Jihad: Holy or Unholy War?
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The concept and practice of jihad have been critical in the history of Islam.[1] From the rise of Islam and the creation and expansion of the Muslim community, jihad has played a central role in Islam. Jihad (exertion or struggle) is sometimes referred to as the Sixth Pillar of Islam. Throughout history, (as in other faiths) sacred scripture has been used and abused, interpreted and misinterpreted, to justify resistance and liberation struggles, extremism and terrorism, holy and unholy wars.

The importance of jihad is rooted in the Quran's command to struggle (the literal meaning of the word *jihad*) in the path of God and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his early Companions. In its most general meaning, jihad refers to the obligation incumbent on all Muslims, individuals and the community, to follow and realize God's will: to lead a virtuous life and to extend the Islamic community through preaching, education, example, writing, etc. Jihad also includes the right, indeed the obligation, to defend Islam and the community from aggression. Throughout history, the call to jihad has rallied Muslims to the defense of Islam.

Since the late 20th century, the word jihad has gained remarkable currency: used by resistance, liberation, and terrorist movements alike to legitimate their cause and motivate their followers. The Afghan Mujahiddin, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, have waged a jihad in Afghanistan against foreign powers and among themselves; Muslims in Kashmir, Chechnya, Daghestan and the southern Philippines, Bosnia and Kosovo have fashioned their struggles as jihads; Hizbollah, HAMAS, and Islamic Jihad Palestine have characterized war with Israel as a jihad; Algeria's Armed Islamic Group has engaged in a jihad of terror against the government there and Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda have waged a global jihad against Muslim governments and the West.

The importance of jihad is rooted in the Quran's command to "struggle or exert" (the literal meaning of the word jihad) oneself in the path of God. The Quranic teachings have been of essential significance to Muslim self-understanding, piety, mobilization, expansion and defense. Jihad as struggle pertains to the difficulty and complexity of living a good life: struggling against the evil in oneself – to be virtuous and moral, making a serious effort to do good works and help to reform society. Depending on the circumstances in which one lives, it also can mean fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam and creating a just society through preaching, teaching and, if necessary, armed struggle or holy war.

The two broad meanings of jihad, non-violent and violent, are contrasted in a well-known Prophetic tradition. Muslim tradition reports that, when Muhammad returned from battle, he told his followers "We return from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad." The greater jihad is the more difficult and more important struggle against one's ego, selfishness, greed, and evil.

Jihad is a concept with multiple meanings, used and abused throughout Islamic history. Although it has always been an important part of the Islamic tradition, in recent years some Muslims have maintained that jihad is a universal religious obligation for all true Muslims to join the jihad to promote a global Islamic revolution.

If jihad has so many meanings, how are they to be understood? Which interpretations are correct? Which of the meanings promote positive improvements and reforms and which have been exploited to justify extremism and terrorism? These questions are not new – they have been debated by Muslims throughout the ages.

Like all scriptures, Islamic sacred texts must be read within the social and political contexts in which they were revealed. It is not surprising that the Quran, like the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, has verses that address fighting and the conduct of war. The world of the Old Testament like that of the Quran (and indeed of medieval Europe) was often a world of tribal raiding and warfare, of conquest and booty, in which fighting and warfare was also the primary means of guaranteeing the security and freedom. The world of Muhammad and the emerging Islamic community was in fact a rough neighborhood. Arabia and the city of Mecca, in which Muhammad lived and received God's revelation, were beset by tribal raids and cycles of vengeance and vendetta. As Fred Donner has noted:

> In this society, war (<u>harb</u>, used in the senses of both an <u>activity</u> and a <u>condition</u>) was in one sense a normal way of life; that is, a 'state of war' was assumed to exist between one's tribe and all others, unless a particular treaty or agreement had been reached with another tribe establishing amicable relations.[1]

Moreover, the broader Near East, in which Arabia was located, was itself divided between two warring superpowers, the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) and the Sasanian (Persian) empires.

