

Might Makes No Right

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(Summary: This article discusses the meaning of might, refuting the myth that “might makes right”. The article focuses on the relationships between might and right, and between power and responsibility. The discussion unfolds against the backdrop of the connotations of Allah’s beautiful name al-‘Aziz (All-Mighty) and how it has been used in the discourses of the Qur’an.)

One of Allah’s beautiful names is *al-‘Aziz*, which means “All-Mighty” or the “Exalted in Might”.

The Qur’an mentions this name 89 times.

It is interesting to note that the name is never used alone. It is always accompanied by another name – or names - of Allah.

It goes together with the “All-Wise” (*Hakim*) 47 times, the “Most Merciful” (*Rahim*) 13 times, the “Most Strong” (*Qawiyy*) 7 times, the “All-Knowing” (*‘Alim*) 6 times, the “Owner of Retribution” (*Dhu Intiqam*) 4 times, the “All- and Oft-Forgiving” (*Ghaffar*) 3 times, the “All-Praiseworthy” (*Hamid*) 3 times, the “Forgiver” (*Ghafur*) twice, and with each of the “Generous” (*Karim*), the “Supreme Bestower” (*Wahhab*) and the “Omnipotent” (*Muqtadir*) once.

In one instance, the *al-‘Aziz* name is placed between the names of the “Overseer” (*Muhaymin*) and the “Compeller” (*Jabbar*).

The meaning of might

Since people are invited to understand Allah’s beautiful names and to act upon what they imply, the message to mankind hereby is as follows (and Almighty Allah knows best).

Might (power, control and authority) is a double-edged sword. It is an inevitable thing and integral to the ways life functions.

The prophets were sent with revealed messages and were supported with miracles. They were to establish both the heavenly truth and earthly justice.

The Qur’an summarizes their missions in three concepts, which at the same time serve as clear signs to people: the Book, the Balance and Iron (*al-Hadid*, 25).

Those concepts are symbols of three thrusts that hold society together and make it move forward. The Book is guidance and knowledge, the Balance is justice and righteousness, and Iron is might, authority and the strong as well as long arm of the law.

They translate themselves into appropriate spiritual, moral and socio-politico-economic systems. They are of paramount importance in the perennial confrontations between good (truth) and evil (falsehood) on earth.

Thus, as the Seal of the prophets who had been sent to all people, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) prayed to Allah to grant him a power and authority (*sultan*) to help him in his assignments (al-Isra', 80).

He knew that his goals could not be achieved without an earthly power. The sole authority of the Book of Allah was not enough. It needed a mighty worldly support.

This "enrichment" of the Book was characterized by the migration (*hijrah*) to Madinah and the establishment of a strong constitutional state.

Without a doubt, Allah curbs with an earthly authority (*sultan*) what cannot be curbed with the Qur'an alone.

Islam is all-inclusive. It is the religion of this world and the Hereafter, and of matter and spirit.

Regulated might

Might and authority are at once gifts and mercies from Allah to people. However, they are multifaceted and variable, and can be used as well as abused.

That is why spirituality and right wisdom are needed to guide and regulate them. With the former on-board, the sky is the limit.

The Qur'an reveals: "He (Allah) gives wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been given wisdom has certainly been given much good. And none will remember except those of understanding" (al-Baqarah, 269).

The Prophet (pbuh) said in a rather weak *hadith*: "There are two types of people, when they are good and righteous the whole community becomes good and righteous, but when they are bad and morally corrupt the whole community becomes bad and morally corrupt; those two types of people are scholars and rulers."

Might alone, yet backed by inappropriate knowledge and values, is unpredictable. It preys on the vulnerable and corruptible. It assails a person from all sides, becoming the source of greatest dangers to him and his surroundings.

When dormant and on its own, it is potent, but when animated and functional, it becomes devastating. It behaves as though a combustible substance.

History is full of instances and people who personified such a paradigm.

