

## JIHAD EXPLAINED

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In the linguistic sense, the Arabic word "jihad" means struggling or striving and applies to any effort exerted by anyone. In this sense, a student struggles and strives to get an education and pass course work; an employee strives to fulfill his/her job and maintain good relations with his/her employer; a politician strives to maintain or increase his<sup>(1)</sup> popularity with his constituents and so on. The term strive or struggle may be used for/by Muslims as well as non-Muslims; for example, Allah, the One and Only True God says in the Qur'an:

*"We have enjoined on people kindness to parents; but if they strive (Jahadaka) to make you ascribe partners with Me that of which you have no knowledge, then obey them not..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 29:8; also see 31:15)

In the above two verses of the Qur'an, it is non-Muslim parents who strive (*jahadaka*) to convert their Muslim child back to their religion. In the West, "jihad" is generally translated as "holy war," a usage the media has popularized. According to Islamic teachings, it is **unholy** to instigate or start war; however, some wars are inevitable and justifiable.

If we translate the words "holy war" back into Arabic, we find "*harbu muqaddasatu*," or for "the holy war," "*al-harbu al-muqaddasatu*." We challenge any researcher or scholar to find the meaning of "jihad" as holy war in the Qur'an or authentic Hadith collections or in early Islamic literature. Unfortunately, some Muslim writers and translators of the Qur'an, the Hadith and other Islamic literature translate the term "jihad" as "holy war," due to the influence of centuries-old Western propaganda.

This could be a reflection of the Christian use of the term "Holy War" to refer to the Crusades of a thousand years ago. However, the Arabic words for "war" are "harb" or "qital," which are found in the Qur'an and Hadith.

For Muslims the term *Jihad* is applied to all forms of **striving** and has developed some special meanings over time. The sources of this development are the Qur'an (the Word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup>) denoted *Sall-Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, meaning peace and blessings of Allah be upon him]. The Qur'an and the Hadith use the word "jihad" in several different contexts which are given below:

### 1. RECOGNIZING THE CREATOR AND LOVING HIM MOST:

It is human nature to love what is seen with the eyes and felt with the senses more than the **unseen reality**. The Creator of the Universe and the One God is Allah. He is the Unseen Reality which we tend to ignore and not recognize. The Qur'an addresses those who claim to be believers:

*"O you who believe! Choose not your fathers nor your brethren for protectors if they love disbelief over belief; whoever of you takes them for protectors, such are your spouses, and your tribe, and the wealth you have acquired, and business for which you fear shrinkage, and houses you are pleased with are dearer to you than Allah and His Messenger and striving in His way: then wait till Allah brings His command to pass. Allah does not guide disobedient folk."*  
(The Holy Quran 9:23, 24)

It is indeed a struggle to put Allah ahead of our loved ones, our wealth, our worldly ambitions and our own lives. Especially for a non-Muslim who embraces Islam, it may be a tough struggle due to the opposition of his family, peers and society.

### 2. RESISTING PRESSURE OF PARENTS, PEERS, AND SOCIETY:

Once a person has made up his mind to put the Creator of the Universe above all else, he often comes under intense pressures. It is not easy to resist such pressures and **strive** to maintain dedication and love of Allah over all else. A person who has turned to Islam from another religion may be subjected to pressures designed to turn him back to the religion of the family. We read in the Qur'an:

*"So obey not the rejecters of faith, but strive (jahidhum) against them by it (the Qur'an) with a great endeavor."*  
(The Holy Quran, 25:52)

### 3. STAYING ON THE STRAIGHT PATH STEADFASTLY:

Allah says in the Qur'an:

*"And strive (Jadihu) for Allah with the endeavor (Jahidhi) which is His right. He has chosen you and has not laid upon you in the deen (religion) any hardship..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 22:78)

*"And whosoever strives (Jahada), strives (yujahidu) only for himself, for lo! Allah is altogether independent of the universe."*  
(The Holy Quran, 29:6)

As for those who strive and struggle to live as true Muslims whose lives are made difficult due to persecution by their opponents, they are advised to migrate to a more peaceful and tolerant land and continue with their struggle in the cause of Allah. Allah says in the Qur'an:

*"Lo! As for those whom the angels take (in death) while they wronged themselves, (the angels) will ask: 'In what you were engaged?' They will say: 'We were oppressed in the land.' (The angels) will say: 'Was not Allah's earth spacious that you could have migrated therein?'"*  
(The Holy Quran, 4:97)

*"Lo! Those who believe, and those who emigrate (to escape persecution) and strive (Jahadu) in the way of Allah, these have hope of Allah's mercy..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:218)

Allah tests the believers in their faith and their steadfastness:

*"Or did you think that you would enter Paradise while yet Allah knows not those of you who really strive (Jahadu), nor knows those (of you) who are steadfast..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 3:142)

*"And surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and fruits; but give tidings to the steadfast..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:155)

We find that the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> and his clan were boycotted socially and economically for three years to force him to stop his message and compromise with the pagans but he resisted and realized a moral victory<sup>(6)</sup>.

### 4. STRIVING FOR RIGHTEOUS DEEDS:

Allah declares in the Qur'an:

*"As for those who strive (Jahadu) in Us (the cause of Allah), We surely guide them to Our paths, and lo! Allah is with the good doers."*  
(The Holy Quran, 29:69)

When we are faced with two competing interests, it becomes *jihad* to choose the right one, as the following Hadith exemplify:

"Aisha, wife of the Prophet<sup>(s)</sup> asked, 'O Messenger of Allah, we see *jihad* as the best of deeds, so shouldn't we join it?' He replied, 'But the best of *jihad* is a perfect Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah).'"  
(Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 2784)

At another occasion, a man asked the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup>:

"Should I join the *jihad*?" He asked, 'Do you have parents?' The man said, 'Yes!' The Prophet<sup>(s)</sup> said, 'Then **strive** by serving them!'"  
(Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 5972)

Yet another man asked the Messenger of Allah<sup>(s)</sup>:

"What kind of *jihad* is better?" He replied, 'A word of truth in front of an oppressive ruler!'" (Sunan Al-Nasa'i, No. 4209)

The Messenger of Allah<sup>(s)</sup> said:

"...the *Mujahid* (one who carries out *jihad*) is he who **strives** against himself for the sake of Allah, and the *Muhajir* (one who emigrates) is he who abandons evil deeds and sin."  
(Sahih Ibn Hibbanm, No. 4862)

### 5. HAVING COURAGE AND STEADFASTNESS TO CONVEY THE MESSAGE OF ISLAM:

The Qur'an narrates the experiences of a large number of Prophets and good people who suffered a great deal trying to convey the message of Allah to mankind. For examples, see the Qur'an 26:1-190, 36:13-32. In the Qur'an, Allah specifically praises those who **strive** to convey His message:

*"Who is better in speech than one who calls (other people) to Allah, works righteous, and declares that he is from the Muslims."* (The Holy Quran, 41:33)

Under adverse conditions it takes great courage to remain a Muslim, declare oneself to be a Muslim and call others to Islam. We read in the Qur'an:

*"The (true) believers are only those who believe in Allah and his messenger and afterward doubt not, but strive with their wealth and their selves for the cause of Allah. Such are the truthful."* (The Holy Quran, 49:15)

### 6. DEFENDING ISLAM AND THE COMMUNITY:

Allah declares in the Qur'an:

*"To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to defend themselves), because they are wronged - and verily, Allah is Most Powerful to give them victory - (they are) those who have been expelled from their homes in defiance of right - (for no cause) except that they say, 'Our Lord is Allah'..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 22:39-40)

The Qur'an permits fighting to defend the religion of Islam and the Muslims. This permission includes fighting in self-defense and for the protection of family and property. The early Muslims fought many battles against their enemies under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> or his representatives. For example, when the pagans of Quraysh brought armies against Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup>, the Muslims fought to defend their faith and community<sup>(6)</sup>. The Qur'an adds:

*"Fight in the cause of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not transgress limits. Lo! Allah loves not aggressors. ...And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against transgressors."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:190, 193)

### 7. HELPING ALLIED PEOPLE WHO MAY NOT BE MUSLIM:

In the late period of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> life, the tribe of Banu Khuza'ah became his ally. They were living near Makkah which was under the rule of the pagan Quraysh, Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> own tribe. The tribe of Banu Bakr, an ally of Quraysh, with the help of some elements of Quraysh, attacked Banu Khuza'ah invoked the treaty and demanded Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> to come to their help and punish Quraysh. The Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> organized a campaign against Quraysh of Makkah which resulted in the conquest of Makkah which occurred without any battle<sup>(6)</sup>.