The Quranic command to fight was in response to the political realities of Arabia and its environs and thus "the necessity of preserving the <u>physical</u> integrity of the Muslim community at a time and place when fighting, sometimes preemptively, sometimes defensively, was understood to be the only way to do so. To be sure, Quranic injunctions to fight often take on the <u>appearance</u> of a call to Holy War, i.e., war based solely on a difference of religion. But this is simply because the only people Muhammad and the early Muslims had to fear were non-Muslims. "(Sherman Jackson) Later jurists would reflect this dichotomous view of a world of us and them, danger, warfare and conquest in their division of the world into the Abode of Islam (Muslim rule, safety and security) and the Abode of Warfare.

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[1] Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, No. 14), 34 (Darwin Press).

The Quran and Jihad

The earliest Quranic verses dealing with the right to engage in a "defensive" jihad, or struggle, were revealed shortly after the *hijra* (emigration) of Muhammad and his followers to Medina in flight from their persecution in Mecca. At a time when they were forced to fight for their lives, Muhammad is told: "Leave is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them—who were expelled from their homes wrongfully for saying, 'Our Lord is God' " (22:39–40). The defensive nature of jihad is clearly emphasized in 2:190, "And fight in the way of God with those who fight you, but aggress not: God loves not the aggressors." At critical points throughout the years, Muhammad received revelations from God that provided guidelines for the jihad.

As the Muslim community grew, questions quickly emerged as to what was proper behavior during times of war. The Quran provided detailed guidelines and regulations regarding the conduct of war: who is to fight and who is exempted (48:17, 9:91), when hostilities must cease (2:192), and how prisoners should be treated (47:4). Most important, verses such as 2:294 emphasized that warfare and the response to violence and aggression must be proportional: "Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind."

However, Quranic verses also underscore that peace, not violence and warfare, is the norm. Permission to fight the enemy is balanced by a strong mandate for making peace: "If your enemy inclines toward peace, then you too should seek peace and put your trust in God" (8:61) and "Had Allah wished, He would have made them dominate you, and so if they leave you alone and do not fight you and offer you peace, then Allah allows you no way against them" (4:90). From the earliest times, it was forbidden in Islam to kill noncombatants as well as women and children and monks and rabbis, who were given the promise of immunity unless they took part in the fighting.

But what of those verses, sometimes referred to as the "sword verses," that call for killing unbelievers, such as, "When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush" (9:5)? This is one of a number of Quranic verses that are cited by critics to demonstrate the inherently violent nature of Islam and its scripture. These same verses have also been selectively used (or abused) by religious extremists to develop a "theology of hate" and intolerance and to legitimate unconditional warfare against unbelievers.

During the period of expansion and conquest, many of the *ulama* (religious scholars) enjoyed royal patronage and provided a rationale for caliphs to pursue their imperial dreams and extend the boundaries of their empires. They said that the "sword verses" abrogated or overrode the earlier Quranic verses that limited jihad to defensive war. In fact, however, the full intent of "When the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever you find them" is missed or distorted when quoted in isolation. For it is followed and qualified by: "But if they repent and fulfill their devotional obligations and pay the zakat [the charitable tax on Muslims], then let them go their way, for God is forgiving and kind"(9:5). The same is true of another often quoted verse: "Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been

forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor hold the religion of truth [even if they are] of the People of the Book," which is often cited without the line that follows, "Until they pay the tax with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (9:29).

From its origins, the Islamic community faced rebellion and civil wars, violence and terrorism, epitomized by groups like the Kharijites and Assassins. The Kharijites were a pious but puritanical and militant extremist group that broke with the caliph Ali and later assassinated him. The Assassins lived apart in secret communities from which they were guided by a series of Grand Masters, who ruled from the mountain fortress of Alamut in northern Persia. The Assassins' jihad against the Seljuq Dynasty terrorized princes, generals, and *ulama* (scholars), whom they murdered in the name of the Hidden Imam. They struck such terror in the hearts of their Muslim and Crusader enemies that their exploits in Persia and Syria earned them a name and memory in history long after they were overrun and the Mongols executed their last Grand Master in 1256.

The response of Sunni Islam and Islamic law was to marginalize extremists and develop a political theory that emphasized stability over chaos and anarchy. This, of course, did not dissuade all from the extremist path. In more recent decades, alongside mainstream Islamic political opposition, terrorist groups have risen up to challenge regimes and terrorize their populations and attack foreign interests. Often they portray themselves as the "true believers" struggling against repressive regimes and in the midst of a "pagan" society of unbelief. They attempt to impose their ideological brand of Islam and "hijack" Islamic doctrines such as jihad, claiming to be defending true Islam, to legitimate their illegitimate use of violence and acts of terrorism.