For might to be turned into a productive and creative force, it needs a helping hand from the domains of the truth, knowledge, wisdom and benevolence.

Just as the truth without might cannot be fully realized, might likewise without the truth cannot be adequately disciplined and carried across the finish line.

Allah's name *al-'Aziz* and other accompanying names

For that reason did Allah attach some of His most distinctive names to His *al-'Aziz* name.

The most frequently used one is the “All-Wise” (47 times), which means that only with wisdom can might be properly perceived and handled, producing right judgments and decisions. Might then becomes a twin of justice.

Towards the same end is also the role of the “All-Knowing” name, which is mentioned 6 times with *al-'Aziz*.

Moreover, might and acting upon it should be imbued with mercy, compassion, generosity and forgiveness, as implied by several other names used with *al-'Aziz*. In this case, it is reminded that might ought to be rendered virtuous and identical with moral excellence.

Might cannot be subjective, nor out of control. It is not a private matter either, whereby a person, or a group of persons, can do whatever they want.

Might makes no right. Rather, it is right that dictates and enlightens might.

Essentially, might is a test, right an honour and privilege.

In the sight of Allah, right is right only because Allah so decreed, while might is might only because it allied itself with right. It is not man who decides.

That is the reason why the *al-'Aziz* name is sometimes associated (13 times in total) with the names that invoke Allah’s absolute authority, omnipotence and ownership of retribution.

This is done in the contexts of instituting and defending justice, defeating oppression and tyranny, and ascertaining the absolute authority of Allah alone and His truth as revealed through His prophets.

As such, Allah is the “Supreme Bestower” of all goodness to the worlds (*Wahhab*), and it is only He who can sustain it by means of integrating the benefits of might with those entailed in what is right.

Accordingly, it is only He who is worthy of all praise (*Hamid*) in both worlds.

All might belongs to Allah. As servants of Allah, only figuratively do people command types and degrees of might. No sooner does a person start feeling that he genuinely enjoys might, than he starts compromising his spirituality.

It is an Islamic tenet that “there is no might or power except with Allah, the Most High, the Supreme in Glory”.

The Prophet (pbuh) said that those words signify a treasure of the treasures of Jannah (Paradise).

The Qur’an affirms: “Whoever desires power and glory (*'izzah*), to Allah belong all power and glory” (Fatir, 10).

Owing to this, for instance, a ruler in Islam is called *ra'in* (care-taker), and people are called *ra'iyyah* (those taken care of).

Religiosity and knowledge top the list of criteria meant for a ruler (leader) in Islam.

Might as nobody's right

Might is nobody's right, nor licence. Similarly, might cannot be bought, imported, borrowed, or simulated.

Might is an effect. Its causes revolve around the actualization of the truth and appropriate knowledge (wisdom).

Knowledge is power and the truth life-force. Wisdom is consciousness and identity.

Anything short of this chemistry leads to false forms of might. Might then becomes a mirage. It becomes a personal, or socio-cultural, construct.

A might that originates from and is authenticated and sustained by the truth and truthful knowledge, is the bona fide might.

At every turn, such might exudes the spirit and profundity of the causes that gave rise to it, in the same manner as a bogus might oozes its hollowness and futility.

He who desires to partake in experiencing might, should worry about the causes that lead to it. Indeed, there are no shortcuts to excellence. Might is a product of an alliance of excellence, diligence and patience.

Prophets Yusuf, Musa and Dawud

About Prophets Yusuf and Musa, the Qur'an says that they were first given "wisdom (power of judgment) and knowledge". That happened when they attained full strength and maturity.

After that, exclusively due to the granted talents in their youth, they were able to do what they were destined to do.

Yusuf became the *al-'Aziz* of Egypt, both in terms of title and functional authority (might). Here *al-'Aziz* is understood as "ruler of the land", "mighty prince" and "chief".

