

THE GLOBAL JIHADI THREAT

MODULE 2: THE ROLE OF JIHAD IN ISLAM

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Introduction

The subject of Jihad has been highly controversial of late for both Muslims and non-Muslims. Critics of Islam have used the concept to illustrate what they believe to be the deep enmity of Islam towards non-Muslims and the implacable violence at the center of the faith whereas apologists have suggested that it is a purely peaceful concept that has been hijacked by a handful of radicals. This module will focus on the various roles that Jihad has played and continues to play in Islam and attempt to present some of the complexity of the concept within Islam.

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Types of Jihad

The term “Jihad” technically means “struggle” or “striving” in the context of God’s path or for a noble cause. In broad terms, Islamic tradition refers to two types of Jihad: al-Jihad al-Akbar (or the greater Jihad) which is the combating of the temptation of sin and the following of God’s commandments, and al-Jihad al-Asghar (or the lesser Jihad) which involves fighting the “enemies of God.”

Generations of Islamic jurists have built upon and elaborated on the types of Jihad creating a distinction between five types of Jihad:

- Jihad of the heart – Jihad bin nafs (faith) – combating the temptation of sin.
- Jihad by the tongue – Jihad bil lisan- (speech) – being truthful and waging a struggle through writing and speech (such as the Dawa – call to Islam).
- Jihad by the hand – Jihad bil yad- (good works) – correcting wrongs through the use of one’s wealth (such as going on the Haj, providing funding for proselytizing and external Jihad, or caring for one’s family members).
- Jihad by the pen – Jihad bil qalam (knowledge) – a struggle for good through the scholarly study of Islam, ijihad (legal reasoning), and science.

Jihad of the sword – Jihad bis sayf (holy war) - fighting the “enemies of God.”

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In Practice

Looking at the concept of Jihad in terms of how it has been practiced and extrapolating back from that to the actual dogma (rather than looking first at the dogma and then seeing how it is actually implemented), one finds that the types of Jihad can essentially be grouped into four functional categories, two internal and two external, based on the Islamic doctrines of greater and lesser Jihad. The “Greater Jihad,” that is, the individual struggle to be a more devout and righteous believer, has both internal and external components since it has both individual and community-wide implications. For the individual, the al-Jihad al-Akbar (greater Jihad) means a striving to be more devout and righteous and to abjure sin, for the community, the greater Jihad implies fighting social and political corruption, educating people in the ways of Islam (otherwise known as Dawa – the call to Islam), fostering the public modesty of men and women and, ultimately, working to create a more Islamically-authentic society.

Like the Greater Jihad, al-Jihad al-Asghar (the Lesser Jihad) has both individual and community-wide implications. For the individual, the lesser Jihad requires a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the community. Traditionally, individuals in the broader Islamic community were only called upon to take up arms when the Islamic world was seen as being militarily threatened by the non-believers or infidels (Kuffar). This principle of the Lesser Jihad being obligatory for all able-bodied Muslims when the Islamic world was facing a direct threat is known as Fard ‘ayn (individual duty or obligation). Collectively, the Lesser Jihad can also be seen as a duty, but one that rests on the Islamic state under the

Caliph and is practiced by the armed representatives of that state (i.e., the professional warriors). Such a Jihad was seen as necessary to expand the territory of Islam and while all Muslims were expected to support it, few were required to actually take part in it. The obligation in this type of Jihad is known as Fard Kifaya (collective duty or obligation).

The other forms of Jihad – tongue, hand and pen, can either be used to promote the Greater or the Lesser Jihads or both. Jihad by the tongue can be used to convince people to become more devout (Greater Jihad) or to support those who fight the infidels (Lesser Jihad). Similarly, Jihad by the hand can be used to fund proselytizing efforts (Greater Jihad) or armies (Lesser Jihad) and Jihad by the pen can be used to promote Islamic scholarship (Greater Jihad) or to propagandize and vilify enemies (Lesser Jihad).

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Dual Interpretations

Some scholars have pointed out that the Greater Jihad is derived from the Lesser Jihad and that Islam began with a focus on violent holy war and only later developed the peaceful ideas of the Greater Jihad.¹ Nevertheless, it is clear from the modern interpretation of the term that today, Jihad can equally serve as a principle for peaceful inner striving and social and political reform as well as for the promotion and execution of warfare and other forms of violence.

This dual nature of Jihad can be illustrated from examples in the Quran and several Ahadith (plural of Hadith). For example, Sura (chapter) 2: 216 of the Quran says:

“Fighting is proscribed for you even if it is abhorrent to you. It may be that you dislike something that is good for you, and it may be that you like something that is bad for you. God knows and you do not know.”

Suras 2:190-193 of the Quran also focus on fighting the enemy, though also laying out limits to the use of violence. They say:

“And fight for the sake of God those who fight you; but do not be brutal or commit aggression, for God does not love brutal aggressors.” (sura 2:190)

“And kill them wherever you catch them, and drive them from where they drove you....” (sura 2:191).

