

JIHAD
without
VIOLENCE



Dr. Ahmed Afzaal

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

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By Ahmed Afzaal

First Edition, May 2010

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Published by Islamic Organization of North America (IONA)
28630 Ryan Road, Warren, MI 48092
Phone: 586-558-6900; Email: publications@ionaonline.org

ISBN: 978-0-9845941-1-5

Printed in the United States of America.

The purpose of this essay is two-fold: first, to explain the nature and purpose of war within the larger framework of Islāmic teachings; and, second, to examine nonviolence as a realistic contemporary alternative to armed resistance, particularly for Islāmic movements.

Struggle

Even when they do not fully appreciate its significance, Muslims all over the world are at least vaguely aware that jihād is an important element in the Islāmic tradition, that somehow it is essential to the very definition of a believer. As any perusal of the foundational Islāmic sources—the Qur’ān and that Ḥadīth—will demonstrate, jihād is one of the central themes animating the Islāmic experience from its very inception; it is neither a peripheral concept nor an optional practice. Indeed, jihād is so central an element in Islām that a person’s very identity as a believing, practicing Muslim becomes seriously compromised in the absence of an active engagement in jihād.

While the Islāmic tradition presents jihād as an essential part of Islāmic worldview, ethics, experience, and identity, outside of the Muslim community the word jihād frequently carries a heavy load of negative baggage. If a survey is conducted in North America today, it is likely to show that the word jihād has overwhelmingly negative connotations— in many people’s mind, this word evokes ideas of fanaticism, irrational hatred, and indiscriminate violence. One may say that jihād today has become a paradoxical concept for many Muslims, in that it can make us feel proud and embarrassed at the same time.

Among Western observers, harsh and unsympathetic portrayals of the relationship between Islām and warfare are nothing new. Accusations regarding the violent nature of Islām have been made countless times throughout the Middle Ages and during the era of European colonialism, and they continue to be made today

in the postcolonial period. Indeed, such accusations have become only more widespread and more strident in the aftermath of 9/11. Because of the frequency with which these allegations have been made by Western observers, and because of the much more brutal and widespread violence that has been perpetrated by the very nations that these self-righteous critics represent, it is perfectly understandable why Muslims have often reacted with suspicion, irritation, and even anger. As we shall see later in this essay, the problem is not exclusively on the side of biased and hypocritical Westerners; at least part of the problem lies within the Islāmic tradition and, more importantly, in the manner in which many contemporary Muslims are approaching their tradition. Recognizing this fact implies that we can do a great deal to address the problem; an accurate analysis will empower us to act proactively, rather than blaming others or feeling sorry for ourselves.

What, exactly, is jihād? Arabic lexicographers inform us that the word jihād is a verbal noun derived from the three-letter root J-H-D, and that words derived from this root convey the sense of struggling, striving, exerting, straining, wearing oneself out, doing one's utmost, applying oneself strenuously, etc. As such, the word "struggle" appears to be an appropriate translation for the Arabic word jihād.

At the basic linguistic level, the word jihād is morally neutral. The Qur'ān uses this word with both positive and negative connotations, because one can struggle for a morally dubious cause as well as for a morally uplifting one. The latter, desirable kind of struggle is often qualified in the Qur'ān with the phrase *fi sabīl Allāh*, in the path of God. Since life on earth is challenging, unceasing struggle is a necessary part of the human condition; to this palpable truth the Qur'ān adds a crucial qualification—people should struggle in the path of God. The metaphor of "path" implies the metaphor of "journey." If human life is a journey, then the "path of God" would be that way of living which leads to God. As such, one's struggle ought to be for the sake of

God, aimed at seeking what God wants and avoiding what God dislikes. That is the only desirable, morally uplifting kind of jihād. Insofar as one's struggle is adulterated by other, less edifying motives—personal aggrandizement, for instance—one's jihād becomes a blameworthy endeavor.

Submission

In the larger framework of Islāmic teachings, the importance of jihād is closely tied with the human need to cultivate peace, which is achieved through our willing submission to God. The Arabic word islām is best rendered into English as “submission,” while a closely related word salām means “peace” and “wholeness.” The Qur’ān teaches that it is impossible for a person to overcome the state of fragmentation, and to achieve the peace that comes from wholeness, without a willing submission to God. Submission is another word for developing harmony with God's moral will. This harmony, however, is impossible to achieve without undertaking a great deal of struggle. Effort is required to resist and overcome the forces that pull us away from God, that lead us further from the path of God, be these forces within a person's soul or out there in society.

Strictly speaking, then, jihād cannot be conceived as one particular item in the list of all the obligations that human beings owe to their Creator. Instead, jihād is the ever-present struggle that underlies—and allows—the realization of any and all such obligations. This makes jihād an indispensable part of being and becoming a muslim, i.e., a person who willingly submits to God's moral will. Put differently, submission constitutes the appropriate manner for engaging the journey that is human life; jihād is the unending struggle that people must undertake in order to stay on this path; and God is the ultimate destination.

The goal of submission requires an investment of struggle. This

does not mean, however, that submission to God is contrary to the natural human inclinations, or that one has to suppress one's true nature in order to be a muslim. On the contrary, our innate disposition or *fiṭrah* is programmed to recognize, love, worship, and seek harmony with the Creator. Indeed, if there were no inner or outer forces pulling us in the opposite direction, our submission to the moral will of God would be an absolutely effortless and blissful experience. Since there are, in fact, opposing forces that resist the full expression of our innate disposition, we must engage in *jihād* so as to resist and overcome their influences in order to pursue our goal of submission. The opposing forces are here not to defeat us but to help us grow. It is, of course, possible to reach a stage of self-growth where submission becomes as natural as breathing, as effortless as blinking; that does not eliminate the need for *jihād*, however, since opposing forces will continue to operate both inside and outside ourselves.