In Egypt, groups like Egypt's Islamic Jihad and other extremist groups assassinated President Anwar Sadat and other government officials, slaughtered tourists in Luxor, burned churches, and killed Christians. In Algeria, the Armed Islamic Group has engaged in a campaign of terror against the Algerian government. Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda undertook a global war of terror against Muslim governments and America, distorting Islam and countering Islamic law in issuing their own *fatwas* (legal opinions) in an attempt to legitimate their war and call for attacks against civilians (noncombatants). Although these groups tend to receive the most media coverage because of the high-profile atrocities they commit, they represent only an extremist minority, not the majority of Muslims.

Terrorists like Osama bin Laden and others go beyond classical Islam's criteria for a just jihad and recognize no limits but their own, employing any weapons or means. They reject Islamic law's regulations regarding the goals and legitimate means for a valid jihad: that violence must be proportional and that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, that innocent civilians should not be targeted, and that jihad must be declared by the ruler or head of state. Today, individuals and groups, religious and lay, seize the right to declare and legitimate unholy wars of terrorism in the name of Islam.

When Osama Bin Laden or the leaders of other terrorist groups in North Africa, the Middle East, South, Southeast and Central Asia speak today, like all Muslims they often use the past to legitimate their agenda and tactics. They

place themselves under the mantle of the Prophet, linking their militant jihadist worldviews to famous earlier interpretations of jihad such as the prominent medieval theologian and legal scholar Ibn Taymiyya and the 20th century Egyptian intellectual and Islamic activist Sayyid Qutb, the godfather of modern revolutionary Islam.

Extremists appeal to conditions (authoritarian governments and a wealthy elite, a minority concerned solely with its own economic prosperity rather than national development, and awash in Western culture and values in dress, music, television, and movies) in many Muslim countries to call for a jihad against rulers and elites and those governments (in particular America) who support them. Western governments are perceived as propping-up oppressive regimes and exploiting the region's human and natural resources, robbing Muslims of their culture and their option to be governed according to their own choice and to live in a more just society.

Thus, the struggle for the soul of Islam going on today is the product of a rich and complex history. Islamic law and Muslim jurists continue to be used both to legitimate and to challenge the legitimacy of a jihad, a practice that continues up to the present day. For example, during the Gulf War, Muslim rulers obtained fatwas to legitimate their participation in the American-led coalition against Saddam Hussein's declared jihad and Saudi Arabia obtained a fatwa to legitimate the presence of non-Muslim American troops in the Kingdom. More recently, Shaykh Omar Abdur Rahman's fatwas were used by extremist groups in Egypt and America to legitimate their acts of violence and terror. Osama Bin Laden, though not a mufti, has given his own fatwas to legitimate his global war and call for attacks against Muslim and Western governments as well as Jews, Christians, and other Muslims. At the same time, prominent religious leaders or muftis have issued fatwas condemning acts of terrorism and suicide bombings against civilians.   Indeed, the debate over suicide bombing which has been introduced as an instrument of jihad reveals a wide diversity of opinions.

Suicide Bombers

On February 25, 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish settler who had emigrated to Israel from the United States, walked into the Mosque of the Patriarch in Hebron and opened fire, killing twenty-nine Muslim worshipers during their Friday congregational prayer. In response, Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) introduced a new type of warfare in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, suicide bombing. Promising swift revenge for the Hebron massacre, the Hamas militia, the Qassem Brigade, undertook operations within Israel itself, in Galilee, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv. In Israel-Palestine, the use of suicide bombing increased exponentially during the second (al-Aqsa) *intifada* (uprising), which began in September 2000. The most horrific example of suicide bombings or attacks was seen in the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Traditionally, Muslims are unconditionally forbidden to commit suicide, because only God has the right to take the life he has granted. There is only one phrase in the Quran that appears relevant to suicide: "O you who believe! Do not

consume your wealth in the wrong way—rather only through trade mutually agreed to, and do not kill yourselves. Surely God is Merciful toward you" (4:29). However, many Muslim exegetes have believed that "do not kill yourselves" can mean "do not kill each other" since it fits the context of the verse. The subject of suicide is therefore little discussed in exegetical literature. The Prophetic traditions (*hadith*), however, frequently, clearly, and absolutely prohibit suicide.

