

***Jihad* — Its True Significance**

by Shahid Aziz

(Based on the notes given by my mentor and teacher, the late Hafiz Maulana Sher Muhammad, may his soul rest in peace, a leading scholar of Islam, the fragrance of whose company shall live with me for ever.)

The concept of *jihad* is as much misunderstood by Muslims as it is by non-Muslims. In English it is generally translated by non-Muslims as ‘Holy War’, which, given the lack of knowledge of Islam in the West may be understandable. What is less so, is that many Muslims themselves regard *jihad* as meaning a Holy War waged for the propagation of Islam.

The sources one may use to understand and explain the meaning of Islamic terminology are lexicons, the Holy Quran, the Hadith (or sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad) and the opinions of the scholars of Islam, and not popular mythology. In addition, *asbab-i nazool*, the context in which a verse was revealed, makes clear Allah’s intention in revealing a verse and its application. Let us consider the meaning and significance of *jihad* in the light of these sources.

Background

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*) was born in Makkah and he was appointed by Allah as a Prophet and a Messenger at Makkah. He started to receive revelation there and this continued after he migrated to Medina. The Holy Quran is made up of the revelation to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*) over a long period of 23 years.

The Holy Prophet (*sas*) communicated his revelation to the inhabitants of Makkah; this led to resentment on the part of their leaders, who began a campaign of persecution against the Holy Prophet and his companions. This included all manner of humiliation, torture and torment. Yet Muslims did not engage non-believers in fighting. Twice, Muslims undertook migration in preference to fighting. The first time some of them migrated to Abyssinia. They were pursued by their enemies, who appealed to the Christian King of Abyssinia to extradite them so that the Muslims might be punished under their tribal laws. The King refused, thereby saving Muslims’ lives. The second migration was to Medina. This time the whole of the Muslim community fled from Makkah in fear for their lives. It was only when the non-believers attacked them in Medina and determined to kill the whole community that Muslims took up arms to defend themselves.

Revelation of verses containing commandments for *jihad*

Some verses commanding Muslims to undertake *jihad* were revealed at Makkah before the Flight to Medina. For example, *Surah Al-‘Ankabut*, ‘The Spider’ (Chapter 29), was revealed at Makkah five or six years after the Call. In it Muslims are commanded thus:

“And whoever strives (*ja-ha-da*) hard, strives (*yu-ja-hi-du*) for himself ...” (29:6)

So, the Muslims were asked to undertake *jihad* at a very early stage while still at Makkah, and at a time when they were being persecuted. Yet, they did not undertake any physical confrontation with their opponents while at Makkah.

As the number of Muslims increased so did persecution. When it became unbearable, as has been said, they migrated to Abyssinia rather than fight. Some may say that at that time Muslims were so few in numbers and so weak that it was in their interest to keep quiet. This is contradicted by an incident related in the *Sunan of Nisai (Kitab al-Jihad)*. It is said that when persecution became unbearable the Companions (*rad*) of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*) approached him and said: “We too have blood in our veins and strength in our muscles, permit us to fight.” The Holy Prophet replied: “I have been commanded to forgive, so fight them not.” This shows that *jihad* is not synonymous with fighting because, although at least one verse commanding *jihad* had been revealed and Muslims asked for permission to fight, yet the Holy Prophet refused.

Meaning of *jihad* given in lexicons

Amongst the lexicons, one of the most important classical works is the *Mufradat* of Raghib. In it, Imam Raghib gives this definition of *jihad*:

“To expend resources and power in defence against an enemy, and it is of three kinds: *jihad* against an enemy that can be seen, *jihad* against the devil and *jihad* against one’s *nafs* (one’s own inner self or desires).”

The most authentic lexicon produced by the European scholars of Islam is Lane’s Lexicon. It says this about *jihad*:

“From the root *ja-ha-da*. Its real meaning is that a person uses his power and abilities and strives to the utmost against something undesirable. It is of three forms: against an open enemy, against Satan, or against his own *nafs*. All these are included in its meaning and it has been used in the same way by the Holy Quran.”