Language

Given this background, we are justified in asking as to what went wrong? How did *jihād* become a word that many Muslims are reluctant to use in public? The negative baggage that the word *jihād* is made to carry these days has resulted from a variety of factors. One of these factors is our sloppy use of language; specifically, our use of the word *jihād* in the sense of “war,” and even “holy war.” This usage is misleading, but the Western media is only partly responsible for the confusion.

While the original sense of the word *jihād* has no connotation of organized violence, the Qur'ānic discourse does occasionally link *jihād* and warfare simply because war necessarily involves exertion and effort. The Qur'ān mentions or implies several varieties of *jihād* in the path of God, and war is clearly one of them. At the same time, the Qur'ān never conflates the two concepts, for the usual Qur'ānic term for warfare is actually *qitāl* (and sometimes *ḥarb*). The conceptual relationship between *jihād* and *qitāl*

is that of partial overlap, not that of complete identity. While *qitāl* always requires *jihād*, not every variety of *jihād* is a war! Indeed, the vast majority of the forms and instances of *jihād*—as mentioned or implied in the Qur’ānic discourse—do not involve any violence.

To be absolutely clear on this issue, consider the fact that every human undertaking involves struggle—all of our deliberate actions, from getting out of bed to balancing a checkbook, require some investment of effort—and yet, the vast majority of human undertakings are not violent. Conflating the general concept of struggle with the particular concept of armed conflict constitutes an abuse of both language and logic, for it involves equating a single member of a large set with the set itself. In other contexts we may find such linguistic confusions to be laughable, except that the consequences of this particular confusion have been quite serious. The Qur’ān, in any case, is innocent of the responsibility for causing the conflation between *jihād* and warfare.

It is also clear from the Qur’ān that just as *jihād* may be undertaken for the right reasons as well as for wrong ones, war too can be either moral or immoral depending on why it is fought as well as how. The careless and imprecise manner in which some Muslims have used the key terms of their tradition is exemplified by the assumption, uncritically held in some circles even today, that any war in which Muslims are involved is *jihād fī sabīl Allāh*, representing authentic Islāmic piety almost by definition and regardless of the aims and methods involved. The Qur’ān stands as a witness against such thinking; in the Qur’ānic perspective, a given struggle may or may not be in the path of God; a given struggle may or may not involve war; and a given war may or may not be moral. Forgetting these crucial distinctions has contributed to the tragic paradox that one of the highest of human virtues—*jihād fī Sabīl Allāh*—is being equated today with some of the worst atrocities against humanity.

It is important to underscore, then, that *qitāl* is only one among the numerous forms of *jihād* discussed in the Qurʾān, and, for this reason, it is a flagrant error to use the words *jihād* and *qitāl* (or *jihād* and war) as if they were synonymous. While *jihād* must be undertaken at all times and under all conditions—since *jihād* is what makes submission possible, and since submission is required in every moment—this is obviously not true of *qitāl*; warfare is always and everywhere an exceptional state.

The confusion caused by equating the term *jihād* with the term *qitāl* has a long history, but its origin can be traced to the early Muslim discourse on jurisprudence. As Muslim jurists appropriated the term *jihād* and employed it freely in their discussions of the permissibility and limits of warfare, the semantic field of this key Qurʾānic term began to shrink drastically in the Muslim imagination. By the time our scholars compiled the classical works on Ḥadīth and Fiqh, the word *jihād* had already become restricted to war; this is precisely why Muslims who wished to emphasize the inner, spiritual aspects of *jihād* were forced to use a different but related term, i.e., *mujāhadah*. Furthermore, many Muslim rulers who wished to extend the boundaries of their political domains found it both necessary and convenient to legitimize their imperial conquests by invoking the powerful symbol of *jihād*, thereby contributing to the narrowing down of its meaning. In our own times, this tendency to conflate the two concepts has resulted in serious misunderstandings in the minds of both Muslims and non-Muslims; so much so that even armed struggles for national liberation in the Muslim world have been routinely labeled *jihād fī sabīl Allāh* without a second thought—even when such struggles break many of the rules of warfare set by the classical jurists.

Generally speaking, the Qurʾān does not recognize any intrinsic moral value in the violent acts committed by humans against each other. Violence is not a divinely mandated part of human existence, nor is it integral to our innate disposition. On the contrary, violence is an unfortunate and undesirable consequence of

human folly, the result of human forgetfulness and heedlessness. And yet, the Qur'ān never issues an absolute and unconditional prohibition on warfare, for it recognizes that armed resistance may become desirable, or even mandatory, under certain conditions.

Reform

What is the relationship between the general concept of struggle in the path of God and the particular concept of armed resistance in the path of God? The Qur'ān clearly prohibits aggression, i.e., initiating armed hostilities against a non-threatening party. At the same time, it openly permits, and even requires, the use of military force for the purpose of resisting and repelling another party's aggression—some things are worth fighting for. This teaching is based on common-sense and on natural law. It is a widely accepted principle that every community has the right to defend itself against outside attack, but that a group of people minding its own business and posing no threat to anyone must remain secure from violence. This principle has found a modern expression in the Charter of the United Nations, which explicitly prohibits wars of aggression while allowing the use of military force when used solely in self-defense. In this respect, the Qur'ānic teaching is identical to what most cultures have recognized throughout history to be a just and moral principle, even if many of them have failed to practice it in a consistent manner.

There is a particular background to the Qur'ānic teachings on the topic of qitāl. For this reason, the full significance of these teachings cannot be appreciated without an acute awareness of the historical conditions under which they were first articulated.

It is important to recognize at the outset that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) was no ordinary religious teacher or holy man, and that his aim was not limited to preaching a message of

personal piety and other-worldly salvation. Among other things, his mission included the establishment of a new community—the ummah—that would act as an instrument for changing the world in accordance with the basic imperative of the revelation that he had received, i.e., submission to the moral will of God. The moral will of God is known to all human beings through their inner experience of conscience, and, in the case of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW), it was known most clearly through the divine revelations that dawned upon his heart in the form of the Qur’ānic discourse.

