Spring and the revolutionary movements in the Middle East and North Africa in great detail, warning against violence. Furthermore, Jalabī has extensively researched contemporary Iraqi politics. In 2003, he published his book *al-Zilzāl al-'Irāqī* (*The Iraqi Earthquake*) in which he considers the Iraqi conflict as an illustration of the failure of sectarian violence, imperialist violence (by the United States), and authoritarianism (by the Baath party) (Jalabī, 2003b).

Nonviolence as change

The foundation of Jalabī's post-Islamist ethics can be summarized in three concepts: critique, science, and change. I will discuss each of these ideas in turn, highlighting their possibilities for a post-Islamist ethics. In his *al-Naqd al-dhātī: ḍarūrat al-naqd al-dhātī li-l-ḥaraka al-Islāmiyya (On*

self-criticism – the necessity of self-criticism for Islamic movements) (1982), Khāliṣ Jalabī argued that "abandoning violence is a principle of change at both the individual and collective levels. Extremism, the disappearance of knowledge, the slogan "I will kill you," jihad, and rebellion—and violence as the disease of our time, is the real problem" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 71). He also stated that "when you allow yourself to attack someone who disagrees with you, you have allowed him to do the same. Cutting off the root of rebellion cannot be achieved by rebellion itself" (Jalabī, 1982, pp. 82-83). For him, the rapid changes in the Islamic world, and the region's descent into a wave of coups, "infected some Islamists, leading them to embrace violence or at least create a climate conducive to it. This sudden and rapid shift in the political landscape forced the Islamist movements to quickly retreat and disappear in order to protect their members, but in doing so, they dealt a severe blow to their role and became largely isolated from the wider Muslim community" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 104). He also contended that "tolerance of others, self-control, and objectivity lead to discover good faith in others, and consequently abandoning violence, and thus sustain mutual respect, and create an atmosphere of growth and fertility" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 112).

He published his second book on nonviolence in 1997 under the title of *Saykūlūjiyyat al-'unf wa-istrātījiyyat al-'amal al-silmī (The psychology of violence and the strategy of peaceful action)*. Herein, he deconstructs the psychology of violence and its roots in human history and anthropology, and criticizing in particular Islamist violence in the Arab-Muslim world. Jalabī denounced the fundamentalist Islamist groups that spread violence and terrorism in the Muslim world. In his view, using armed force by Islamist movements is prohibited and that jihad, seen by these movements as armed combat to overthrow rulers, is actually a rebellion that uses the same old Kharijite method, which the Islamic world, with all of its schools of thought and jurisprudential traditions, has long rejected. He further argues that the foundation of social transformation is a change in the soul, which forms the premise of a nonviolent, peaceful approach to social change. Regarding the instruments of change, he favours acknowledging the other, addressing violence with nonviolence, engaging in discourse, transforming the souls first, establishing a sound culture, and fostering freedom of thought (Jalabī, 1997b).

His 2005 book *al-Islām wa-l-'unf* (*Islam and violence*, co-authored with two other Arab-Muslim intellectuals Aḥmad Abū Maṭar and Zuhayr al-Mukhkh) is his most thorough attempt to develop an Islamic philosophy of nonviolence. At the beginning, he conducted a comparative study of the greatest revolutions that brought about change in human history. He asserts that in contrast to revolutions in France, Russia and Iran, the Prophet Muḥammad's revolution was the greatest since it changed the world and created a new society with virtually no casualties. He argues that the main problem in Islamic thought and movements, even before 9/11, was the tendency of Islamist organizations to use violence to overthrow authoritarian regimes like Egypt and Syria since the 1960s. He criticizes this inclination and believes that science and peace alone would bring about change. Then, he refers to Quran 6:34 about the prophets' approach to social change: (And certainly were messengers denied before you, but they were patient over [the effects of] denial, and they were harmed until Our victory came to them. And none can alter the words of Allah. And there has certainly come to you some information about the [previous] messengers). Out of this method, Jalabī derives six ideas that form the core of his nonviolent philosophy: 1. Violence does not liberate man but rather entangles him in the trap of worshipping power. The most dangerous disease that afflicts society is its fragmentation into classes when it turns into a narrow segment of the arrogant and a broad base of the oppressed, while they are in reality of the same cultural nature. 2. The mission of the prophets was to promote non-violence by breaking the lever of power, liberating man from its sick relationships, building a democratic monotheistic society, getting rid of the privileged class, and teaching the true word. 3. Nonviolence is a method of dialogue and persuasion and a purely internal change. Thus, the Quran calls to build a society of "non-coercion". Nonviolence does not mean surrender; rather, it develops the will in a healthy direction. It calls for dialogue and removes hatred and hypocrisy, the roots of the tree of violence.

