

Peace and Jihad in Islam

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A short text that discusses the various facets of "Jihad" according to the Qur'an, and addresses the issues raised by critics who quote Qur'anic verses to argue that Islam is intrinsically non-peaceful.

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Introduction

On September 11, 2001, a few individuals hijacked four civilian airplanes and used them as weapons to create terror in United States, especially on the two World Trade Center buildings. All the crew and passengers in the four planes as well as about three thousand civilians lost their lives in those attacks.

The foreign policies of the United States of America *vis-à-vis* the Muslim countries do not justify that American civilians in the planes and the World Trade Center buildings be killed. This is not what Islam teaches. Look at the instructions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during war-time: he clearly forbade the killing of the old, the children, and the women.¹ Those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center towers and in the planes were all civilians, and quite a few of them were Muslims.

All Muslim leaders in the United States of America, Canada, and the entire world clearly condemned the hijacking that was committed in the United States as act of terrorism which is not acceptable by Islam.

This condemnation is based on the universal value of sanctity for human life. The holy Qur'an relates the story of the first murder in human history, that of the two sons of Adam in which Cain (Qabil) murdered his brother Abel (Habil). This is in Chapter 5 of the Qur'an, verses 27 to 31.

At the conclusion of this story, Almighty God says:

“Whosoever kills a person without any reason (of murder or mischief in the earth), it is as though he has killed all the people. And whosoever saves a single life, it is as though he has saved all the people.” (Surah al-Maaida, 5:32)

It is clear from this verse that unless a person is put on trial and proven to have murdered someone, he or she cannot be killed – and that killing an innocent person is tantamount to killing all humans.

[1.](#) Hurr al-‘Amili, Wasa’il ush-Shi’a, vol. 11, p. 43.

So What About Jihad?

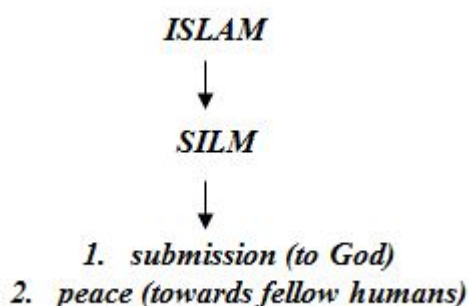
One of the ironies of this era is that although the means of communication have greatly advanced, people still have difficulty in a meaningful communication and dialogue with other cultures and religions. There is a lot of misinformation and misunderstanding of the Islamic faith.

Many individuals, laymen as well as experts, have tried to link 9/11 to the concept of *jihad* in Islam. In one of the famous radio talk shows of Toronto, soon after 9–11, I heard one caller saying that what happened on that day was 10% terrorism and 90% Islam. A fundamentalist Christian leader in the US said on his TV show that “Probably Muhammad was a terrorist.” So it is important to talk about *jihad* in Islam.

Islam Is The Religion Of Peace

Islam is primarily a religion of peace. Its name “Islam” comes from “*silm*” which means two things: one is “submitting to God” and the second is “peace”. Both meanings are inter-twinned.

Whenever Muslims meet one another, they use the greeting of peace: “*as-salamu ‘alaykum* – peace be upon you”, and the other person responds by saying “*‘alaykumus salam* – upon you be peace.”

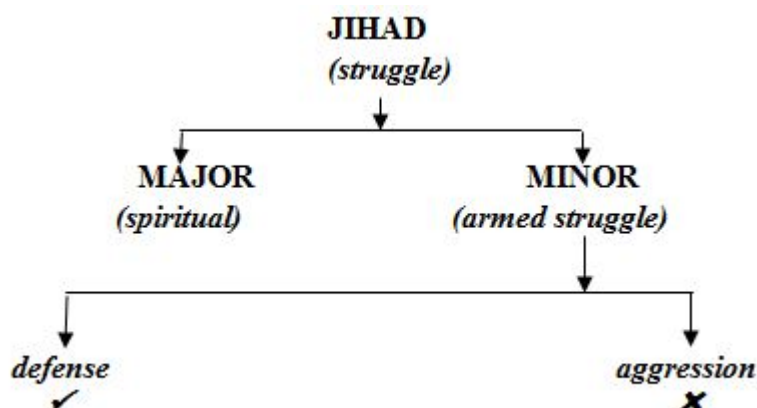


The daily prayers begin with praising God as “Mercy and Beneficent” and ends with the greeting of peace for all.