For Prophet Muḥammad (SAW), the encounter with divine revelation was a momentous experience, one whose consequences would spill out immediately into his surroundings—seventh-century Arabia—and would continue to reverberate forcefully in subsequent centuries and all across the world. The basic imperative that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) received and conveyed to his followers was islām, i.e., willing submission to the moral will of God; coupled with the imperative of jihād, i.e., an unceasing exertion for the purpose of actualizing the desired state of submission. Imperatives that dawn upon the heart from the transcendent realm are necessarily experienced with an absolute intensity; entirely absent from his prophetic consciousness was the modern—and somewhat dubious—distinction between the public and private spheres. This meant that the jihād that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his followers had to undertake could not have been limited to the personal or individual level alone. From the very beginning, the message that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) proclaimed was such that it could not have been faithfully realized in history without a struggle that embraced the political dimension of life. As is well known, his preaching attracted sharp opposition that soon grew into outright conflict; the response could not have been otherwise given this radical and uncompromising feature of his message.

Since the modern distinction between the public and private spheres was irrelevant to the mission of Prophet Muḥammad

(SAW), imagining him as an ordinary religious teacher or holy man would preclude a true appreciation for the role of warfare in his career. Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) was interested not simply in the moral and spiritual growth of his followers but also in bringing about wide-ranging changes in the world at large. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that in his prophetic consciousness these two aims formed a seamless unity. The divinely mandated mission of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) required him to establish ‘adl (justice) among people, to eliminate fasād (corruption) from the earth, and to bring about iṣlāḥ (reform) in society. The Qur’ānic revelation demanded not only that people change themselves but also that they undertake the struggle to change the world. Obviously, the ummah could not have followed such unmistakably “worldly” imperatives without including the political dimension of life within its zone of concern. This made opposition and conflict inevitable, as explained below.

All societies function on the basis of some form of voluntary or involuntary consensus over basic principles; these principles are manifested in particular ways of feeling, thinking, and acting which, in turn, form the supporting framework for social structures and institutions. Every society has a bias towards keeping its structures and institutions stable, which generally means keeping them just the way they are. Any demand for change is always the result of widespread dissatisfaction with the existing structures and institutions, or at least with the way they are perceived to be currently functioning. On the other hand, any set of structures and institutions endures at least partly because a large or small group of individuals benefits from it in a disproportionate way. This group of individuals has a natural stake in the continuation of the status quo and in rejecting, denouncing, and suppressing all demands for change. Any collective struggle aiming at significant reforms in the structures and institutions of a given society would therefore face stiff opposition and resistance. If the movement is strong enough to persist, conflict will ensue.

Throughout history, all societies have sought to restrict change,

or at least to slow it down considerably. To do so, every society has evolved various mechanisms to convince its members of the legitimacy or necessity of the existing arrangement, as well as to threaten or punish the few who dare to disagree with the social consensus or try to take matters in their own hands. Resistance to change comes primarily (but not exclusively) from the particular individuals who have the highest stake in maintaining “business as usual.” Those who benefit the most from a given set of social structures and institutions are usually the same individuals who enjoy the most power, including the power to use coercive force in the form of organized violence. Consequently, any collective struggle aiming to bring about significant reform in the existing structures and institutions will be threatened, sooner or later, with organized violence.

Warfare

The above scenario is generic, but it applies to the life and career of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) with particular clarity. In his divinely mandated struggle to establish justice, eliminate corruption, and bring about reform, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) faced vigorous opposition from a variety of directions, particularly from the top elite of his own tribe of Quraysh. This opposition increased in direct proportion to the widening of the Prophet’s zone of influence. In the initial years of his mission, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his followers faced ridicule and taunting, which later grew into physical abuse and economic boycott, eventually turning into overt and organized violence. As the early Muslims grew increasingly cohesive and influential, the level of violence against them intensified by the same proportion.

In Makkah, the Prophet (SAW) and his followers faced the growing opposition in the spirit of active nonviolence. They controlled their emotions by cultivating patience and perseverance, exercising the great virtue of ṣabr. They resisted the temptation to retaliate physically even when the weakest members of their

fledgling community were tortured in public and even killed. They neither gave in to the opposition nor gave up their commitment. The threats and punishments they received did not break their resolve; instead, they used the opposition's violence to learn patience and self-control, strengthen their characters, and become increasingly firm in their convictions.

These early Muslims prevailed through nonviolent resistance partly because their opposition was relatively hesitant and disorganized. After about twelve years of attempting to suppress an idea whose time had obviously arrived, the elite of the Quraysh finally decided that it was politically feasible to assassinate Prophet Muḥammad (SAW). This opportunity came too late for them, however, for by that time Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) had already found a sanctuary for his ummah. A major shift occurred in the year 622 in the form of the hijrah—the migration of Muslims from Makkah to the oasis town of Madīna in the north. The assassination plot meant that the opposition had become desperate, willing to do anything; but the hijrah meant that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) was now in a position to establish his ummah as an independent community transcending tribal boundaries. This new situation was intolerable for the opposition, whose natural response to the hijrah was to escalate the conflict by organizing itself into an overtly aggressive armed force. Instead of abuse and torture, now there will be war.

There was nothing unexpected in this development. The establishment of an independent community and a proto-state in Madīnah posed a serious challenge to the stability of social structures and institutions across Arabia. Reform was in the air, which raised the level of anxiety among the elite of the Quraysh to a new height. From their viewpoint, these elite were involved in the struggle for the survival of a system put in place by their great forefathers; they were defending what they saw as good and necessary, even sacred. The desire for self-preservation is found not only in animals but also in social structures and institutions. To defend itself against the possibility of change, the status quo

had no option but to become more ferocious, more determined, more organized, and more violent.

This must have been obvious to Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) as he arrived in Madīnah and began immediately to build an independent community and polity. He was too farsighted a leader not to have anticipated an escalation from the leaders of the Quraysh. In fact, he must have been aware even before the hijrah that the migration of his followers would only intensify the conflict rather than bring it to an end. He must have known that his opponents would not sit idly by, watching him establish and expand a community whose beliefs and practices were at odds with their entrenched political and economic interests.