4. Violence and democracy are like oil and water; they do not mix. Rather, water extinguishes fire. It is not possible to build a democratic, pluralistic society as long as a community believes in violence as a method for change. Among the advantages of a society without coercion are democratic rights, such as freedom of belief, expression, and peaceful assembly. 5. In relations between nations, violence is no longer seen as a solution for the ongoing disputes and conflicts of interests. 6. Peaceful ideas provide wonderful immunity because they do not harm anyone, and everyone benefits from them (Jalabī, Abū Maṭar and al-Mukhkh, 2005). Moreover, Jalabī published smaller pieces in which he promoted various other ideas, including the use of "peaceful action" as an effective technique for creating and sustaining momentum for a transformed civil society on an Islamic basis, "peaceful direct action" for invigorating Arab-Islamic political, cultural, and social revival, an Islamic paradigm for "neutralizing violence", discriminating between force and true "resistance power" and the search for peaceful action within the ritual practices, teachings, and values of Islam (Crow, 2000, pp. 63-64).

Jalabī envisions change as a mental-cultural process and an act within the realm of the possible. He asserts that mankind is a slow, cumulative result of conscious efforts which were formed across numerous units of time. For example, the Battle of Badr, which the Qur'an called the Criterion, *al-furqān* was a manifestation of possibilities that had previously been formed, and not an achievement that suddenly came to the surface (Jalabī, 1997a, p. 36). He adds that society is a huge number of individuals organized within a network of relationships, and the gradual change of individuals will ultimately lead to a change in society. This does not require changing all individuals, as it is neither required nor possible, but rather changing the decisive quantity (or critical mass), and upon reaching the change of the critical mass, the social current begins to take shape (Jalabī, 1997a, p. 36). He concludes that human conflict is usually two-sided, and the right attitude is to train oneself in a useful way to bring thoughts under control. For blaming the others is - indirectly - an invitation to relieve oneself from responsibility, self-criticism and the fatigue of correction; it is an attitude of disabling the law of effort while we should be changing our souls which is the beginning of the mechanical, psychological, and social lever of global change (Jalabī, 1997a, p. 37).

Jalabī's conception of nonviolence as change reflects the lengthy history of religious transformative pacifism found in Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and other Asian religions. In academic literature, and to express a similar idea, Fahey (1997) introduced the concept of reconstructionist pacifism, whereas Fiala (2018) used the idea of transformational pacifism. The shared meaning of these ideas is to seek to shift moral, cultural, social, and psychological sensibilities away from acceptance of violence and conflict and advocate for the spiritual unity of all people, which serves as the basis for ending conflict and establishing a worldwide legal, political, and economic system that upholds the rights of all individuals (Fiala, 2018 ; Fahey, 1997). Initially, nonviolence changes individuals to the extent that they subdue their violent impulses, which leads society as a whole to undergo transformation and consider the common good through peaceful ways. Overall, thus, Jalabī's approach is psychological and highlights the transformation of the self as the first step towards social and political change.

Science and Peace

In the early 1990s, Jalabī named his project *al-'ilm wa-l-silm*, or science and peace, which he crosses in the context of a new Islamic *ijtihād*. He believes that a philosophy of science and peace is both effective and beneficial insofar as science is needed to build civilization while peace is required to build society. Jalabī views science as the element that creates peace and liberates the world from violence into a period of peace. Jalabī also believes that the developed world flies with two wings: peace and science ; the countries that refuse to contribute to the creation of this world of peace and science, such as the Arabs, will live in their own rhetorical realm where swords are stronger than words to their own loss (Jalabī, 1999, p. 27). In his *Abḥ*

āth fi 'l-'ilm wa-l-silm (Inquiries into science and peace), which was published in 1992, Jalabī advocates for a rationalist interpretation of the Quran which tells the Prophetic stories in order to illustrate human development (Jalabī, 1992, p. 51). In a similar manner to other reformist Muslim intellectuals, Jalabī frequently criticizes the disdain for science and the lack of scientific advancements and productions in the Muslim world. He particularly complains about Muslims who take violent political action rather than engage in peaceful and scientific endeavors, which led to further isolating Muslims from the rest of the world.