The Concept Of Jihad

The concept of “jihad” needs to be understood clearly. Many people in the media take Qur’anic text out of context. And so let us see: what is the meaning of jihad?

The word “*jihad*” does not mean “holy war”. This is a Western rendering of a broader concept in Islamic teaching. Ask any expert of Arabic language and he will tell you that “jihad” does not mean “holy war”. The term “holy war” has come from the Christian concept of “just war,” and has been used loosely as an Islamic term since the days of the Crusades.



So What Does “Jihad” Mean?

In Arabic language, the word jihad literally means striving and working hard for something. In Islamic terminology, it retains the literal meaning in two different dimensions, which are expressed by “major jihad” and “minor jihad”.

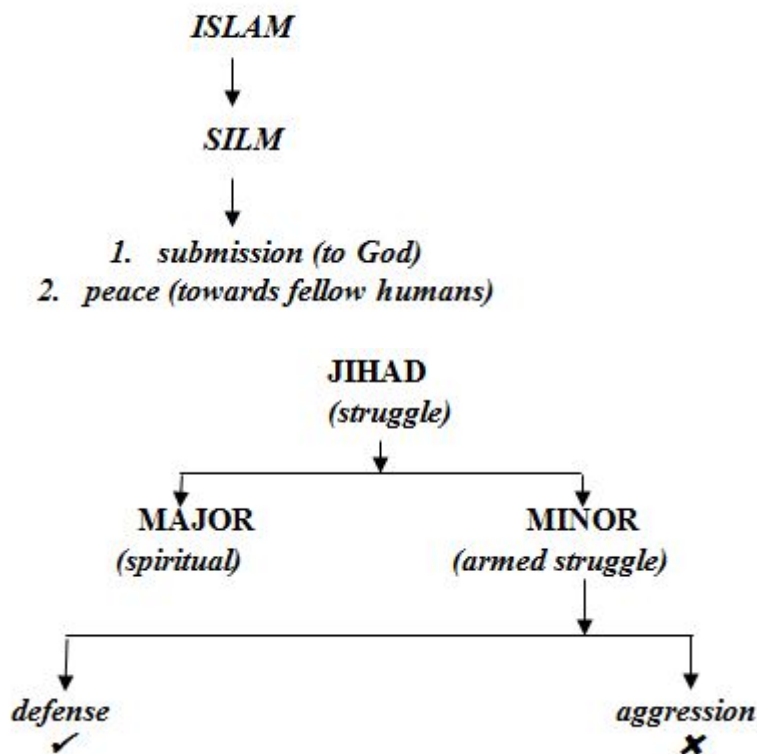
The **major jihad** is known as the spiritual struggle, a struggle between two powers within ourselves: the soul and the body. The conscience is in conflict with the bodily desires. This spiritual conflict is an ongoing jihad within each one of us. Islam expects its followers to give preference to the soul and the conscience over the body and its desires.

The fasting in the month of Ramadhan is an example of the annual training for this major jihad.

The **minor jihad** is the armed struggle. However, that does not automatically mean unjustified use of violence. The minor jihad may be divided into two: aggression and defense. Aggression against any people is not permitted in Islam; however, defense is an absolute right of every individual and nation.

Islam has allowed the minor jihad only to defend the Muslim people and their land, and to maintain peace in Muslim societies.

Image:



Jihad In The Qur'an

The Initial Verses

Let us now go to some verses from the Qur'an.

