

An Understanding of 'Jihad'

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Abstract: *Islam is the religion of peace containing the controversial concept is 'jihad', which requires to be understood. 'Jihad' is an Arabic term which means 'striving' or 'struggling' with one's self and spending one's money in the cause of God. Most of the explications of the term claim that there are two types of 'jihad' namely, 'greater jihad' and 'lesser jihad'; the former is given more importance as an understanding of the Qur'anic textual occurrence of the term. But this term has been misinterpreted religiously and politically across the world as 'Holy War' or 'Terrorism' in the name of Islam to change the true meaning of 'jihad'. This paper attempts to describe the basic concept of 'jihad' and focus on the 'spiritual jihad'.*

Keywords: *Jihad, religion, Islam, Qur'an, peace, violence, self-defence*

Peace is the goal that every Muslim starts his day with; a Muslim is required to strive for the world people. The Muslims start, "...the daily prayers...with praising God as 'Mercy and Beneficent' and ends with the greeting of peace for all..." (Rizvi, p. 3). Thus it is quite clear Islam does not begin with violence rather it begins as the peaceful proclamation of the absolute unity of God [or universal brotherhood among the world people] by the Prophet Muhammad in the pagan-dominated town of Mecca (Cook, 2005, p. 5). Therefore, in the first instance Islam is the religion of peace.

The most manipulated concept in Islam is 'jihad' and has become highly and extremely contentious issue. 'Jihad' is understood as the very heart of Islam and every Muslim is advised to practise 'jihad' as commanded by God in the Qur'an. The Arabic word 'jihad' comes from the root word 'jahada' (Pal, 2011, p. 83) which means striving or struggling with one's self and spending one's money for the cause of God. Thus 'jihad' primarily refers to the inner struggle of an individual for the virtuous cause of God in all aspects of life. We find various 'ayat' in the Qur'an significant for an understanding of the term, for example

"Only those are Believers who have believed in Allah and His Messenger, and have never since doubted, but have striven with their belongings and their persons in the Cause of Allah: Such are the sincere ones." (49: 15)

"Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in Allah's cause, with their goods and their persons have the highest rank in the sight of Allah: they are the people who will achieve [salvation]." (9:20)

"But the Messenger, and those who believe with him, strive and fight with their wealth and their persons: for them are [all] good things: and it is they who will prosper..." (9:88)

Thus from the above verses it is clear that 'jihad' is a peaceful action and it does not necessarily involve aggression. This

peaceful warfare clearly was referred to early *jihad* warriors, for example, Ibn al-Mubarak declares in his *Kitab al-jihad*: “The fighter is one who fights his [lower] soul” (Cook, 2005, p. 35). This concept of ‘*jihad*’ has been best expressed in the early stage of history that differentiates the peaceful *jihad* that is the inner *jihad* and the violent *jihad* that is the external respectively known as ‘greater *jihad*’ and ‘lesser *jihad*’. In the same manner from the Sufi thinker Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, we find two types of *jihad* while he proclaimed:

“...The inner [*jihad*] is the ‘*jihad*’ of the soul, the passion, the nature...It involves repentance from rebelliousness and errors, being steadfast about it, and abandoning the forbidden passions. The outer is the ‘*jihad*’ of the infidels who resist Him and His Messenger [Muhammad] and to be pitiless with their swords, their spears, and their arrows—killing and being killed. The ‘inner *jihad*’ is more difficult than the ‘outer *jihad*’ because it involves cutting the forbidden customs of the soul, and exiling them, so as to have as one’s example the Divine commands and to cease from what it forbids. Whoever takes God’s command as his example with regard to the two types of ‘*jihad*’ will gain a reward in this world and the next. Bodily wounds on the martyr are just like someone cutting their hand—there is no real pain in it—and death with regard to the soul of a *mujahid* who repents from his sins is like a thirsty man drinking cold water.” (Cook, 2005, p. 45)

The ‘greater *jihad*’ is the struggle of the self or purifying the self by performing religious activities as commanded by God in the *Qur’an*. Struggling to follow the

commandments of God and to denounce all the prohibited acts of God is the ‘greater *jihad*’ and ‘lesser *jihad*’ is the physical combat for self-defence, like fighting against the adversary, fighting for protecting the people or their land from oppressors. This type of ‘*jihad*’ is given lesser importance in the *Qur’an*. While it is mentioned in the *Qur’an*:

“...permission is given [to fight], because they are wronged... those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right...” (22:39-40)

“Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors. (2:190)

Again it is mentioned:

“But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou [also] incline towards peace and trust in Allah: for He is One that heareth and knoweth [all things]. (8:61)

These verses are the signs of using violence for self-defence with a warning that people should not exceed the proper limits or should not to be aggressive.