Jalabī argues that "all the moral sermons, the continuous teachings of reformers, the reflections of philosophers, and their bold proposals have not advanced humanity on the path to peace. Instead, wars have followed one another in horrific cycles, growing more brutal with each new round, characterized by increased barbarity, the development of more sophisticated weapons, and the enactment of more stringent human laws" (Jalabī, 2000, pp. 226-227). In his view, "what has made progress in resolving the problem of human violence is science, and humanity has begun to gradually bid farewell to war. Just as the state, by monopolizing violence from individuals, has been able to provide security in return, the global state, the hope that humanity has realized today, has been achieved through science when it reached the pinnacle of power. It has come to understand that self-destruction is the inevitable fate of war, force, weapons, violence, and all that leads to them, whether in word or deed" (Jalabī, 2000, p. 227) Science also helped undermine one of the roots of violence, racism and the theory of racial supremacy of some races by proving the unity of the human race and the burial of racism through linguistics, genetics and anthropology (Jalabī, 2000, p. 231).

Even if he is not the only pacifist to underline the connection between knowledge and nonviolence, Jalabī provides a unique contribution. As a surgeon, Jalabī infuses his works and project with his extensive and professional medical expertise to advocate for nonviolence not only as a religious and ethical perspective but also as scientifically justified. This contrasts with the assertion in the fields of political science and international relations that pacifism is not scientific (Fiala, 2023). For example, Richard Jackson argues that in the sphere of international affairs, pacifism and nonviolence have been disregarded and even "subjugated" (Jackson, 2018). Additionally, according to Jackson, pacifism is viewed by many international relations researchers as "unscientific, naïve, and of limited relevance" (Jackson, 2021, p. 107). Experts of political science and international relations are usually realists who perceive the world as a game of pursuing power, selfish interests and fierce competition.

One of the implications of Jalabī's conclusions is the much needed development of Muslim societies. By investing in science and peace, Muslims can redirect their energy from revolt, weaponry, and the loss of human life and resources into industry, scientific research, and rationalized economic activity that would eventually lead to profound improvements and better lives. Many Muslim societies are extremely underdeveloped, which perpetuates a cycle of violence, economic failure, unemployment and disinterest in science. Islamist movements expose young people to beliefs and violent rhetoric that give them the false impression that they can use violence and take control of their lives to change the world. In reality, however, this youth is being used to ruin their own societies, engaging in forming militias, implementing foreign agendas, and destabilizing order. As numerous nations in the East and West show, only through education and science that can youth find effective ways to break this vicious cycle.

Critique as Emancipation

Jalabī has also notably emphasized critique in correlation with nonviolence. He released two books on critique: *Al-Naqd al-dhātī,* already mentioned, in 1982 and *Fī naqd al-fikr al-dīnī: al-naqd al-tārīkhī (On the critique of religious thought: historical critique)* in 2014. In his *al-Naqd al-dhātī*, he discussed the necessity of self-criticism in Islamist movements, describing what he calls self-criticism as a system of theoretical underpinnings, a scientific paradigm, and a self-monitoring

method (Jalabī, 1982, p. 5). He defines self-criticism as "endorsing rational awareness and dealing with ideas as intrinsic value, or as objective units detached from the individual" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 5). It is easy to criticize others, he adds, "because it exposes them, but it is one of the most difficult things to engage in self-criticism because it is a confrontation with the self, as we are accustomed to running away from the self or giving it a sort of sanctification. We can say that what we are looking for here is not the development of this kind of experience to become a practical tool for us, but rather we lack its very existence and its birth. Criticism in our society is unscientific and irrational, meaning that it relies on personal impulses and is based on conjecture" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 5). He notes that "the very concept of self-criticism is unwelcome in the Muslim world. It is either considered slander and defamation, which is not Islamic brotherhood, or it is seen as an accusation, which is considered apostasy in Islam, or it is a Western, non-Islamic term, which we have no need for. In general, this term has not yet found its way into becoming, firstly, a common understanding, and secondly—and more importantly—it has not yet become a tool that can be used, like other methods, to cleanse the Muslim world and restore its well-being" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 9).

For Jalabī, success in any political effort lies in self-criticism as a constructive element, separating the individual from the idea, and error from crisis (Jalabī, 1982, p. 7). Jalabī also points out that "the weakness of the spirit of self-criticism among Islamists is due to a weakness in the structure of their mentality, although this phenomenon also includes non-Islamists" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 63). He adds that "the disasters that have occurred so far in the Middle East have not yet been analyzed, and the trend toward analysis and self-criticism has not developed. Therefore, mistakes and consequently disasters are repeated. A coup or even a revolution is not necessary to change a society. Social change is a long-term, deeply rooted process, and history tells us that rulers are forced to adopt the religions of their citizens, not the other way around. In other words, the impetus for change always comes from the bottom up, not the other way around" (Jalabī, 1982, p. 81).