The hijrah, then, represented both an escalation of the conflict as well as a major shift in how it would be carried out. Instead of verbal or physical abuse aimed at individual converts, the opposition would now respond militarily against the entire Muslim community—as well as against any tribe that dared to support the ummah. This implied that Muslims, if they were to survive, must be fully prepared to defend themselves against the expected onslaught. After the hijrah, it would no longer be possible for Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his followers to continue their mission by relying on the same strategy of nonviolent resistance they had been practicing in Makkah. Not to change the strategy at that point would have been suicidal. On the eve of the hijrah, therefore, it was already a foregone conclusion that violent conflict would occur very soon.

In the immediate wake of his arrival in Madīnah, or perhaps during the journey itself, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) received an explicit divine permission to fight back, as recorded in the Qur’ān. What followed was a series of armed conflicts between Muslims and the Quraysh, along with their respective allies. The state of war came to end several years later in a peace treaty negotiated between the two parties at Ḥudaybiyyah. As the Prophet’s zone

of influence kept widening during this period, the Quraysh kept losing their hold over the Arab tribes until the triumph of the new faith and the new ummah became an indubitable reality.

It was under very specific historical circumstances, then, that jihād took a form in which it had not previously manifested in the Prophet's life, i.e., as armed resistance. Understanding the historical circumstances within which qitāl became a divinely mandated obligation for Muslims is an essential prerequisite for appreciating its relative importance in the larger framework of Islāmic tradition. We too often forget that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) lived in a specific period of history and in a specific part of the world. This means that the realities of seventh-century Arabia formed the actual context in which Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) proclaimed the message of the Qur'ān and in which he carried out his divinely inspired struggle. As a real person who lived in the real world, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) embodied the imperative of submission to the moral will of God in accordance with the specific needs and peculiar limitations of his immediate surroundings. Given his specific historical circumstances, therefore, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) had no choice after the hijrah but to organize and lead his followers in numerous armed encounters—the unacceptable alternative to this was to give up the mission altogether.

In order to remain true to the divine imperative he had received, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) not only had to fight in several battles, he had to motivate his followers to risk their lives as well. There would have been no Muslim ummah today had the early Muslims failed to demonstrate extraordinary courage, resilience, and perseverance on the battlefield. Not just once, but on several occasions after the hijrah the very survival of Muslims as an independent community came to depend on their ability to outfight their opponents. Given the brutal social conditions under which Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) had proclaimed the Qur'ānic revelation, it is fair to say that that revelation may not have survived, let alone established as a concrete historical reality, had it not

been for the willingness of his companions to repeatedly take the ultimate risk.

Tradition

In light of the historical circumstances under which the duty of qitāl first emerged, it is hardly surprising that the Islāmic tradition has paid extraordinary attention to its various dimensions. To begin with, the Qur’ānic narrative itself emphasizes the importance of qitāl as a divinely ordained obligation, and the same emphasis is reflected in the Ḥadīth literature. As any informed Muslim already knows, both the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth contain extensive discussions of this form of jihād—why it is necessary for the faithful to participate in armed conflict, what heavenly rewards await those who risk their lives for the sake of God, why desertion from the battlefield is such a serious offence, etc. After the hijrah, it had soon become incumbent on all able-bodied Muslim men to risk their lives on the battlefield whenever the need arose to defend the community. Those who tried to evade this obligation were duly criticized in the Qur’ān, either as having insufficient faith or as suffering from the spiritual disease of nifāq—hypocrisy. The word hypocrites was used by the Qur’ān for those free-riders who wished to gain material benefit from their membership in the ummah but who were, at the same time, unwilling to make the required contributions, such as sacrifice any economic advantage or endanger their lives on the battlefield. On the other hand, divine forgiveness and great rewards are promised in the Qur’ān to those who participated in the battles for the sake of God—especially to those who suffered injury and death.

The Islāmic tradition in the post-Qur’ānic period continued to preserve, emphasize, and expand this trend, often embellishing it through imaginative or inspired narratives. In the initial decades, this must have been necessitated by the mobilization required for military campaigns into the Persian and Byzantine Empires,

but the need continued to persist as the stress of rapid expansion began to take its toll on the nascent political structures, leading to a series of three civil wars. Since the term *qitāl* soon became synonymous in the juristic discourse with *jihād*, and since the concept of *jihād* was at least partly appropriated in the service of imperial conquests during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, political and religious motives seem to have intermingled in the subsequent glorification of war and military culture. Further emphasis on *qitāl fī sabil Allāh* became part of the growing Islāmic tradition in response to foreign military threats, such as the Crusades, the Mongol invasion, and European colonialism.

Primarily because the very origin of Islām was intertwined with armed conflicts, but also because much of the classical Islāmic tradition developed under the dark shadow of Arab imperialism, we find a strong tendency in our religious heritage that legitimizes and exalts armed combat. There is nothing problematic about this tendency, so long as we are able to place it in its historical context and compare it objectively with other, competing tendencies that are also found in our tradition. Since we do not encounter the verses of the Qur'ān and the sayings attributed to Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) in an intellectual vacuum, it is vital for us to understand how the post-Qur'ānic tradition was formed and how it influences us today as we seek guidance from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. To the extent that we are unable to contextualize the Islāmic tradition, and particularly if we do not fully appreciate the historical circumstances of seventh-century Arabia within which Islām first appeared as a universal message and mission, to that extent we face the danger of making serious errors of interpretation.

We can learn a great deal from the Islāmic texts that emphasize the importance of warfare and martyrdom in the path of God, regardless of whether these texts are found in the Qur'ān, in the Ḥadīth, or in any of the subsequent writings produced by Muslims authorities and sages over the last fourteen centuries. These texts demonstrate the importance of defending one's community

against external threats, of persevering in the face of overwhelming violence, and of sacrificing one's resources, including life itself, for the sake of one's ideals. As such, they are indispensable sources for inspiration, spiritual and moral development, and education.