In the traditional belief it is observed that ‘*jihad*’ has been radically reinterpreted with an aggressive intent of the *Qur’anic* verses in order to focus on the spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is the fighting against the evil forces, evil spirits or demons which creates difficulties in human affairs in various ways. Traditions indicating that ‘*jihad*’ meant spiritual warfare, however, are entirely absent from any of the official, canonical collections with the exception of that of *al-Tirmidhi*, who cites “the fighter is one who fights his passions” (Cook, 2005, p. 35). One might reasonably infer from this that the hadith

collectors construed as illegitimate the entire line of thought leading to the conclusion that spiritual warfare is part of or equivalent to aggressive '*jihad*' (Cook, 2005, p. 35). Thus it is quite clear that the *Qur'anic* revelation of '*jihad*' cannot be abridged to armed conflict. Almost all the occurrences of the root word '*jahada*' primarily speak to the query of the true intention and devotion and towards striving bodily efforts and spiritual efforts in His way. So, '*jihad*' in the *Qur'an* infers an aggregate commitment to God through a sanctification, devotion, dedication and even solemn presentation to His direction.

The ascetic and mystic thinkers' saying '*jihad*' - against the backdrop of an increasingly affluent and comfortable Islamic order - as a struggle not to preserve the Islamic message against non-Muslim hostility but to direct one's own soul away from worldly attachments (Heck, 2004, P. 98). '*Jihad*' in this way was considered as spiritual exercise of will and desire, as well as the ascetical guideline for the bodily exercise. Therefore waging spiritual *jihad* was a necessary requirement to mystical union. For them, '*jihad*' as a struggle to cleanse one's inner state did not mean that ascetics and mystics give out the military intervention of '*jihad*'. In general, the '*inner jihad*' was an essential requirement for the '*outer jihad*' that is for self-defence, for example, while Muhammad returned from military journey, he proclaimed: "We have returned from the '*lesser jihad*' to embark on the '*greater jihad*'" (Heck, 2004, P. 99).

However, there is an important difference between the ascetic mystic and the ascetic warrior from the early Islamic history; they fought the adversary on the rural areas of

the Islamic world. The difference has significance for the reason that it can spread on religion as a source of both hostile and non-hostile. Both ascetic mystic and ascetic warrior including Muslims, believed that Prophet Muhammad deserving of simulation, since his life is an example that provides a criterion of true Islamic religious practice. Striving to close down the worldly attachment is an essential requirement to follow the Prophet Mohammad but the way which the Prophet followed, was very difficult, different and significant. The ascetic mystics tried to follow Prophet for the cause of God but the ascetic warrior tried to take advantage of the military activities of Prophet. Thus, the mystic's view:

"...military *jihad* is a worldly activity pursued by those lacking knowledge of the only true reality, knowledge of which was acquired by union with God. War - offensive or defensive - was a sign of spiritual immaturity...indicating failure in the goal of the '*greater jihad*', namely removal of the veil of this world's illusions. Despite the common goal of identification with prophetic experience (revelation), the profound difference in the formal appropriation of that revelation resulted in very different conclusions about violence as religious expression." (Heck, 2004, P. 100)

Hence '*jihad*' for the ascetic mystic, was taken upon oneself as an attempt to the demonstration of the divine knowledge and for the ascetic warrior, it was embraced upon a different as a way to acquire the martyr's crown for religious belief. Many have claimed that the authentic '*jihad*' [or] the '*greater*

jihad,’ is not warfare waged in the world against external adversaries but is rather an internal spiritualized war waged against the self and its base impulses (Bonner, 2006, p. 12).

Ibn Abi al Dunya narrates that the soul is an enemy and argues that Muslims must struggle not by means of their possessions and persons but against their possessions and their souls:

“Those of the believers who stay at home while suffering from no injury are not equal to those who fight in the cause of Allah with their possessions and persons. Allah has raised those who fight with their possessions and persons one degree over those who stay at home; and to each Allah has promised the fairest good. Yet Allah has granted a great reward to those who fight and not to those who stay behind.” (Cook, 2005, p. 37)

This *Qur’anic* analysis of the above verse twists the fundamental meaning from the unique intention to think on the fight against one’s lower passions of the soul. Al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi also gives emphasis on the ‘greater *jihad*’ for struggling the soul’s passions elucidating the *Qur’anic* verse 9:60:

“Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the [funds]; for those whose hearts have been [recently] reconciled [to Truth]; for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah;

and for the wayfarer: [thus is it] ordained by Allah, and Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom.”