One can thus see that, from a classical Muslim scholar to a more recent European non-Muslim, both have given the same meaning of *jihad*. Although all lexicons give similar meanings for *jihad*, I have cited only two standard works to show *jihad* does not mean war and certainly not a war waged for the propagation of Islam.

Meaning of *jihad* from the Holy Quran

For a Muslim, the basic source of his or her beliefs is the Holy Quran. Here are some verses from the Holy Quran which determine what *jihad* means. It says:

“And those who strive hard (*ja-ha-du*) for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways.” (29:69)

Here the word *jihad* is used to mean a spiritual struggle to attain nearness to God. And again:

“And whoever strives (*ja-ha-da*) hard, strives (*yu-ja-hi-du*) for himself.” (29:6)

Here *jihad* is used to mean an effort either to purify oneself or to help others, as is shown by the verse which follows 29:6. Further, the Holy Writ says:

“And We have enjoined on man goodness to his parents. But if they contend (*ja-ha-da-ka*) with thee to associate others with Me, of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not ...” (29:8)

Here the word *jihad* is used to mean an argument. In another place we find:

“And strive hard (*ja-hi-du*) for Allah with due striving ...” (22:78) and

“So obey not the disbelievers, and strive (*ja-hi-du*) against them a mighty striving (*ji-ha-dan kabeeran*) with it (the Holy Quran).” (25:52)

In these two verses a Muslim is clearly told to conduct a *jihad*. In the first verse the *jihad* is to be conducted to attain nearness to God. In the second verse Muslims are told to conduct a *jihad* against the disbelievers, not with the sword, but with the Holy Quran. This *jihad* with the Holy Quran is called *jihadan kabeeran* or a mighty or great struggle.

Commenting on this verse, Allamah Fakhr-ud-Din Razi has said:

“Some people take this verse to mean striving by preaching, but others say that it means to fight and yet others consider that both meanings apply. However, the former meaning is correct because this verse was revealed in Makkah and the permission to fight was given after the Flight .” (*Tafsir*, vol. 4, p. 330)

The word *jihad* is, in fact, the opposite of the word *qauood* or idleness or holding back. The Holy Quran says:

“The holders back (*qa-i-doo-na*) from among the believers, not disabled by injury, and those who strive hard (*mu-ja-hi-duna*) in Allah’s way with their property and their persons, are not equal ...” (4:95)

It is common sense to say that the opposite of idleness is not fighting but making an effort and struggling.

Meaning of *jihad* from the *ahadith*

The next source on which a Muslim bases his or her belief and faith are the *ahadith* of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*), collections of his sayings. I give below some sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad to show that he too used the word *jihad* to mean a struggle.

In *Mishkat* we find the following sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*).

1. “Carry out a *jihad* against the idolaters with your wealth, your lives and your tongues.” (*Kitab al-Jihad*)
2. “The Holy Prophet (*sas*) was asked which is the best *jihad*. He replied that it was the one carried out against the idolaters with one’s wealth and one’s life.” (*Ibid.*)

A more specific *hadith* clarifies the difference between the use of the word *jihad* for fighting and efforts to purify oneself.

“It is related on the authority of Jabir (*rad*) that when a party of fighting men returned, the Holy Prophet welcomed them saying: ‘You have come from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*.’ They asked: ‘What is the greater *jihad*?’ The Holy Prophet replied: ‘For a man to struggle against his own weaknesses.’ ”

In *Kitab al-Amarat*, in *Mishkat*, the Holy Prophet is reported to have said:

“The greatest *jihad* is to say the truth to a tyrannical despot.”

In the classical work *Tafsir Ruh ul-Biyaan* an explanation of this *hadith* is given as:

“The Holy Prophet said that the greatest *jihad* (*jihad-i akbar*) is to tell a tyrannical ruler the truth. **This is the greatest *jihad* because to carry out a *jihad* with gentleness and argument is superior to *jihad* with the sword. *Jihad* with the sword is the lesser *jihad*.**”

In modern language we can say that to win the hearts and minds of the people is better than conquering territory. **Territory conquered may be lost but hearts, once won over, stay loyal forever.**

In the *Mufradat*, referred to earlier, the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*) is reported to have said:

1. “Carry out a *jihad* against your own failings as you would carry out a *jihad* against an enemy.”