These same texts, however, also represent a potential pitfall for many contemporary Muslims. This is particularly true for those Muslims who tend to take individual verses of the Qur'ān or sayings attributed to Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) as proof-texts to defend this or that viewpoint—with little regard to the original historical circumstances, the principles of Qur'ānic hermeneutics and Ḥadīth criticism, or the rich heritage of juristic reasoning. Same is true for those Muslims who tend to rely upon a particular verdict given by a particular legal authority—with little understanding of the juristic method involved, the scholar's own social context, or the full range of the scholarly debate within which that opinion was formulated. Such tendencies have developed in modern Islām in response to the contemporary vacuum of religious authority; they represent sincere but immature attempts at finding absolute certainty in an otherwise uncertain world. For many Muslims today, these tendencies have created a serious risk for developing a shallow and truncated understanding of key Islāmic concepts like jihād and qitāl. Because of the peculiar nature of this subject, they also face the temptation of attempting to put their distorted interpretations into practice. As is well known, the latter can and does lead to a multiplicity of intractable problems. A little knowledge can be a very dangerous thing.

We cannot fully understand a significant portion of classical Islāmic texts—including the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth—without paying attention to their historical context; in the same way, we cannot properly practice a significant portion of the imperatives found in these texts without paying attention to our own social context.

History

A basic distinction needs to be made in order to elucidate the last point. The five pillars of Islām—the testimony of faith, ritual prayer, alms tax, fasting, and pilgrimage—are acts that we are required to perform in approximately the same way as the first Muslims did, regardless of our social and historical circumstances. Even though each pillar has its own benefits, we are not required to perform these acts merely or solely for the purpose of receiving certain known benefits. On the contrary, we practice the five pillars because they are required, first and foremost, for their own sake. It is precisely for this reason that very particular forms have been prescribed for each of the five pillars, and that “innovation” has been strongly prohibited in this domain.

The above features do not hold true, however, for another set of injunctions found in the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth. These latter injunctions are not required for their own sake; instead, they constitute practical means for realizing certain moral values. As such, the intended aims of such injunctions are often difficult to achieve without taking into account the impact of social and historical variables. Islāmic teachings on qitāl belong to this category of injunctions; the duty to take up arms and fight for the sake of God is a qualitatively different matter than offering the ritual prayer five times a day. As scholars throughout Muslim history have emphasized, religiously legitimate qitāl has very specific aims, which is why it becomes an active obligation only under very specific conditions. This is literally a matter of life and death, and we cannot afford to take it lightly. If qitāl is initiated in a social setting where it is clearly not warranted, either morally or strategically, then the responsibility for causing harm would fall on those who initiated the violence—regardless of their pious intentions.

Today, we are living in a world that is vastly different from the one in which Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) had lived and in which the Qur’ānic revelation had first appeared. Fourteen centuries

have passed. There is a tendency among many Muslims to ignore this fact, to pretend nothing significant has changed between the Prophet's era and our own. This disregard for history creates the illusion that an injunction given to specific individuals under specific circumstances can be taken out of its original context and practiced in a radically different setting without any adverse consequences. This illusion is based on the assumption that regardless of time and space a given action always causes the same outcome and promotes the same value. Such an attitude of ignoring the reality of historical change and of the impact of social context is not only naïve and irresponsible; it can also be downright dangerous and counterproductive.

The fact that fourteen centuries have passed since the time of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) has little affect on how we perform the five pillars; but it is enormously relevant to how we understand the Islāmic teachings on the subject of jihād and qitāl.

While it is still our obligation to try reforming social structures and institutions in accordance with the moral imperatives of the Qur'ān, such a struggle no longer necessitates armed conflict or warfare. This is in sharp contrast to the situation that prevailed in seventh-century Arabia, the situation in which Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his companions had to carry out their struggle. The contrast between the two situations is striking; but in what ways? It is not that the world has become a more peaceful place since the time of the Prophet (SAW). Nor is it the case that the guardians of the status quo in our times are willing to give up their power to employ coercive force or that they have become significantly restrained in their use of organized violence. On the contrary, today the powers that be are much more organized and much more efficient in their capacity to employ violent and coercive force than at any other point in human history. And yet, something very fundamental has changed.

One of the most critical differences between the time of Prophet

Muḥammad (SAW) and our own is that the coercive power of violence is no longer the only possible means for bringing about significant reforms in social structures and institutions, nor is it the only possible means for resisting and overcoming the organized violence of the status quo. For the first time in history, a set of powerful new tools and methods have become available on an unprecedented scale—tools and methods that can be used by the powerless in their struggle to establish justice, to eliminate corruption, and to bring about reform, but without engaging in physical violence. In theory, nonviolent means for changing social structures and institutions have been available all through history, to all people, in all human societies; it is the degree of their practical feasibility and effectiveness, however, that has varied widely from one social setting to another. For instance, the degree of the practical feasibility and effectiveness of nonviolent means was very high during the twelve years of Prophet Muḥammad’s (SAW) struggle in Makkah, though it declined rapidly after the hijrah. In any case, while it is true that the possibility of using nonviolent methods is nothing new, it is only in recent history that the degree of their practical feasibility and effectiveness has outstripped that of violent means. As a consequence of this change, it has become infinitely more rational for social movements to use nonviolent methods than violent ones.

Nonviolence

Today, violence is rapidly becoming one of the least effective means for changing social structures and institutions; in many contexts it has already become completely useless and even counterproductive. What is replacing the need for such violence is a sophisticated array of theories, methods, strategies, and tactics that deliberately avoid causing physical harm but can still unleash a power that is incomparably greater than that of the most advanced weaponry. Taken together, these theories, methods, strategies, and tactics constitute an approach that is often referred to as nonviolence.