### 8. REMOVING TREACHEROUS PEOPLE FROM POWER:

Allah orders the Muslims in the Qur'an:

*"If you fear treachery from any group, throw back (their treaty) to them, (so as to be) on equal terms. Lo! Allah loves not the treacherous."*  
(The Holy Quran, 8:58)

Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> undertook a number of armed campaigns to remove treacherous people from power and their lodgings. He had entered into pacts with several tribes, however, some of them proved themselves treacherous. Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> launched armed campaigns against these tribes, defeated and exiled them from Medina and its surroundings<sup>(6)</sup>.

### 9. DEFENDING THROUGH PREEMPTIVE STRIKES:

Indeed, it is difficult to mobilize people to fight when they see no invaders in their territory; however, those who are charged with responsibility see dangers ahead of time and must provide leadership. The Messenger of Allah, Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup>, had the responsibility to protect his people and the religion he established in Arabia. Whenever he received intelligence reports about enemies gathering near his borders he carried out preemptive strikes, broke their power and dispersed them<sup>(6)</sup>. Allah ordered Muslims in the Qur'an:

*"Fighting is prescribed upon you, and you dislike it. But it may happen that you love a thing which is bad for you. And Allah knows and you know not."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:216)

### 10. GAINING FREEDOM TO INFORM, EDUCATE AND CONVEY THE MESSAGE OF ISLAM IN AN OPEN AND FREE ENVIRONMENT:

Allah declares in the Qur'an:

*"They ask you (Muhammad) concerning fighting in the Sacred Month. Say, 'Fighting therein is a grave (offense) but graver is it in the sight of Allah to prevent access to the path of Allah, to deny Him, to prevent access to the Sacred Mosque, and drive out its inhabitants. Persecution is worse than killing. Nor will they cease fighting you until they turn you back from your faith, if they can..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:217)

*"And those who, when an oppressive wrong is inflicted on them, (are not cowed but) fight back..."*  
(The Holy Quran, 42:39)

To gain this freedom, Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> said:

"**Strive** (Jahidu) against the disbelievers with your hands and tongues."  
(Sahih Ibn Hibban, No. 4708)

The life of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> was full of **striving** to gain the freedom to inform and convey the message of Islam. During his stay in Makkah he used non-violent methods and after the establishment of his government in Madinah, by the permission of Allah, he used armed struggle against his enemies whenever he found it inevitable.

### 11. FREEING PEOPLE FROM TYRANNY:

Allah admonishes Muslims in the Qur'an:

*"And why should you not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated (and oppressed)? - Men, women, and children, whose cry is: 'Our Lord! Rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from You, one who will protect; and raise for us from You, one who will help.'"*  
(The Holy Quran, 4:75)

The mission of the Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> was to free people from tyranny and exploitation by oppressive systems. Once free, individuals in the society were then free to choose Islam or not. Prophet Muhammad<sup>(s)</sup> successors continued in his footsteps and went to help oppressed people. For example, after the repeated call by the oppressed people of Spain to the Muslims for help, Spain was liberated by Muslim forces and the tyrant rulers removed. After the conquest of Syria and Iraq by the Muslims, the Christian population of Hims reportedly said to the Muslims:

"We like your rule and justice far better than the state of oppression and tyranny under which we have been living."<sup>(7)</sup>

The defeated rulers of Syria were Roman Christians, and Iraq was ruled by Zoroastrian Persians.