In his *Fī naqd al-fikr al-dīnī,* he focuses on the need for historical critique and criticism of religious thought. He contends that the problem of Muslim backwardness began with the assassination of reason in favour of tradition (Jalabī, 2014, p. 301); this liquidation of reason is a decision of both religious and political despotism which ultimately disabled the immunity of Muslims. As a result, the latter withdrew from history, and roles changed between nations, and Arabs became imprisoned in the Mediterranean Sea while the West explored the Atlantic Ocean, applied democracy, established the institutions of scientific research, banks and military power (Jalabī, 2014, p. 302). Jalabī urges Muslims to view history as a dynamic movement and to reject traditionalism, which promotes adhering to the traditions passed down from earlier generations as authoritative because this attitude prevents Muslims from evolving, being creative and making contributions to knowledge and the modern world (Jalabī, 2014, p. 94). The republics of fear, unemployment, and erring that emerged in the second half of the 20th century in the Arab world, divided Arab societies between lost citizens, subdued intellectuals, and Islamic scholars cut off from modernity, and thus authoritarianism succeeded in maintaining backwardness in the Arab world (Jalabī, 2014, p. 137). Arabs will be unable to comprehend the logic of history and the issues they face if they do not view history analytically as sequences of events in dialectic, interactional, and chronological dynamics. Since Muslims tend to celebrate conquests, select favorable events, and consider superficially the meanings of events, they particularly glorify power and violence which gave rise to military control over Muslim societies to this day. For this reason, a critical historical reading of Islamic history is a critique of violence (Jalabī, 2014, pp. 314–315).

Jalabī mobilized four critical arguments against violence. He argues that:

> Changing a nation at the hands of the military or ideas by force is an invalid way of thinking if considered from the perspectives of religion, sociology, biology, and politics. In terms of religion, violence is polytheism. Just as the declaration (There is no god but

> God) is the greatest in terms of faith, so too is political life built upon the principle of (There is no compulsion in religion). The word "no" negates all forms of coercion, in every religion, and in every direction. Regardless of whether they convert to them or reject them, entering or leaving a faith, people should not be killed for their beliefs. Otherwise, we would have legitimated coercion, imprisonment, and a one-way street. When religion is imposed through coercion polytheism follows, and monotheism becomes mixed with idolatry while truth is confused with falsehood. In this sense, anyone who places hope in violence commits polytheism and associates other deities with God, making their endeavour worthless (Jalabī, 2014, p. 316).

Secondly, Jalabī maintains that, seen from the perspective of sociology, "violence is entering the realm of the "law of the jungle," where power belongs to God alone. Thus, the "worship of power" is the worship of false idols and prostration before them" (Jalabī, 2014, p. 316). Thirdly, in the language of biology, Jalabī considers "violence to be the abandonment of reason and the reliance on physical strength, and this is the greatest corruption of humanity when roles are reversed, and a person walks on their head, upside down. But whoever walks on their head loses both their head and their feet" (Jalabī 2014, p. 317). Finally, in the language of politics, Jalabī contends that "democracy means that everyone agrees that no party will resort to violence and that freedoms of thought, expression, assembly, and political affiliation are guaranteed. Only one thing is prohibited: the use of force, weapons, and coercion to impose ideas" (Jalabī, 2014, p. 318).

The Importance of Jalabī's Post-Islamist Ethics

First, let us asses the importance of Jalabī's post-Islamist ethics, which is arguably the most thorough critical engagement with Islamism written by a Muslim intellectual in the 20th century. Jalabī has been successful in demonstrating the connection between Islamism, violence, and secrecy. In this regard, he has stressed that Islamism revitalizes radical Shi'i and Kharijite movements that sought power via violence in Islamic history. Additionally, he has argued that Islamism has a limited view of politics and religion since it is a partisan ideology, much like nationalist and communist organizations. Moreover, he showed the effect the militarized climate and authoritarianism that predominated in Muslim countries had on Islamist movements. He also placed a strong emphasis on science and reason in order to govern intelligently and efficiently societies (as opposed to violent rulership). Furthermore, he contested the Islamist notion of using violence to create an Islamic state showing that such an idea is not justified from an Islamic perspective. Finally, he highlighted the irrationality and recklessness of Islamists who incite conflicts that result in the destruction of many Muslims.