Arabi be acquainted with this as the appropriate meaning of the phrase but uphold with the aim of that fighting is one of the ways of good work that take one nearer to God. Fighters in the way of God are known for their great deeds, as per Arabi and consequently are reinterpreted as the individuals who take part in working for the benefit of everyone, and additionally captivating their interests in fight. In the Qur’an, *jihad* including however not constrained to armed struggle, implies that one’s activity is embraced with the right intention and in this way deserving of perfect reward because of the activity’s adjustment to divine order. ‘*Jihad*’ is in this way a method for deciding one’s purity or remaining in sacredness. In short, ‘*jihad*’ in the Qur’an signals not military activity per se but a righteous or right cause before God and such a righteous or right cause before God exactly meant was envisioned in various ways by Muslims in the centuries subsequent to Islamic revelation according to social commitments and historical circumstances (Heck, 2004, P. 98).

It is stated in *sura* no. 17 of the Qur’an: “Do not kill, save where it is justified, any soul that Allah has made inviolate. We have given authority to the next-of-kin of anyone who is wrongfully killed, but let him not be excessive in the killing, for he himself has been aided.”_Obviously, there is controversy within and outside Islam regarding the meanings of ‘wrongfully’ killed and ‘excessive’ in the killing (Webel, 2004, p. 123). For example, the

Western adversaries, many present-day Islamic jihadists and other ‘terrorists’ believe that they “are not in favour of violence for its own sake...(but) are for peace...They also tend to believe that their acts of violence against ‘God’s enemies’ will be rewarded in the next world: “Life after death is forever...So it’s very important that you lived your life for Allah, so you are rewarded after death. God looks at those who sacrifice their lives in the ‘*jihad*’ with love”(Webel, 2004, p. 34). ‘*Jihad*’ connotes the fight against the dangerous and the villain, the self-restraint in which believers try to take after God’s will. It is the long lasting battle to be moral, to be righteous in the pathway of God.

Islam is a revealed religion of obedience to Allah and Allah has revealed message for human being looking for peace and mercy. Islam claims peaceful communications with other people across the world. However, there is place it may become obligatory or necessary to turn into war for self-defence where there is no other alternative. In Islamic terminology it is not termed as war but ‘*jihad*’ The important contrast between ‘war’ and ‘*jihad*’ is that the purpose of ‘*jihad*’ is to defend the Muslims and enable their entitlement to convey the Islamic message to Islam, and to spread the all inclusive message of the Prophet Mohammad revealed by God. While war is an armed conflict between nations or states by using military force. War may be for defence against aggression, a legitimate reason within certain conditions, but in broad and general historical terms it most often is waged as an aggression and for unjust personal and national vendettas; for imperial, colonial and corporate expansion

and hegemony; for the control, exploitation, plunder and theft of material and human resources; or for mere fame, glory and arrogance (Al-Sheha, P.38). However, Islam does not overlook any type of war but turns into war as a last resort or for retribution to stop the adversary.

Thus from the above verses it is quite clear that Islam is not the religion of violence or war but ‘religion of peace’ and its basic concept *jihad* has a good contribution for spreading the world peace, communal harmony and universal brotherhood among the world people. Qur’an gives more emphasis on ‘greater *jihad*’ than ‘lesser *jihad*’ and allows “...Muslims to physically defend their lives, properties and land against any aggression, and also to fight for ending tyranny against the oppressed men, women and children...” (Rizvi, p. 9). There is no place of violence or war in Islam or in any other religions either it may be Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism but for self-defence it is permitted. No religions permit killing of any people. Every religion tries to live peacefully making communal bond of love among the world people. And it is said that there is no compulsion in religion. Religion is the inner belief or a private affair. Everyone is free to choose any religion and can worship any God whom one is ready to accept. As the *Qur’an* says: “Let there be no compulsion in religion...” (2:256) and “To you be your Way, and to me mine” (109:6). These verses indicate that religion must be practised voluntarily and willingly and there is no place of force in religion. The *Qur’an* gives absolute freedom of religion and recommends people to take care of other people equitably, eliminating all forms of violence as well as force.

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