2: “Carry out a *jihad* against the unbelievers with your hands and your tongues.”

In the *Sahih* of *Bukhari* (*Kitab al-Jihad*) it is related that the Holy Prophet (*sas*) said:

“The better *jihad* is *Hajj-ul-Mabroor*.”

Another *hadith* tells us that:

“Real *jihad* is that in obedience to Allah one struggles against one’s own desires.”

And elsewhere:

“***Jihad* consists of four things: to command the good; to forbid the bad; to speak the truth at times of trial requiring patience; not to be reconciled with transgressors.**”

These sayings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad make it clear that *jihad* means a struggle to the best of one’s ability. It involves the use of one’s wealth, one’s hand, one’s tongue, etc; and it is against one’s own desires as well as external opponents, and its objectives are to attain nearness to God and to propagate Islam.

If we summarise what the Holy Quran and the *hadith* tell us we find that three forms of *jihad* are mentioned: *jihad kabir*, *jihad akbar* and *jihad asghar*. The first two forms, meaning the greater struggle, are eternal and refer to a struggle against oneself or a struggle to propagate Islam, and the third, meaning the lesser *jihad*, is *jihad* with the sword or fighting. However, this is conditional *jihad* and depends upon the circumstances. **In fact the Holy Quran uses three words for fighting: *harb*, *qital* and *jihad*. Whereas the first two have a restricted meaning of fighting, *jihad* has, as has been shown, a much wider significance. To allow for this, the phrase *jihad bis-saif* (*jihad* with the sword) is used to indicate that fighting is meant.**

Early days in Medina

After Muslims migrated to Medina, the non-believers of Makkah wrote a letter to Abdullah bin Ubbay, one of the chiefs of Medina. In it they said:

“O people of Medina, you have given our opponents sanctuary. We swear by God that, unless you either attack and kill them or expel them from your city, we shall kill all your men and take away your women.” (*Sunan Abu Dawood*, vol. 2, p. 495)

When the Muslims were neither killed nor expelled, the non-believers first resorted to raiding the outskirts of Medina. This was to make clear their declared intention of attacking Medina unless the Muslims were removed.

When the Holy Prophet Muhammad arrived in Medina, he took certain precautions. First, he entered into a treaty with the Jewish and other tribes living in the area. This treaty, known as *Mithaq-i Medina*, lays down the principles of Muslim conduct when living in a non-Muslim environment. He then arranged for night guards to be placed around Medina and started to send out regular reconnaissance patrols to guard against surprise attacks. The situation was so dangerous that the Holy Prophet (*sas*) and his Companions used to go to bed fully armed, in case there was a surprise attack on them.

Events leading up to the permission to fight

Eventually, the non-believers of Makkah made up their minds to annihilate the Muslims at Medina. They decided to raise an army to attack Medina. To finance the campaign they confiscated the property left behind in Makkah by the Muslims. A large trade caravan was assembled to take these goods to Syria and to sell them there to raise money for the campaign.

While the caravan was on its way back from Syria an incident gave the non-believers of Makkah an excuse to attack Medina. It has already been explained that the Holy Prophet used to send out reconnaissance patrols to gather information about enemy movements. It was in the second year after the Flight from Makkah that the Holy Prophet sent out a patrol under the leadership of *Hazrat* Abdullah bin Hajash (*rad*). He was given secret written instructions sealed in an envelope and told to open the envelope after two days. The patrol was instructed to head for a place called Nakhla. When *Hazrat* Abdullah (*rad*) looked at his instructions he discovered that he was to stay at Nakhla and gather intelligence about the movement of non-believers.

Hazrat Abdullah (rad) was sent to patrol this area for a number of reasons. One reason may have been to check whether the rumours related to confiscation of Muslim property left behind in Makkah and its sale were true. A second reason may have been to keep a look out to see when the trade caravan sent to Syria would return, because its return would herald the imminent attack being planned by the Makkans. A third reason may have been to warn the non-believers of Makkah that if they continued to disrupt agricultural production in Medina, on which its economy depended, then the economy of Makkah would also suffer because their trade caravans, on which the Makkan economy depended, would also be disrupted.

