



Jihad

and Holy War

In the name of God,
the Compassionate, the Merciful

Jihad and Holy War

To many Americans, the word *jihad* and “*holy war*” have become synonymous. Many equate *holy war* with *jihad* when in fact the phrase “*holy war*” never appears in the Quran – the Holy Scripture and main source of guidance for Muslims. The words *holy* and *war* can be found in the Quran but never together. The word *jihad* on the other hand is a common term that can be found in numerous places in the Quran and is used in different contexts. If it is not *holy war*, then what is *jihad*?

The Arabic language is a semantic language where words are normally derived from a set of three consonants called the trilateral root. For example, in Arabic the word KaTaBa which means ‘to write’ is derived from the root K T B (three letters). From that root word we have *Katib* which means writer, *Kutub* means books, *Maktabah* means library or bookcase and so on. Every word is usually connected to its root and has a meaning related to the root.

The word *jihad* comes from the three-letter root, J H D. The root Ja Ha Da connotes effort, struggle, exertion, and resistance among other synonyms. *Jihad* simply means to strive or to struggle. A person who is engaged in *jihad* is called a *Mujahid* (pl. *Mujahideen*). There are two main types of *jihad*; self-struggle (*Jihad al-Nafs*) and striving in the way of God (*Jihad fi Sabil Allah*), which implies the act of striving in order to serve God on earth.

Of the two, the self-struggle is identified as the supreme *jihad*. Muhammad, a Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, was once asked, which *jihad* is most supreme? Muhammad replied, “To strive against your own soul in order to obey God.”

Humans are created with certain urges, passions and desires that demand satisfaction. Such instincts that belong to the lower (baser) self are blind. Unless one is able to completely curb such desires and purge all satanic and evil ideas and influences from their soul one will find himself committing sin(s).

The closer one gets to God the harder the struggle becomes. It is for this reason Muhammad called it the

supreme *jihad*. It is the clash between the animal instincts the Quran defines as “*al-nafs al-Ammarah*,” the commanding or passionate soul that incites people to evil, or according to Sigmund Freud, the Libido or Id, versus the desire to obey and please God.

People who love to eat yet attempt to diet undergo a strenuous struggle resisting the temptation of eating in order to maintain good health. This is an example of *jihad* or self-struggle. Similarly, a smoker who decides to quit smoking knows all too well how difficult it is to quit. However, those who are determined to quit smoking resist the temptation and endure the struggle in order to preserve their health. This is another example of *jihad* or self-struggle. In truth, every human being, rather every living thing, goes through a never ending struggle for self-preservation which can be identified as *jihad*.

Self-struggle or *jihad al-nafs* is extremely difficult. It requires discipline, resistance, perseverance and endurance. Therefore, one has to migrate from vices and sins while simultaneously struggling to obey the commands of God.

The entire life of a Muslim who consciously surrenders and submits his/her free will to the Will of God is nothing but a life of *jihad* (struggle). Praying five times daily while struggling to get up at dawn to offer the prayer when one may easily enjoy the comfort of their warm bed instead is not easy; to endure long hours of fasting without food or water especially during long hot and humid summer days is not easy; to control the sexual desire of unmarried men and women is not easy; to stay away from unlawful activities the soul desires is not easy. It is a continuous struggle or *jihad*.

Those who resist, struggle and wage *jihad* against their passion, urges and desires in order to obey God's commands are promised guidance, “*And those who strive (jahadu) in Our cause, We shall certainly guide them on Our paths for verily God is with the righteous.*” (*The Spider*, 29:69)

The other type of *jihad* is the “Struggle in the Way of God.” This type of *jihad* is of two kinds; the ideological *jihad* (propagation of the Truth) and the non-violent/armed *jihad*.

God commanded Muhammad to, “*Say, ‘This is my path: Resting upon conscious insight accessible to*

reason, I am calling (you all) unto God - I and they who follow me. And I am not one of the polytheists.’” (*Joseph*, 12:108) This verse explains the responsibility laid upon Muhammad and his followers to deliver the message of God and invite people to the Truth.

Muhammad began his mission preaching the Quran in the streets of Mecca just as Jesus preached the Gospel in the streets of Nazareth. To spread the truth and invite people to the straight path one must struggle in a way not unlike the efforts of Noah. God reminds us of Noah's struggle, “*O my Lord! I called my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away: every time I call them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, cover their heads with their garments, persist in their rejection, and grow more insolent and arrogant. I have tried calling them openly. I have tried preaching to them in public and speaking to them in private.*” (*Noah*, 71, 5-9)

Muhammad like his predecessor, Jesus, attracted the weak and the oppressed. He challenged the elite of his clan, the Quraish, just as Jesus challenged the Romans. The Quraish rejected his claim of being a prophet of God. They mocked him, called him names and tried to prevent him from preaching. They offered him kingship, women and riches to give up his mission. In response to these offers, Muhammad's reply was, “If they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left in order to abandon this mission, I would not abandon it until God has made me victorious, or I perish.”