### WHAT SHOULD MUSLIMS DO WHEN THEY ARE VICTORIOUS?

Muslims should remove tyranny, treachery, bigotry, and ignorance and replace them with justice and equity. We should provide truthful knowledge and free people from the bondage of 'associationism' (Shirk, or multiple gods), prejudice, superstition and mythology. Muslims remove immorality, fear, crime, exploitation and replace them with divine morality, peace and education. The Qur'an declares:

*"Lo! Allah commands you that you restore deposits to their owners, and if you judge between mankind that you judge justly. Lo! It is proper that Allah admonishes you. Lo! Allah is ever Hearer, Seer."*  
(The Holy Quran, 4:58)

*"O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah's witness to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety and fear Allah. And Allah is well acquainted with all that you do."*  
(The Holy Quran, 5:8)

*"And of those whom We have created there is a nation who guides with the Truth and establishes justice with it."*  
(The Holy Quran, 7:181)

*"Lo! Allah enjoins justice and kindness, and giving to kinsfolk, and forbids lewdness and abomination and wickedness. He exhorts you in order that you may take heed."*  
(The Holy Quran, 16:90)

*"Those who, if We give them power in the land, establish prescribed prayers (salaah) and pay the poor-due (zakah) and enjoy right conduct and forbid evil. And with Allah rests the end (and decision) of (all) affairs."*  
(The Holy Quran, 22:41)

### DID ISLAM SPREAD BY FORCE, SWORDS OR GUNS?

The unequivocal and emphatic answer is **No!** The Qur'an declares:

*"Let there be no compulsion (or coercion) in the religion (Islam). The right direction is distinctly clear from error."*  
(The Holy Quran, 2:256)

Here is a good study of the question of the spread of Islam by a Christian missionary, T. W. Arnold:

"...of any organized attempt to force the acceptance of Islam on the non-Muslim population, or of any systematic persecution intended to stamp out the Christian religion, we hear nothing. Had the caliphs chosen to adopt either course of action, they might have swept away Christianity as easily as Ferdinand and Isabella drove Islam out of Spain, or Louis XIV made Protestantism penal in France, or the Jews were kept out of England for 350 years. The Eastern Churches in Asia were entirely cut off from communion with the rest of Christendom throughout which no one would have been found to lift a finger on their behalf, as heretical communions. So that the very survival of these Churches to the present day is a strong proof of the generally tolerant attitude of Mohammedan [sic] governments towards them"<sup>(8)</sup>.

Islam does not teach, nor do Muslims desire, conversion of any people for fear, greed, marriage or any other form of coercion.

In conclusion, *jihad* in Islam is **striving** in the way of Allah by pen, tongue, hand, media and, if inevitable, with arms. However, *jihad* in Islam does not include striving for individual or national power, dominance, glory, wealth, prestige or pride.

-- M. Amir Ali, Ph.D.

### REFERENCES:

1. For the sake of simplicity and easy reading, masculine pronouns have been used throughout this brochure. No exclusion of females is intended. ([back](#))
2. Haykal, M. H., *The Life of Muhammad*, Tr. Ismail R. Faruqi, American Trust Publications, 1976, p. 132. ([back](#))
3. Haykal, pp. 216, 242, 299 and 414 for the Battles of Badr, Uhud, Al-Khandaq and Hunayn, respectively. ([back](#))
4. Haykal, p. 395 for the conquest of Makkah. ([back](#))
5. Haykal, pp. 245, 277, 311 and 326 for campaigns against the tribes of Banu Qaynuqa', Banu Al-Nadir, Banu Qurayzah and Banu Lihyan, respectively. Also, see p. 283 for the Battle of Dhat Al-Riqa'. ([back](#))
6. Haykal, pp. 284, 327, 366, 387, 393, 443 and 515 for the Battles of Dawmat Al-Jandal, Banu Al-Mustaliq, Khayber, Mu'tah, Dhat Al-Salasil, Tabuk and the Campaign of Usama Ibn Zayd, respectively. ([back](#))
7. Hitti, Philip K., *History of the Arabs*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1970, p. 153. ([back](#))
8. Arnold, Sir Thomas W., *The Preaching of Islam, a History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, Westminster A. Constable & Co., London, 1896, p. 80. ([back](#))

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