The first battle fought by the Prophet and his followers was a war of defense. It is known as the Battle of Badr, a place that is near the city of Medina (the Prophet's city in Arabia). This was a battle in which the Prophet came with his followers to face the enemy force that had come all the way from Mecca that was still controlled by the infidels.

The first verse of the minor jihad, the armed struggle, revealed at that time is in Chapter 22, Surah Al-Hajj, of the Qur'an, verses 39–40. It clearly explains the purpose of the minor jihad:

"Permission is granted to those who are fighting because they have been oppressed...those who have been expelled from their homes without any just cause..." (Surah al-Hajj, 22:39–40)

Again, referring to the non-believers of Mecca who waged war after war against the Prophet and his followers in Medina, the Qur'an in Chapter 2, Surah al-Baqara, verse 190, says:

"Fight in the way of God those who are fighting against you; and do not exceed (the limits). Verily Allah does not love those who exceed (the limits)." (Surah al-Baqara, 2: 190)

In this verse, the talk is about responding to a war by defending yourself; there is no talk of initiating aggression at all. Even in the defensive mode of struggle, Almighty God warns the Muslims that they should not “exceed” beyond the proper limits.

Islam teaches that Muslims should be strong in order to defend themselves, but that does not mean they have to become aggressive and unjust. In Chapter 8, Surah al-Anfal, verses 60–61 of the Qur’an, God has provided this general guidance very clearly when He addresses Muslims in the following way:

“Prepare against them (i.e., the enemy) with whatever force and trained horses you can in order to frighten thereby Allah’s enemy, your enemy, and others besides them who you do not know but Allah knows them.” (Surah al-Anfal, 8:60)

After giving this general guidance of being strong and prepared to defend ourselves, the verse goes on:

“But if they (the enemies) incline to peace, then you (also) incline to it, and put your trust in Allah...” (Surah al-Anfal, 8:61)

In short, Islam wants Muslims to be strong so that others would not bully them; but then they have to extend the hand of peace even towards their enemies if there is an inclination of peace on the enemy’s part.

The Problem Of Text & Context

Some writers and speakers quote the Qur’anic verses out of context and try to blame Islam for promoting violence and terrorism. They take a “text” and use it outside its “context”.

It is just like someone searches through the Bible and picks the following words or sentences to prove that the Bible promotes violence:

“Take all the leader of these people, kill them.” (Numbers 25:7)

“Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.” (Numbers 31:17–18)

“Kill every male and every woman who is not a virgin.” (Judges 21:11)

No fair-minded person will accept such “out of context” presentation of the Biblical verses. Yet we see many Christian evangelists and missionaries do exactly the same to the Qur’an without any hesitation.

So let us look at some examples of taking the Qur’anic “text” outside its “context”.

First Example

Chapter 2 (Surah al-Baqara), verse 191 is quoted as follows:

“Kill them wherever you find them.”(2: 191)

To understand the full context of this verse, read verses 190 to 193 together:

“And fight in the way of God those who are fighting against you, and do not exceed the limits, surely God does not love those who exceed the limits” (2: 190).

“And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drove you out—persecution is severer than slaughter. And do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca] until they fight with you in it; but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers” (2: 191).

“But if they desist, then surely God is Forgiving, Merciful” (2: 192).

“And fight them until there is no persecution and religion should be only for God; but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors” (2: 193).

The context clarifies that the verse 191 is allowing Muslims of Medina to defend themselves against the aggression of the unbelievers of Mecca. It surely does not say that Muslims should go around the world killing any infidel that they find!