Unfortunately, the word “nonviolence” can be quite misleading; it clearly fails to capture the full range and richness of all that it is supposed to stand for. Most people who hear this term for the first time are likely to assume that it refers to submissiveness, quietism, passivity, and withdrawal from struggle. It even sounds cowardly and escapist. Worst of all, it is a negative term; it says what it is against, but not what it is for. And yet, we should avoid jumping to conclusions, for we have already learned not to judge a concept based only on the connotations that have somehow become associated with a particular term. Just as *jihād* does not mean what many people associate with this term, the same is true for nonviolence.

Nonviolence does not mean passive surrender to tyranny, nor is it an escape from a dangerous or challenging situation. It is, on the contrary, a comprehensive approach for organizing a collective struggle by mobilizing and empowering people; it is a comprehensive approach for managing a conflict in a way that maximizes the chances of achieving significant and permanent changes in the status quo. The distinctive quality of this approach, of course, is that it does not allow the use of violence as a coercive tool.

Many people have been conditioned to think that there is something inevitable about armed conflict, or that war is somehow an integral part of human nature. While most of the substantial revolutions since the beginning of civilization have been the result of violent conflicts, there is absolutely no reason to believe that such will always be the case. It is true that human beings are prone towards conflict, but the inevitability of human conflict does not mean the unavailability of violent methods for the resolution of those conflicts. Nor is this a matter of wishful thinking, speculation, or idealism. Nonviolence as a method for structural and institutional transformation has already been successfully tested innumerable times under a variety of conditions, and is constantly being refined and improved in terms of both its theoretical foundation and its practical application. It is no

exaggeration that the ideas and practices associated with nonviolence are transforming the very mindset through which collective struggles have been waged during most of human history. Today, nonviolence is nothing short of a global phenomenon that is rapidly approaching a very high level of sophistication, precision, and effectiveness.

Let us look at the pragmatic aspect of the issue. In premodern times, there was a definite possibility of success for a popular movement that launched a violent rebellion against particular social structures or institutions (including the government of the time). One of the most well-known examples of this phenomenon is the French Revolution that took place in 1789. Such a possibility existed primarily due to two factors. First, even though the ruling classes enjoyed the protection of standing armies, they did not yet have a complete monopoly over the means of organized violence, i.e., weapons. Second, the flow of information from the population to the rulers was considerably inefficient. With the consolidation of the nation-state during the last two hundred years, however, both of these factors have virtually disappeared. The modern nation-state exercises an almost total monopoly over the means and use of “legitimate” violence, institutionalized in the form of police, military, and paramilitary forces. Advances in communication technology and bureaucratic efficiency have brought about a tremendous increase in the capacity of the nation-state for the surveillance of its own citizens. Because of these developments, all modern governments now possess incredibly powerful resources to identify, infiltrate, destroy, disperse, or otherwise neutralize any movement that is hoping for a violent uprising, regardless of its popularity.

Today, the use of violence by non-state agents represents nothing more than an irritation or annoyance for most governments—such violence no longer poses any real threat for the status quo. Today, popular movements that resort to violent methods may succeed in creating civil unrest, social mayhem, lawlessness, rioting, etc., but it is clear that there can be no repeat performance of

the French Revolution through such methods.

In addition to becoming largely ineffective, the use of violence by popular movements is also increasingly counterproductive. The immense disparity between the resources of ordinary citizens and those of the nation-state has made it virtually impossible for a popular movement to launch an armed attack against a military target—or to achieve any positive result by doing so. This is precisely why the last century witnessed an unprecedented rise in violent and indiscriminate assaults on unarmed civilians, aimed at creating spectacles of fear in order to influence government policies. Terrorism, however, does not help a movement achieve its goals either; instead, it legitimizes the effort of the nation-state to criminalize both the movement and its cause. Instead of weakening its hold, acts of terror indirectly empower the nation-state and enhance its capacity to use increasingly oppressive methods, thereby escalating the cycle of violence. Destruction of innocent lives alienates such a movement from its supporters and reduces its chances of winning new sympathizers. It also leads to divisions in the ranks of the movement but increasing solidarity in the ranks of the status quo. On occasions, a popular movement that has resorted to violent methods may eventually succeed in getting a few of its demands met; but the tremendous cost in human suffering and mutual antagonism often makes that achievement hollow and meaningless. In today's world, expecting to bring about a positive and permanent change through terrorism is tantamount to living in a fools' paradise.

As the effectiveness of violence has continually declined during the twentieth-century, nonviolence has come to the fore as a realistic alternative. In recent decades, numerous nonviolent movements for social and political change have succeeded in different parts of the world, despite what appeared to be insurmountable odds. Typically, these movements consisted of unarmed civilians facing deeply entrenched systems that were protected by well-trained bureaucracies as well as the overwhelming firepower of modern militaries. According to conventional wisdom, such

movements had absolutely no possibility of success. Instead of using violent methods, the participants in such movements paid greater attention to organizing and employing effective strategies; they used a wide variety of nonviolent methods—including mass protests, civil disobedience, strikes, sit-ins, economic boycotts—and very often achieved their desired objectives. Gandhi’s Salt March and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the Civil Rights movement are just two of the most famous examples. These have set the stage for other success stories like the Solidarity movement in Poland, the People Power movement in the Philippines, and the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.

What makes nonviolent methods more effective than violent ones? Generally speaking, the modern nation-state tends to rely heavily for its own legitimacy on the willing cooperation and consent of its citizens. Widespread literacy and a higher level of political awareness are making it increasingly difficult to rule on the basis of coercion alone. The pressure of democratic ideals is such that even the worst dictatorships are forced to make a show of popular support through token elections or referendums. The consciousness of human rights is much higher today than it was at any previous moment in history, making it increasingly difficult for unjust and repressive policies to go unnoticed or unchallenged for long. Consequently, withholding cooperation and withdrawing consent have now become immensely powerful means for changing and reforming social structures and institutions.