At Nakhla, *Hazrat Abdullah (rad)* ran into a small Makkan caravan and, against the Holy Prophet's strict instructions, he attacked it, killing Umru bin al-Hadrami, taking two prisoners and some booty. Upon his return to Medina, the Holy Prophet (*sas*) clearly told him that he had exceeded his instructions and refused to accept the booty for the state treasury. Other Companions (*rad*) were also angry with him and said:

“You did that for which you were not given a command ...” (*Tabari*, p. 1275)

Permission to fight is given

Umru, the person who died in confrontation with *Hazrat Abdullah (rad)* was the son of a prominent chief. It was a matter of honour to avenge the death of any member of a tribe, let alone the son of the chief.

There were also other considerations. Makkans now realised that the Holy Prophet (*sas*) was keeping a close eye on their trade routes with the world outside Arabia. They saw that they had made a grave mistake by letting the Holy Prophet (*sas*) move to Medina because he (*sas*) now had the power to destroy their economy at will by disrupting trade. There was a more immediate worry — the caravan from Syria which was on its way back.

Abu Sufian, the caravan-leader, heard rumours of an attack and changed his route to avoid it. He despatched a messenger to Makkah to inform them of the danger. Makkans could not be sure that the caravan was safe. In any case, Umru's death had totally changed the calculation. The matter was no longer political or religious, it was a matter of honour. Umru's death had to be avenged.

They acted swiftly. An army of one thousand foot soldiers and a hundred cavalry was raised and despatched to Medina with the utmost urgency. It was at this time that the Holy Prophet (*sas*) prayed for guidance and the Muslims were given permission to fight. The Holy Quran says:

“Permission to fight (*yu-qa-taluna*) is given to those on whom war is made, because they are oppressed. And surely Allah is Able to assist them.

“Those who are driven from their homes without a just cause except that they say: Our Lord is Allah. And (if) Allah did not repel some people by others, (then) cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which Allah's name is much remembered, would have been pulled down. And surely Allah will help him who helps Him. Surely Allah is Strong, Mighty.” (22:39–40)

Note that when permission to fight is given to the Muslims, the word used is *qital* and not *jihad*. It has already been pointed out that the Holy Quran uses the words *harb* and *qital* for the use of physical force, whereas the word *jihad* is used in a much wider sense of a struggle. It can be that eventually the struggle in a general sense may indeed lead to a struggle in the physical sense, but this is then called *jihad bis-saif*, or struggle with the sword..

These two verses also make other things clear. First, that Muslims are to fight when “war is made” on them. In other words, Muslims are not to be aggressive but fight in defence only. Second, Muslims are given permission to fight when tyranny and oppression have become unbearable and people are persecuted and forced out of their homes for their beliefs. Third, the intention of those waging war is to establish tyranny and to deprive Muslims of the freedom to hold their beliefs, practice their religion and to propagate it by peaceful means. Fourth, the war fought by Muslims is to be for the defence of all people subjected to oppression and tyranny, regardless of their religion, creed or colour.

Elsewhere, the Holy Quran says:

“And (if) Allah did not repel some people by others (then), cloisters, and churches, and synagogues, and mosques in which Allah’s name is much remembered, would have been pulled down.”

In another place the Holy Quran says:

“And fight (*qa-ti-lu*) in the way of Allah against those who fight against you but be not aggressive.” (2:190)

Here again the Holy Quran uses the word *qital* for physical force, and not the word *jihad*. And, Muslims are again instructed to defend themselves, but they are not to be aggressive.

This discussion from the lexicons, the Holy Quran and the Hadith, sources on which a Muslim bases his or her faith, clearly shows that *jihad* is not synonymous with fighting. The historical context of the verses in which Muslims were allowed to fight also shows that Muslims have never been commanded by the Holy Quran or the Holy Prophet Muhammad (*sas*) to engage in aggression.

(Extract from *Khutbah Jumu‘ah*, delivered at *Dar-us-Salaam*, London, 5th October 2001)

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