Second Example

Chapter 4 (Surah an-Nisaa), verse 74 which supposedly encourages blood shedding:

“So let those fight in the way of God who are willing to sell this world’s life for the hereafter; and whoever fights in the way of God, then be he slain or be he victorious, We shall grant him a mighty reward.” (Surah an-Nisaa, 4:74)

Those who quote this verse, conveniently leave out the next verse no. 75 which explains the purpose and justification for the minor jihad:

“And what is the matter with you that you do not fight in the way of God for [the sake of] the oppressed men, women, and children who pray: ‘Our Lord, take us out of this town whose people are oppressors, and appoint for us from Thee a guardian and give us from Thee a helper...” (Surah an-Nisaa, 4:75)

This verse is clearly urging the Muslim to stand up for *the oppressed men, women and children*. Should not divine religions defend the oppressed men, women and children?

Third Example

Chapter 9 (Surah at-Tawba), verse 12:

“Fight the leaders of unbelief”(9: 12).

This is just part of the whole passage where God talks about the Muslims in Medina and their truce agreement with the unbelievers of Mecca. See verses 12 to 14:

“And if they break their oaths after their agreement and revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief –surely their oaths are of no value– so that they may desist” (9: 12).

“What is the matter with you that you do not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Prophet [from Mecca], and they attacked you first? Do you fear them? But God is most deserving that you should fear Him, if you are believers” (9: 13).

“Fight them; God will punish them by your hands and bring them to disgrace, and assist you against them, heal the hearts of a believing people, remove the rage of their hearts, and God turns (mercifully) to whom He pleases, and Allah is Knowing, Wise” (9: 14).

The context clearly gives the right of defence to the Muslim but, in no way, does it promote aggression.

Fourth Example

Chapter 9 (Surah at-Tawba), verse 36:

“Fight the polytheists all together” (9:36).

In reality, this sentence is part of an entire verse in which God talks about the sacredness of four of the twelve months in which fighting is forbidden. Then it says:

“And fight the polytheists all together as they fight you all together; and know that God is with those who guard (evil)” (9:36).

Those who like to take this Qur’anic verse out of its context conveniently miss out the part “as they fight you all together”. As you see, this verse is also responding to the aggression started by the polytheists against the Muslims; it does not talk about initiating a war.

Conclusion

From these examples, it is quite clear that Islam is not talking about the minor jihad for the sake of aggression; rather it is allowing the Muslims to physically defend their lives, properties, and lands against any aggression, and also to fight for ending tyranny against the oppressed men, women and children.

The verses regarding the idol-worshippers of Mecca are very specific and related to that time period. Let us again look at Chapter 22, verses 39–40:

“Permission (to fight) is granted to those who are fighting because they have been oppressed, and most surely God is well able to assist them. Those who have been expelled from their homes

without a just cause except that they say, ‘Our Lord is Allah’” (Surah al-Hajj, 22:39).

“Had there not been God’s repelling some people by others, certainly the monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which God’s name is mentioned would have been demolished. And surely God will help him who helps His cause; most surely Allah is Strong, Mighty” (Surah al-Hajj, 22:40).

Islam deals with the realistic human society and not with the idealistic society. In the words of Dr. Sayyid Hussain Nasr, “Muslims view the Christian ethics as being too sublime for ordinary human beings to follow; it seems that the injunction to turn the other cheek was being meant only for saints. Christian people over the centuries have not shown any more restraint in war than have non-Christians. The ideal preached and the practice followed have often little to do with each other.”¹

Let us conclude with the chapter 109 of the Qur’an:

“Say: O those who do not believe! I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor am I going to worship what you worship. Nor are you going to worship what I worship. You shall have your religion, and I shall have my religion.” (Surah al-Kafiroon, 109: 1-6)

¹. See in Hans Kung & Jurgen Moltmann, eds., Christianity Among World Religions (Edinburgh: Clark, 1986) p. 7.

Misuse Of “Jihad”

Just because the term “jihad” is misused by some Muslims for their political agenda, Muslims don’t have to abandon this noble concept of their faith. While talking about jihad, I have heard many Muslims describing only the major (spiritual) jihad and shying away from the minor jihad in the sense of armed struggle for defense. As Muslims, we stand by our teachings and don’t need to apologize for it even if some misguided souls hijack the terms of our faith for their own political ends.