Historically both Sunni and Shii Muslims have generally forbidden "sacrificial religious suicide" and acts of terrorism. The Nizari Ismailis, popularly called the Assassins, who in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were notorious for sending suicidal assassins against their enemies, were rejected by mainstream Islam as fanatics. However, in the late twentieth century, the issue resurfaced as many, Shii and Sunni alike, came to equate suicide-bombing with martyrdom, relinquishing one's life for the faith. Although usually associated with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in fact suicide bombings have also occurred in Lebanon, Indonesia, and elsewhere. In Lebanon, they were used by Hizbollah and al-Jihad in attacks such as those against the U.S. Marine barracks and French military headquarters in Beirut in 1983, in which several hundred were killed.

In Israel-Palestine, increased Israeli violence, brutality, and targeted assassinations reinforced the belief among many Palestinians and Muslims that so-called suicide bombers were committing not an act of suicide but one of self-sacrifice, engaged in resistance and retaliation against Israeli occupation and oppression. As student posters at universities in the West Bank and Gaza declared: "Israel has nuclear bombs, we have human bombs." Or as a Palestinian fighter remarked: "The Israelis blow us up. Why shouldn't I go to Israel and take some of them with me?"

Suicide bombings, especially those that target innocent civilians or noncombatants, have precipitated a sharp debate in the Muslim world, garnering both support and condemnation on religious grounds. Prominent religious leaders have differed sharply in their legal opinions (*fatwas*). Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the religious leader and founder of Hamas, and Akram Sabri, the Mufti of Jerusalem, as well as many other Arab and Palestinian religious leaders, have argued that suicide bombing is necessary and justified. However, others condemn suicide bombings, in particular those that target civilians, as terrorism.

Prominent Islamic scholars and leaders have been sharply divided in opinion. Sheikh al-Sheikh, the head of Egypt's venerable al-Azhar Mosque and former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, has condemned all suicide bombing as un-Islamic and forbidden by Islam. Sheikh Muhammad Sayad Tantawi, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and a leading religious authority, has drawn a sharp distinction between suicide bombings that are acts of self-sacrifice and self-defense and the killing of noncombatants, women, and children, which he has consistently condemned. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi, among the most influential religious authorities, has given fatwas that recognize suicide bombing in Israel/Palestine as an act of self-defense, the giving of one's life for God with the hope that God will grant him or her Paradise. Like others, Qardawi has legitimated the killing of civilians, arguing that Israel is a militant and military society in which both men and women serve in the military and reserves and that if an elderly person or a

child is killed in such acts, it is an involuntary killing. At the same time, he has denounced acts of terrorism elsewhere as un-Islamic or against the teachings of Islam.

Post 9/11 global terrorism remains a threat to the world community as bombings by religious extremists from Morocco and Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, India and Indonesia have demonstrated. In July 2003 at a World Ulama Conference, Dr. Muhammed Sayed al-Tantawi, the Shaykh or head of al-Azhar University, led the assembled religious scholars in condemning the killing of innocent civilians, noting that: "Extremism is the enemy of Islam…Whereas jihad is allowed in Islam to defend one's land, to help the oppressed, the difference between jihad in Islam and extremism is like the earth and the sky." (The Straits Times, July 12, 2003) In many parts of the Muslim world today there is a struggle for the soul of Islam, as the Muslim mainstream, often a silent majority, are challenged by the threat of religious extremism to the faith of Islam and to the security and stability of Muslim societies. At the same time, the international community is challenged to distinguish the acts of religious extremists (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist) and their religious traditions. Critical o the war against global terrorism will be the ability of leaders to recognize that while the military can effectively punish and capture, it is only by addressing the root causes of terrorism (authoritarian and repressive governments, the maldistribution of economic resources, flawed educational, secular and religious, systems and flagrant human rights abuses) that the conditions that breed extremists and their unholy wars can be eradicated.

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[1] For this article, I have drawn from *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* and *What Everyone Needs to Know about Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2002).