Even after more than 40 years, his pacifism as a critique of Islamism, slow change and science nurturing is still highly relevant. Islamist violence had wrecked havoc in Afghanistan, Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s. Over the past 20 years, the violence of ISIS and al-Qaida, as well as that of numerous Shi'i militias, devastated various regions in the world, especially the Middle East, in the name of resistance and jihad. Additionally, Islamist violence hindered the advancement of science, economic growth, and democracy. Jalabī's critical analysis of Islamic history also helps counter some of the influence of Islamism on Islamic thought. He has also contributed to elucidating Islamism's militaristic, authoritarian, and partisan nature, which renders it inappropriate for a free, democratic, and evolving society.

However, some flaws exist in Jalabī's approach to Islamist violence. The fact that he ignores how Islamism serves as a tool for both international and domestic policy is perhaps the most significant shortcoming of his contribution. In order to eliminate other threats, such as the communist organizations that were important during the Cold War, states in the Muslim world have organized, supported, and empowered Islamist movements. At the international level, some states, including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran, employed Islamist movements as instruments of foreign policy in order to create proxies and maintain a conflict (such as the ones in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Syria). In several instances, world powers, particularly the United States

and the United Kingdom, have formed alliances and assisted Islamist movements in gaining military and political power. Without USA's geopolitical and economic interest in the Middle East, Islamism could not have reached a global significance.

Jalabī advocates for personal transformation, which would eventually and gradually lead to a collective change. He does not, however, explain how nonviolence could be sufficiently active to bring about tangible social change, even while he supports a variety of methods of change in civil society (such as dialogue and cultural activities). As Fiala puts it, "for peaceful means of social change to be effective, they must be coordinated and organized. Gandhi and King thought that the power of nonviolence was linked to its ability to motivate and move large numbers of people. Pacifism as a personal stance will not be effective at creating social change: it requires a coordinated social effort" (Fiala, 2023). In scholarly and political literature, the efficacy of nonviolence is frequently questioned, particularly in the face of terrorist and authoritarian threats (Fiala, 2023). Authoritarian regimes tend to control the whole spectrum of societal initiatives and actively sabotage any meaningful effort of reform or change, displaying powerful apparatuses to eliminate any risk for the status quo.

Syria itself is the most recent example of how nonviolence could fail to bring about peaceful and slow change. In 2011, the peaceful young protest movement demanded reforms, which the Assad dictatorship rejected, responding with the usual brutal repression, denying Syrians any access to freedom. The protests turned into an armed uprising and became a weapon in the region's geopolitical rivalries, allowing foreign forces to establish themselves in Syria and international terrorists to destabilize the country. Between 2011 and 2024, the Syrian civil war claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, sent millions into exile, and completely destroyed the Syrian economy and infrastructure (Almustafa, 2022). Eventually, the Islamist militia Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the Assad government in 2024. Sunni Syrians seem happy with this result and so are most of Syria's neighbours and the West, but ethnic and religious minorities (sponsored by foreign powers) in Syria contest this change, which leads to more violence in Syria and difficulties in state-building. For the Assad regime, the choice was between change and a ruined nation, and it chose the latter, and in such a self-destructive scenario, non-violence seems to be out of place. As shown by the experiences of Indonesia and Malaysia, nation-building and state-building need constant dialogue, pluralism, peace and tolerance towards religious and ethnic minorities (Ridwan, Hanan and Astuti, 2024; Adnan, Maula and Harahap, 2025 ; Yapp, 2025; Machasin, 2025).

Conclusion

In this article, we have found that Khāliṣ Jalabī's Islamic pacifism illustrates post-Islamist ethics, which stresses the need for a scientific-historical approach to the Islamic legacy, the criticism of Islamist violence, and the need for gradual social transformation. His contribution to critical thinking in Islamic contexts is particularly significant and still highly relevant. He urges Islamists to practice self-criticism in order to change their perspectives on politics and violence. He then emphasized the necessity for a historical critique of religious thought and a revision of the ways Muslim religious and political leaders have abandoned reason and science, condemning Muslims and Arabs to backwardness. However, Jalabī's critique of nonviolence as change has some shortcomings. On the one hand, he fails to consider how Islamism aligns with the agendas of local and international geopolitical players. On the other hand, Jalabī promotes individual change, which would eventually and progressively result in a shift in society as a whole. These findings imply that Islamic pacifism is not defeatist but proactive and transformative insofar as it adheres to a gradual and moral change. In light of the current debates in Islamic thought and societies on violence, and despite its limits, it may be helpful and effective to take seriously the resources and promises of post-Islamist ethics of peace.

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