It is not only the likes of Bin Laden who hijack and misuse the noble terms of Islam; we have even seen the government of the United States of America promoting the concept of minor jihad when it suited its own geopolitical interests.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 80’s, the U.S. Agency for International Development spent millions of dollars to supply Afghan school children with textbooks filled with violent images and “militant Islamic” teachings. Published in the dominant Afghan languages of Dari and Pashtu, these textbooks were developed in the early 1980s under an AID grant to the University of Nebraska–Omaha and its Centre for Afghanistan Studies. The agency spent \$51 million on the university’s education programs in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1994.

The primers, which were filled with talk of *jihad* and featured drawings of guns, bullets, soldiers and mines, have served since then as the Afghan school system's core curriculum. Unlike the children in the rest of the world whose math textbooks have pictures of apples and oranges, the Afghan children were taught to count with illustrations showing tanks, missiles and land mines.^{[1](#)}

And so when it suited its strategic interests, the United States of America promoted the culture of jihad among the Afghan children in the 80's and President Reagan even welcomed the Afghan "mujahideen" in the White House. (Even the Taliban used the American-produced books, though the radical movement scratched out human faces in keeping with its strict fundamental code.) Now that that culture of violence has come to haunt it, the US administration is absolutely against the idea of jihad and expects Muslims to abandon that concept in totality.

Muslims cannot be expected to change their views on the noble concept of jihad just because of some misguided Muslims or some world powers' misuse of that term. Muslims should strongly condemn the misuse of jihad and confidently affirm the concept of jihad as explained in the Qur'an and the noble examples of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

^{[1](#)}. Information on US financed "jihadi culture" is based on the article of Joe Stephens and David B. Ottaway, "From U.S., the ABC's of Jihad" in Washington Post, March 23, 2002, page A01.

The so-called "jihadi culture" (which should be rightly named as "kalashnikov culture" of Afghanistan) not only came to haunt US itself; it also breed militancy in the sectarian Sunni group of Pakistan like Sipah-e Sahaba and now shows its ugly face, through the vehicle of al-Qaeda, in Iraq also.

Media & Stereotyping The Muslims

In light of what we have said above, there is no justification in linking 9/11 to the concept of the minor jihad in Islam.

However, we are deeply saddened to see that certain segments of the media, especially the radio talk shows, are still fuelling the hatred against the Muslims, the Arabs, and the great monotheistic faith of Islam. This is in spite of the fact that Muslims have universally condemned the act of terror of September 11th in which innocent lives were lost.

Targeting the Muslims or the Arabs based on guilt-by-association is absolutely wrong. The double standard in the media is really appalling. Just think for a moment:

When a bomb exploded in early days of September 2001 in Northern Ireland near a Catholic school in a Protestant neighbourhood, no one in the media blamed the entire Protestant community as "terrorists

and murderers”. When the IRA committed acts of terror in Northern Ireland or United Kingdom, no one in the western media labeled the Catholic faith “as the religion of terrorism”.

When Dr. Goldstein, a Jewish settler in Israel, entered the mosque in Hebron few years ago and gunned down Palestinian worshippers, no one said that all Jewish people are “terrorists”. When Serbians brutally massacred Muslims in Bosnia, the media never blamed the Serbian Orthodox Church for it even though some priests of that church used to bless the Serbian militia before they embarked on executing the Muslim prisoners. YET we see that when a few Arabs or Muslims commit acts of terror, all the Muslims and all the Arabs are automatically branded as “terrorists and murderers.” As Muslims, we ask the media for fairness, and nothing more.

The media should realize that the hijackers who used those planes as weapons did not only hijack the planes and kill thousands of innocent people in United States of America; they also victimized a billion Muslims who are now being labeled as “murderers and terrorists”.

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