Muhammad was fully determined to continue his prophetic struggle. God instructs him, “*Do not give in to the disbelievers and strive hard (jahidhum) against them with this Quran a mighty jihad (struggle).*” (*The Criterion*, 25:52) His prophetic mission was to bring about God's vision of a just and equitable society in a world where tyranny and oppression reigned. Preaching the truth to power that has a vested interest in the status quo was a bitter pill to swallow. It takes courage and firm resolve to speak truth to power. Muhammad articulates this point in his famous quote, “The most virtuous *jihad* is a word of truth before a tyrant and oppressive ruler.”

While in Mecca, Muhammad, a master strategist for non-violence, ordered his companions who were undergoing severe verbal and physical persecution at the hands of their oppressors to, “Keep your hands

folded, do not retaliate not even in self-defense.”

The profound non-violent struggle or *jihad* in Mecca paved the way to inspire great leaders of modern times such as Mahatma Gandhi of India. After reading two volumes on the biography of the prophet Muhammad, Gandhi writes, “I wanted to know the best of the life of one who holds today undisputed sway over the hearts of millions of mankind ... I became more than ever convinced that it was not the sword that won a place for Islam ... When I closed the second volume (of the Prophet's biography) I was sorry there was not more for me to read of that great life.”

The persecution, which proved to be ineffective, was followed by a social and economic boycott. After the demise of Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib who protected him and allowed him to preach freely, the leaders of Quraish including Abu Jahl, his staunchest enemy, plotted to assassinate Muhammad and rid Arabia of him and his mission.

Unlike the first voluntary emigration of the early converts of Islam to Abyssinia, Muhammad, based on a revelation, commanded all believers that remained in Mecca to immigrate to Medina. After thirteen years of harsh persecution, Muhammad and a handful of followers eventually found a safe haven in Medina, a city 200 miles north of Mecca. The residents of Medina welcomed the immigrants with open arms. They erected the first mosque, Quba on the outskirts of Medina and built a religious center that became known as the Prophet's Mosque. It served as the propagation base for Islam. At last they were free to worship God.

The struggle, however, did not end. The non-violent struggle soon took the shape of an armed struggle or according to the Quran, *qital*. The residents of Medina appointed Muhammad as their leader. The Meccans feared the growing influence of the Muslims in Medina so they plotted to eliminate the religion of Islam in order to protect their trade routes to Syria, north of Medina. After a failed attempt to intercept a caravan that carried goods stolen from Muslims en route to Syria for trade, Muhammad received a directive from God to fight those who oppressed, fought and expelled them from their homes. “*Permission (to fight) is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged and, verily, God has indeed the power to help them.*” (*The Pilgrimage, 22:39*)

In the second year after migration 300 believers confronted 1,000 strong idolaters at Badr. The conflict that became known as “the battle of Badr” resulted in a decisive victory for the Muslims and fulfillment of a prophecy. Of course, Quraish would retaliate and armed conflicts continued for a few years until a peace treaty was concluded with the Quraish famously known as “The Treaty of Hudaibiyya.”

After a couple of years of relative calm and peace, the Quraish decided to dissolve the treaty after they breached it. This violation and decision prompted Muhammad to march toward Mecca with 10,000 strong soldiers. It was clear that the balance tilted in Muhammad's favor and that the Quraish were not in a position of strength to fight, so they remained passive. The Muslims peacefully marched the streets of Mecca where they were once persecuted. The Prophet ordered the destruction of all idols in and around the holy sanctuary of the Kaba. The idolaters were certain that Muhammad would soon take revenge. However, to their surprise, he ignored the crimes of Quraish and proclaimed general amnesty to all residents of Mecca.

Not long after the conquest of Mecca and shortly after he performed his only pilgrimage, Muhammad returned to his Lord leaving behind a legacy to be remembered and admired by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He single-handedly spread a religion that would become among the greatest religions of the world. Today, this great man has claim to more than 1.5 billion followers of Islam.

The armed struggle, or “just-war” concept (*qital* in the way of God) in the historical context of Muhammad's mission was entirely justified and sanctioned by God. “Jihad in the way of God” and “fighting (*qital*) in the way of God” are not the same. Indeed, *jihad* and war are not synonymous.

Groups like al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, ISIS, and Islamic Jihad among other terrorist organizations have misinterpreted and misrepresented the Quranic concept of *jihad*. Fighting for political power, revenge, or glory does not qualify as *jihad*. To shed the blood of innocent people and coerce them into believing in Islam is in fact un-Islamic.

The famous Indian Muslim scholar, Abul Kalam Azad in his book *Masala Khilafat* writes, “There is a serious misconception regarding what jihad is. Many people think that jihad means only to fight.

The critics of Islam too labor under this misunderstanding whereas to think thus is to utterly narrow the practical scope of this sacred commandment. Jihad means to strive to the utmost. In the Quran and the Sunnah (prophetic tradition) terminology, this utmost exertion, which is undertaken for the sake of truth rather than personal ends, is indicated by the word jihad.”

Let us take a lesson from the life of the prophet Muhammad. It is absolutely incorrect to construe *jihad* as terrorism in the name of religion. *Jihad* is not a violent concept rather a sacred duty. Indeed, the whole life of a true believer endures *jihad*. He struggles against himself in order to obey and please God.



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www.ionamasjid.org

info@ionaonline.org

866-779-IONA

IONA Headquarters

28630 Ryan Road

Warren, MI 48092

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أمريكا الشمالية

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