“But if they stop, God is most forgiving, most merciful.” (sura 2:192).

“And fight them until there is no more strife, and there is the religion of God. And if they stop, then let there be no hostility, except against wrongdoers.” (sura 2:193).

¹ David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46.

Along similar lines, Sura 61:4 states that: "God loves those who fight for the sake of God in a battle line as though they were a solid building."

Similarly, a Hadith recounted by Abu Hurairah tells of how the Prophet said:

"Jihad is incumbent on you under every commander whether he is virtuous or wicked, even though he be guilty of heinous sins...." (AD-Msh. 4:26)

And an additional Hadith recounted by Ibn Umar tells of how the Prophet said:

"I have been commanded that I should fight these people till they bear witness that there is no god but Allah and keep up prayer and pay zakat. When they do this their blood and their property shall be safe with me except as Islam requires, and their reckoning is with Allah (B. 2:16).

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Dual Interpretations, Continued

At the same time, the Quran repeatedly rejects the imposition of religion by force of arms saying in Sura 2: 256, "There is no compulsion in religion, true direction is already distinct from error...."

The Quran also suggests the possibility of divine redemption for non-Muslims, thus presumably negating the right of Muslims to undertake aggressive acts against non-Muslims saying in Sura 22:17, "As for the Muslims, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the polytheists, God will decide among them on the day of resurrection."

At least one Hadith, reported by Abu Said, suggests that Muhammad did not consider violent Jihad to be the most important form of Jihad. The Hadith notes that the Prophet stated that "The most excellent Jihad is the uttering of truth in the presence of an unjust ruler." (Tr-Msh. 17).

Similarly, another Hadith attested to by Abu Hurairah, reports that the Prophet said, "...he who is killed in the way of Allah is a martyr; he who dies a natural death in the way of Allah is a martyr; he who dies of the plague (in the way of Allah) is a martyr; he who dies of cholera (in the way of Allah) is a martyr.: (M-Msh. 18).

Finally, a Hadith attested to by al-Bayhaqi reports that: "a number of fighters came to the Messenger of Allah, and he said: You have done well in coming from the 'lesser jihad' to the 'greater jihad.'" They said: "What is the 'greater jihad?'" He said: "For the servant [of God] to fight his passions."

Of course, we could go on and on referring to sections of the Quran and various Ahadith to illustrate both the more peaceable and more aggressive aspects of the faith. Suffice to say

that believers can and have, over the years, chosen to focus on one or the other core interpretation of Jihad.

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Perception of Duty

Islamic scholars (ulema) have traditionally viewed the lesser Jihad or Jihad of the Sword as a collective duty (Fard Kifaya) authorized by the Caliph and carried out by professional soldiers.

Some Sunni Islamic scholars believe that, in the wake of the abolishment of the Caliphate in 1924, no Islamic leader has the authority to declare a Jihad of the Sword until such time as a Caliphate has been reestablished and the new Caliph has authorized a holy war.

Jihadist Muslims, on the other hand, believe that since Islam is, in their perception, under grave attack from the infidels (not only because Western culture seems to be “overwhelming” Islamic lands, but also because Muslim lands are either “occupied” by infidel powers or ruled by local “apostates”), all Muslims have an individual duty (Fard ‘ayn) to defend Islam through the use of force without the requirement that this action be approved by a Caliph or other Islamic leader. Jihad of the Sword, in the view of these extremists, is both a personal obligation and a permanent feature of Islamic existence which they, in fact, elevate to the level of a “sixth” pillar of Islam. Jihad thus becomes an all-encompassing violent struggle requiring the complete and on-going mobilization of Muslim society.²

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Fundamentalists

As all devout Muslims share the same basic beliefs, how does one reconcile the contradictory messages of holy war and peaceful inner striving that are at the heart of the complex concept of Jihad? As usual, in matters of religion, this is a question of interpretation of the sacred texts. Passive Fundamentalist Muslims believe that the world will gradually become Islamic by peaceful, evolutionary means because Islam is the true religion of God and God wills that it encompass all of humanity. Active Fundamentalists believe that Islam will be victorious globally through violent and revolutionary methods because God expects Muslims to fight to expand the faith. Passive Fundamentalists try to fit Islam into the existing world order while Active Fundamentalists try to force the world

² Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-4.

to follow the dictates of Islamic society and culture. Finally, Passivists believe that Islam is a religion of peace whilst Activists believe that peace can only be established after all peoples have submitted, by force if necessary, to the faith and its laws.³

It should be remembered in the context of the above discussion, that not all Muslims are Fundamentalist or otherwise adhere to a strict interpretation of the faith. Degrees of adherence to the tenets of Islam vary both in the Islamic world and in the West and there are also significant numbers of secular or semi-secular Muslims worldwide, particularly in the West. Moreover, it is not incompatible to maintain a more flexible interpretation of Islamic beliefs whilst accepting pluralistic, democratic-humanistic principles. Just as many Christians and Jews opt for a more flexible interpretation of their own belief systems to allow for acceptance of both democracy and pluralism (whilst some of their co-religionists follow a stricter and more intolerant brand of the respective religions), the same is, of course, possible for Muslims.