When he met the king of Egypt, in order to be rewarded for his remarkable abilities, Yusuf defined his competency as "a knowing guardian". And to the king he was "an honourable (high in rank), a trusted one".

Musa, on the other hand, was later described as "the strong and the trustworthy", denoting a prescription for success in every field.

On account of the same reasons, Talut (King Saul) from the Children of Israel, who was gifted abundantly with knowledge and bodily prowess, was able to defeat the forces of "mighty", but fallacious, Jalut (Goliath).

In the end, Dawud (David), who was in Talut's army, slew Jalut (Goliath), as a highpoint of the victory.

The Qur'an then states about Dawud the champion: "And Allah gave him power and wisdom and taught him whatever (else) He willed" (al-Baqarah, 251).

True might is invincible

It follows that when true might is attained, and when people's lives are adjusted to the will and command of the "One Exalted in Might", no challenge is insurmountable. Nothing can withstand such a force.

All sham forms of might are ordained to perish. The two cannot coexist.

In this light the following Qur'anic verses are to be viewed: "O Prophet, urge the believers to battle. If there are among you twenty (who are) steadfast, they will overcome two hundred. And if there are among you one hundred (who are) steadfast, they will overcome a thousand of those who have disbelieved because they are a people who do not understand. Now, Allah has lightened (the hardship) for you, and He knows that among you is weakness. So if there are from you one hundred (who are) steadfast, they will overcome two hundred. And if there are among you a thousand, they will overcome two thousand by permission of Allah. And Allah is with the steadfast" (al-Anfal, 65-66).

When the Qur'an says that the main reason for non-believers' disadvantage and defeat is that they do not understand, things are not to be taken literally.

"They are a people who do not understand" embodies all the antitheses of certitude, authentic wisdom and might, which non-believers possess. The idiom symbolizes all the senseless convictions and lifestyles of non-belief.

Surely, he who does not know life, does not know death either. And he who does not know why and how truly to live life, does not know why and how truly to defend it either.

Many existential battles are lost before they even started. Traditionally and ideally, Muslim soldiers were styled like those who loved death as much as their enemies loved life.

Might versus right

The perennial confrontations between the truth and good, on the one hand, and falsehood as well as evil, on the other, could be understood as confrontations between the proponents of might and the proponents of right.

The greatest enemies of all prophets were *al-mala'* (elites). They were societies' most influential members who ruled and determined the standards of right and wrong.

They did what they wanted and could, while the rest of society members endured what they had to.

Such people were their communities' parasites.

One of the accusations levelled by *al-mala'* against their prophets was along the lines of them being followed mainly by the weak and the poor.

For instance, the mighty elites of the people of Nuh used to tell him: "Nor do we see that any follow you but the meanest among us, in judgment immature (the lowest class of people)" (Hud, 27).

Jesus is reported to have said: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew, 5:5).

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), similarly, said and did many things that favoured the weak and the poor.

However, this by no means indicates that the weak and the poor are innately better than the people who are powerful and rich.

Islam, by the way, favours nobody on the strength of his mere name, position, status, or reputation. The only criterion is faith and good deeds.

Might is not intrinsically evil. It is its people that pervert it and turn it into a scourge.

The weak and the poor are often singled out because of their suffering, effected directly or indirectly by *al-mala'* (elites and the people of authority).

As if the prophets wanted to atone somehow and symbolically at least for the ageless tribulations those people had to put up with. The tribulations were in the name of certain customs and institutions, so the prophets were able to target thus not only individuals, but also established institutions and systems.

The trend persists

In any case, the philosophy and culture of “might makes right” persist even today. The trend never stops rearing its ugly head.

It runs through the veins of, for example, social Darwinism, all forms of kratocracies and totalitarian regimes (including totalitarian and outright fake democracies), absolute capitalism, and the notion of the clash of civilizations.

In essence, little changed. The primitive substance of “master-slave morality” remained, utilizing some modern casings and means.

Islam never endorsed such ideology, and never will.