

Justice and Equality in Islamic Law: A Defining Feature of Sharia

Among the most defining characteristics of Islamic law (Sharia) is its unwavering commitment to justice (‘adl) and equality (musāwāh). These principles are not mere moral aspirations but essential components embedded in every ruling, command, and obligation of Islam. The Islamic worldview does not distinguish people by race, class, or gender when it comes to rights and responsibilities. All human beings stand equal before Allah and His law, “like the teeth of a comb,” as the Prophet ﷺ described.

Justice in Islam is not a man-made ideal subject to societal whims, but a divine command grounded in revelation, prophetic tradition, and the natural order (fiṭrah) of the universe. This article explores the Quranic foundations, theological implications, and practical applications of justice in Islam as a universal legal, ethical, and spiritual imperative.

Justice as a Divine Command in the Qur’an and Sunnah

The Qur’an contains dozens of verses that directly command justice and explicitly condemn injustice (ẓulm). Allah says:

“Indeed, Allah commands justice (‘adl) and excellence (iḥsān)...”

(Surah An-Nahl 16:90)

“And if you judge between people, judge with justice.”

(Surah An-Nisā’ 4:58)

These verses establish that justice is not optional—it is a divine order that governs personal conduct, social relationships, and political authority. Islam elevates the concept of justice to the level of worship when fulfilled sincerely and correctly.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was described as the model of justice. In numerous hadiths, he is seen ruling equitably among the people—poor or rich, friend or foe. He said:

“The most beloved of people to Allah on the Day of Judgment and the closest to Him will be the just ruler...”

(Sunan an-Nasā’ī)

Justice as a Divine Attribute of Allah

Justice is not only a legal principle but also one of Allah’s eternal and essential attributes. Allah is “Al-‘Adl”—The Just. He has negated all forms of injustice for Himself:

“Your Lord does not wrong anyone.”

(Surah Al-Kahf 18:49)

“Indeed, Allah does not wrong even the weight of a speck.”

(Surah An-Nisā’ 4:40)

“Indeed, Allah does not wrong the people at all.”

(Surah Yūnus 10:44)

Because Allah is perfectly just, everything He commands and prohibits is rooted in fairness. He does not hold people accountable for what they cannot do, nor does He burden a soul beyond its capacity:

“Allah does not burden a soul beyond what it can bear.”

(Surah Al-Baqarah 2:286)

This theological truth becomes the foundation of Sharia’s design—laws are crafted in a way that align with human capacity, need, and spiritual growth.

Legal Ease and Equity: Sharia’s Practical Mercy

In contrast to oppressive or arbitrary systems, Islamic law is built upon balance (tawāzun) and facilitation (taysīr). Allah says:

“Allah intends ease for you, not hardship.” (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:185)

“Allah does not intend to place you in difficulty, but He intends to purify you.” (Surah Al-Mā'idah 5:6)

These verses represent the jurisprudential maxim:

“Hardship brings ease” (al-mashaqqah tajlib al-taysīr)

which has guided Islamic legal scholars (fuqahā') in crafting flexible and compassionate rulings based on contexts (maqām), capabilities (qudrah), and intents (niyyah).

Ibn al-Qayyim: Justice as the Spirit of Islamic Law

The renowned jurist and theologian Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah wrote:

“The foundation of Sharia is built upon justice, mercy, benefit, and wisdom. Any ruling that departs from these is not part of Sharia, even if introduced by interpretation.”

He affirms that:

- Justice is inseparable from Islamic law
- Any law that results in injustice or contradiction is not truly Islamic, regardless of how it is framed

This highlights the need to prioritize ethical coherence in legal reasoning (ijtihād) and to reject rulings that contradict Islam's spirit of mercy and balance.

The Fitri Nature of Sharia Justice

Sharia's rulings conform to the natural human disposition (fiṭrah). It does not favor rulers over the ruled, men over women, or wealthy over poor. It ensures:

- No collective punishment
- No excessive penalty
- No immunity for wrongdoers

The divine legislator (Allah) possesses perfect knowledge and therefore crafts laws that are neither excessive nor deficient.

Justice as a Central Objective of Revelation (Maqasid al-Sharia)

Dr. Ahmad al-Raysuni, a leading authority on Maqāṣid al-Sharī‘ah, points to the Qur’anic verse:

“We sent Our Messengers with clear proofs and sent down with them the Book and the Balance so that people may uphold justice.”

(Surah Al-Ḥadīd 57:25)

This verse identifies justice (qisṭ) as the purpose behind:

- The mission of every Prophet
- The revelation of every Scripture
- The application of divine measurement (the Balance)
- Thus, all divine legislation aims at establishing justice on earth.

Social and Judicial Applications of Justice in Islam

Islamic law mandates justice in:

Judgment and dispute resolution “Judge between them with justice; indeed, Allah loves those who are just.” (Qur’an 5:42)

Marriage and family structure “If you fear that you cannot be just, then [marry] only one...”
(Qur’an 4:3)

Even in war and conflict, justice remains essential:

“If two groups among believers fight, make peace... then make peace with justice and be fair.
Verily, Allah loves the just.”
(Surah Al-Hujurat 49:9)

Justice vs. Vested Interests: A Warning to Scholars and Leaders

Ibn al-Qayyim strongly warns against scholars who allow personal bias or tribal loyalty to influence their rulings. He writes:

“The heirs of the Prophet must practice justice among all groups... not favor their own sect, tribe, or teacher. Their religion is justice and their guide is evidence.”

This highlights the responsibility of Islamic leadership—both scholarly and political—to implement justice without favoritism, compromise, or fear of public opinion.

Justice: The Key to Islamic Civilization

The Qur’anic worldview does not merely seek to establish a Ministry of Justice but rather a just society. Dr. al-Raysuni states:

“Justice must be pursued by all people, for all people, in all circumstances—to live by it, act through it, and enjoy its protection.”

Thus, the Islamic call is not for titles but for structures of justice: in governance, economy, education, media, and personal conduct.

A Legacy of Justice: Rib‘ī ibn ‘Āmir’s Declaration

During the historic Battle of al-Qadisiyyah, the Muslim envoy Ribʿī ibn ʿĀmir declared to the Persian commander Rustam:

“Allah has sent us to bring people from worshipping other people to worshipping Allah, from the narrowness of this world to its vastness, and from the injustice of religions to the justice of Islam...”

This profound statement captures the universal mission of Islam: to liberate mankind spiritually, socially, and politically—through divine justice.

Conclusion: Justice in Islam Is a Living Principle

Justice in Islam is not a historical footnote or theoretical ideal—it is a living, actionable principle that shapes every level of personal and societal life. Whether in courtrooms, classrooms, or family homes, the justice of Sharia is comprehensive, sacred, and indispensable.

To build a just world, modern Muslims must revisit and revive this central value of the Qurʾan—not by slogans, but by practical implementation across every sphere of life.