As we are, however, interested in the Islamists and especially the Jihadists (both of whom are active Fundamentalists), we must necessarily focus on the extremists within the Islamic community though we should not lose sight of the fact that they do not, by any means, speak for all Muslims.

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The Afterlife: Paradise

A central element in the practice of Jihad of the Sword is death, which each warrior must be prepared to face and even welcome. For devout Muslims, life on earth is transitory and the only permanence is the eternity of the hereafter. The problem is that no one can be one hundred percent sure that God will forgive them of their sins when, after having departed this earth, they stand before God. The Quran spends considerable time going into detail about what good and evil persons can expect in the hereafter.

The pleasures of Paradise are vividly described as are the tribulations of Hell.

For example, Suras 56:20 to 56:38 state that the righteous will enter Paradise where:

“..there will be fruit from them to choose from, and whatever flesh of fowl they desire. And there will be large-eyed maidens, like treasured pearls, as a reward for what they did. They will hear no nonsense there, and no accusation: only the saying, “Peace, peace!” ... They will be amidst lotus trees without thorns and orderly acacias with extensive shade, and flowing water and abundant fruit that is never unavailable or out of season; and high cushions. We have created the females as a special creation, making them virgins, loving wives as companions for the company of the right.”

³ A.J. Abraham, *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Doctrine of Jihad* (Lima, Ohio: Wyndham Hall Press, 2002), 10.

Paradise is similarly described in Suras 55:46 to 55:78 as containing: “flowing springs,” “fruits, dates and pomegranates,” “women who restrain their glances, whom no previous man or sprite has deflowered,” and with the righteous reclining on “green pillows and fine colorful carpets.”

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The Afterlife: Hell

On the other hand, most Infidels and all apostates can expect to be sent to Hell. The Quran does not mince words with respect to what “evildoers” can expect to find in Hell. Sura 18:29 states: “...We have prepared a fire for the unjust, whose billowing smoke will envelop them. And if they pray for rain, We will rain on them water like molten brass, that will burn their faces. What a miserable drink, and what a terrible place to rest!

Similarly, Suras 22:19-22:22 state: “...for those who scoff [at God], garments of fire are cut out: boiling water will be poured over their heads, whereby their innards and their skins will be melted; and they will have restraints of iron imposed upon them: whenever they seek to get out of there from anguish, We send them back in there: *Taste the torture of burning.*”

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The Holy War

Believers are informed, as repeatedly emphasized in the Quran, that God is “all-seeing, all-knowing,” and that they will be judged by God upon their deaths. At the same time, in Sura 9:111, the Quran makes it clear that: “Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allah, kill and get killed. That is a true promise from Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran; and who fulfills His promise better than Allah? Rejoice, then, at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph.”

This passage and others in the Quran as well as the Hadith have thus been interpreted as granting the holy warrior who dies in the Jihad of the Sword automatic access to Paradise. Some interpretations also claim that the martyr for Islam also paves the way for seventy of his family members to reach Paradise thus ensuring that their sins will be forgiven providing them with peace of mind in this life as they do not have to fear the possible consequences in the hereafter.

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Ultimate Testimonial of Faith

Muslims use the term “Istish’had” to refer to death for Islam (in the course of Jihad). This term, and the related one, “Shaheed” (one who dies for Islam) are commonly translated as martyrdom and martyr respectively, but this translation misses some of the true significance of this concept.

The act of Istish’had performed by the Shaheed is an act of bearing witness or testifying to one’s faith in God (if you recall, the related term, Shahadatan, the first pillar of Islam, indicates the twin testimonials of faith in one God and belief in His Messenger). To underscore this point, the body of the Shaheed, unlike the bodies of other deceased Muslims, is not washed or wrapped in clean shrouds, but is buried as is with the blood serving as a sign of honor and a testimonial before God.

Death in violent Jihad thus represents the ultimate testimonial to the believer’s faith for which he or she will be rewarded in Paradise. Consequently, Islamically-motivated suicide bombers and their supporters, to take the most prominent contemporary example of Istish’had, view the act of blowing oneself up among innocent victims (whom they deem to be infidels, whether Muslim or not) as a testimonial to their faith and certainly not a self-destructive act of suicide. Incidentally, personal suicide, known in Arabic as “Intihar,” is forbidden in Islam.

Indeed, by dying in Jihad, the believer is not only committing a supreme act of faith, but is also self-interestedly insuring that he (and sometimes she) and his/her family will reach the highest levels of Paradise. The act of suicide bombing or other acts of physical self-sacrifice thus represent a type of “death insurance” policy. After all, if this life is short and cruel but one can do something while on this Earth to ensure an eternity of bliss for oneself and one’s loved ones, such behavior becomes diabolically rational.

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References

1. David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 46.
2. Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-4.
- 3.A.J. Abraham, *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Doctrine of Jihad* (Lima, Ohio: Wyndham Hall Press, 2002), 10

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Closing Credits

Music