Nonviolence enjoys numerous strategic advantages over violence. Undeserved suffering of conscientious individuals espousing a just cause naturally widens the zone of their sympathizers. Nonviolent resistance increases solidarity in the ranks of the movement but often divides the status quo. Consistent and strategic use of nonviolent methods allows a very large number of people to participate in the movement, prevents the development of long-term animosity and mutual hatred, and keeps the doors of reconciliation open irrespective of the length of the conflict.

Islām

The practical efficacy of nonviolence is beyond dispute, and there is no reason why contemporary Islāmic movements should not embrace nonviolence as a central part of their respective methodologies.

Some Muslims may object to nonviolence, however, arguing that the practice of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) should play a decisive role in determining any course of action. This is an important argument that needs to be adequately addressed. As part of their faith, Muslims view the totality of the life and actions of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) as representing what the Qur'ān calls “a beautiful example.” The Prophet’s customary practice, or *sunnah*, is the model that all Muslims aspire to imitate in their own lives, as much as possible. Since the Prophet (SAW) obviously used military force in his own struggle, some may argue that Muslims are obligated to follow the Prophetic model any time they are involved in a similar struggle. The use of nonviolent methods, from this viewpoint, would be a violation of the *sunnah* of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW). If the use of military force was good enough for the Prophet (SAW), they might say, then it must be good enough for us.

In the course of history, the successful use of nonviolent means for bringing about large-scale changes is a relatively recent phenomenon. As we have seen, while the possibility of using such methods had always existed, during most of history the actual probability of successfully transforming social structures and institutions through the exclusive use of nonviolence was not very high, particularly if the envisioned transformation involved the highest political level. This is because, throughout the history of human civilizations, governments everywhere tended to rely more on the coercive power of their weapons than on the willing consent of the population. In the historical context of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW)—and for hundreds of years after him—armed resistance was the only realistic means for meeting the challenge

of the coercive force that would inevitably be unleashed by the status quo against any movement for reform. Other than armed resistance, the Prophet (SAW) did not have at his disposal any other means for overcoming the organized violence that he and his followers were facing; he chose to employ military force to counter the challenge because the only alternative—giving up his mission by admitting defeat—was clearly unacceptable.

In effect, the Prophet (SAW) used military force because this was the most effective means available to him, in his historical context, for meeting the challenge that he was facing. In the twenty-first century, as we have seen, armed resistance is no longer the most effective means available to us, either for transforming social structures and institutions or for neutralizing the organized violence of the status quo. Today, it is nonviolence that has become the most effective means for dealing with these challenges. Consequently, we believe that the Prophetic sunnah requires us to use nonviolent means because of their indisputable efficacy in relation to violent methods.

Today, nonviolence is analogous to any other technological innovation. Just as contemporary Muslims do not denounce air travel, computers, automobiles, cell phones, or antibiotics simply because Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) did not use any of them, there is no reason for them to reject nonviolent methods simply because the Prophet (SAW) had chosen to use the military option under certain specific circumstances.

Furthermore, the assumption that the Prophet (SAW) did not use nonviolent methods is itself seriously flawed. It results from a shallow and incomplete understanding of nonviolence, as well as from a lack of sufficient reflection on the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. If these Islāmic sources are carefully studied in light of the theories and practices of contemporary nonviolence, it will soon become apparent that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his followers had, in fact, employed various nonviolent methods through-

out the course of their struggle. The Prophet, after all, had led his followers through twelve years of nonviolent resistance in Makkah, well before any armed conflict broke out. This period of nonviolent struggle constitutes more than half of his prophetic career, and the armed conflicts of the post-hijrah period do not erase or abrogate the “beautiful example” that the Prophet (SAW) had set in Makkah. Nor did he cease using nonviolent methods during the later part of his prophetic career in Madīnah. In fact, many of the values and strategies that are usually associated with contemporary nonviolence are explicitly mentioned in the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth; most Muslims are unaware of these precedents simply because of a lack of adequate attention to this topic. Similarly, countless instances of the application of these teachings can be identified in the Islāmic tradition that developed in the post-Qur’ānic period; once again, it is a matter of paying adequate attention.

In a frequently quoted ḥadīth, Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) is reported to have said: “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer; he is most deserving of it wherever he finds it.” According to this teaching, Muslims are obligated to accept as their own anything that is “wise,” i.e., true and beneficial—regardless of its immediate source. One can hardly doubt that “nonviolence” is one of the wisest set of ideas and practices to have come along in a very long time. Insofar as it is wise, it is perfectly Islāmic.

Ethics

Even more important than the question of practical efficacy is the issue of morality. Muslim authorities and sages have long debated the aims and conditions of legitimate qitāl, but they never questioned their basic assumption that at least some wars were just and moral because they were sanctioned by God. Despite this assumption, qitāl was never conceived in the Islāmic tradition as something that could be desired or pursued for its own sake; the value attributed to war was always instrumental value.

At best, war could be a means to an end; but it could never be an end in itself.

Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) chose armed resistance in order to overcome the organized violence that the status quo was perpetrating against the newly emerging Muslim community and its mission. The Prophet (SAW) was seeking to establish justice, eliminate corruption, and bring about reform; he did not desire war for its own sake, but chose it as a practical course of action to realize these higher goals. Once the opposition had been largely neutralized, he was immediately willing to negotiate a peace treaty. The Prophet (SAW) exhibited the same attitude at the Conquest of Makkah; the leaders of the Quraysh had been the worst enemies of Islām, but the Prophet (SAW) accepted their surrender and proclaimed for them a general amnesty. Had qitāl been an end in itself—just like the ritual prayer—the Prophet (SAW) would never have accepted any cessation of hostilities nor acted so magnanimously toward his former enemies.

The Qur’ān makes it clear that the normal and desired state of human life is peace; and that armed conflict is an undesirable exception that should cease as soon as possible. There is nothing inherently beautiful or virtuous about war; it has no intrinsic value, but only a limited instrumental value as a practical course of action. In situations where the same goal can be achieved either by violent or by nonviolent means, the latter would be the undisputed Islāmic choice. Despite the emphasis on qitāl in the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth, there is absolutely nothing in these sources that would prevent or prohibit Muslims from adopting nonviolent approaches for pursuing their goals. In fact, since God has sanctified human life, a nonviolent method must always be preferred over a violent method whenever possible.

Muslims who take the archetype of the “warrior” as their supreme ideal of Islāmic piety may be tempted to think that nonviolence is merely a tactic for protecting oneself from physical

injury; that it is meant for the coward rather than for the hero. It is worth repeating, however, that *qitāl* is only one form of *jihād*, which means that the Islāmic image of the *mujāhid* need not be restricted to that of a swordsman on horseback. The Islāmic teachings that encourage us to practice relentless perseverance and to sacrifice our lives in the path of God are as applicable for Muslims who undertake nonviolent struggles as they were for those who entered the battlefields under the command of Prophet Muḥammad (SAW). Efforts aimed at reforming social structures and institutions are inherently risky, even in the so-called free and democratic societies. It is important to dispel the misconception that nonviolent struggles are somehow less hazardous to one's life and limb than armed combat. On the contrary, it is fair to say nonviolence is not for the fainthearted.

The use of nonviolent methods does not guarantee that one will remain safe and unmolested. It is only the people seeking reform who voluntarily decide not to harm anyone; the guardians of the status quo, along with their institutions of organized violence, are under no such constraint. As a result, nonviolent struggles can and do involve a great deal of suffering at both physical and emotional levels.

Participation in a protracted nonviolent struggle is the ultimate test of the strength of one's character. It requires extraordinary courage, commitment, patience, and self-discipline to stand one's ground in front of guns, tanks, and bulldozers; to take verbal abuse, physical blows, and even bullets without defending oneself. It is almost an instinctive reaction to slap someone back who has just slapped you; but it takes an unusual degree of self-control simply to stand your ground and do nothing. Similarly, it is relatively easy to take the life of a much-hated opponent in a moment of rage; but it requires a high degree of self-restraint to allow oneself to be beaten to a pulp and not raise one's hand in self-defense. The teachings of the Qur'an and the Ḥadīth that are meant to inspire the believers to remain steadfast in times of conflict and to endure physical pain with patience are as appli-

cable in the case of nonviolent resistance as they were in their original context of warfare.

Overall, the risk of injury and death is probably the same whether the conflict is violent or nonviolent. From an Islāmic viewpoint, however, the latter is clearly preferable because it does not involve the risk of causing any deliberate or inadvertent harm to an innocent person. This point is exceedingly important, though it is often taken very lightly in discussions on the use of deadly force. Comparisons are frequently made between contemporary armed conflicts and the seventh-century battles in which Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) and his companions had participated; what is often forgotten in these discussions is that the two kinds of conflicts are not really comparable. The Prophet (SAW) and his followers fought with swords, spears, and arrows; modern conflicts involve rockets, bombs, airplanes, and computers. In the former case, one knew for sure who one's opponent was; men usually had to look at each other face to face in the heat of the battle. In modern warfare, the killer and the victim almost never face each other like this; soldiers have little control over who is harmed or killed by their actions. Instead of putting a sword through another person heart, and intimately knowing that one is responsible for taking a human life, modern warriors merely look at their screens and push buttons to drop their bombs or launch their rockets. The difference this makes for the morality of war is hardly insignificant. For this reason alone, Muslims ought to recognize modern warfare as belonging to an entirely different category than the kind of armed combat sanctioned in the Qur'ān.

A key principle in Islāmic jurisprudence—firmly rooted in the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth—concerns the duty to maintain the safety of all noncombatants. During the Prophet's own lifetime, this principle of noncombatant immunity was rarely violated. Today, however, because of the tremendous “progress” that has been made in the technology of mass killing, it has become impossible to uphold this principle. This has led modern governments to

accept some level of “collateral damage” as an inevitable part of warfare, but a compromise like this is very difficult to legitimize within the Islāmic tradition. An act of terror represents a deliberate violation of the principle of noncombatant immunity, and, regardless of the avowed morality of its intended aim, can find little justification in Islāmic ethics. Nonviolent struggle, by reducing or eliminating the risk of causing harm to the innocent, becomes an infinitely more desirable option for Islāmic movements than any strategy that does involve such a risk.

Conclusions

Muslims can never abandon jihād, for the transformation of social structures and institutions in accordance with the moral imperatives of the Qur’ān is a fundamental obligation of their faith. They are forever obligated to strive in order to establish justice, eliminate corruption, and bring about reform. The use of violent means in the course of their jihād, however, is neither a permanent obligation of their religious tradition nor an unavoidable necessity required by their social conditions. Islāmic movements are sometimes tempted to act violently, usually under the assumption that violent methods will be effective in helping them reach their goals; this assumption is augmented by the belief that the Islāmic sources, particularly the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth, permit and encourage—even require—the use of such methods regardless of social and historical circumstances. Both assumptions are flawed. On pragmatic as well as ethical grounds, the use of nonviolent methods is a much more preferable strategy for Islāmic movements than any strategy that involves violence.

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Notes



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Jihad Without Violence begins with the best explanation of jihad that I have seen—and that itself would make this little book invaluable. But it goes on to argue, I think decisively, that the brief episode of war in the career of the Prophet (SAW) does not constitute an argument for war by Muslims today, and why, on the contrary, nonviolence, which has been used successfully from Afghanistan to Palestine, is morally and pragmatically superior.

Michael N. Nagler
Professor Emeritus, University of California, Berkeley
Author of *The Search for a Nonviolent Future:
A Promise of Peace for Ourselves, Our Families, and
Our World*

Into the battle over whether Islam is by nature aggressive and violent or passive and peaceful, Ahmed Afzaal brilliantly outlines a superior alternative. By arguing that Islam is a force of social transformation toward justice but that nonviolence will be its most effective method in the contemporary world, Afzaal rescues jihad from its popular distortions and responsibly reclaims it as an essential part of Muslim identity.

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Categories in the Study of Religion*

ISBN 978-098459411-5



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