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# Peace & Jihād in Islam

## Introduction

On September 11, 2001, a few individuals hijacked four civilian airplanes and used them as weapons against various targets, to create terror in the United States. All the crew and passengers in the four planes, as well as about three thousand civilians lost their lives in those attacks.

The foreign policies of the United States of America vis-à-vis Muslim countries do not justify the killing of American civilians. This is not what Islam teaches. Look at the instructions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during war-time: he clearly forbade the killing of the elderly, children, and women.<sup>1</sup>

Those who lost their lives in the World Trade Center towers and in the planes were all civilians, and quite a few of them were Muslim.

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

This condemnation is based on the universal value of sanctity for human life. The holy Qur'ān relates the story of the first murder in human history, that of the two sons of Adam in which

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<sup>1</sup> *Hurr al-‘Āmili, Wasā’ilu ‘sh-Shi‘a*, vol. 11, p. 43.

Cain (Qābīl) murdered his brother Abel (Hābīl). This is in Chapter 5 of the Qur'ān, verses 27 to 31.

At the conclusion of this story, Almighty God says:

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

It is clear from this verse that (1) unless a person is put on trial and proven to have murdered someone, he or she cannot be killed; and that (2) killing an innocent person is tantamount to killing all of mankind.

## **So What About *Jihād*?**

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

Many individuals, laymen as well as experts, have tried to link 9/11 to the concept of *jihād* in Islam. In one prominent Toronto radio talk show, soon after 9/11, one caller stated that ‘what happened was 10% terrorism, and 90% Islam’. A fundamentalist Christian leader in the US, stated on his TV show, that ‘probably Muhammad was a terrorist’. Due to misconceptions and stereotypes such as these, it is important to talk about *jihād* in Islam.

### **(a) Islam is the Religion of Peace**

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

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

## **Islām**

### **Silm**

#### **1. Submission (to God)**

#### **2. Peace (towards fellow humans)**

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

### **(b) The Concept of Jihād**

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

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

**So what does “*jihād*” mean?** In Arabic language, the word jihād literally means ‘striving and working hard for something’. In Islamic terminology, it retains the literal meaning in two different dimensions, which are expressed by “major jihād” and “minor *jihād*”.

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

Fasting in the month of Ramadhān is an example of the annual training for this major jihād.

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

## ***JIHĀD***

***(struggle)***

***MAJOR***

***(spiritual)***

***MINOR***

***(armed struggle)***

***defense***

***aggression***

□ □

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

## ***Jihād in the Qur'ān***

## **(a) The Initial Verses**

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

The first battle fought by the Prophet and his followers was a war of defense. It is known as the Battle of Badr, a place near the city of Medina. This was a battle in which the Prophet led his followers to face enemy forces that had come all the way from Mecca. (See Book 1 for further details)

The first verse regarding minor jihād, the armed struggle, revealed at that time is in Chapter 22 of the Qur'ān, verses 39-40.

It clearly explains the purpose of the minor jihād:

*“Permission is granted to those who are fighting because they have been oppressed...those who have been expelled from their homes without any just cause...”*

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

*“Fight, in the way of God, those who are fighting against you; and do not exceed (the limits). Verily Allāh does not love those who exceed (the limits).”*

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

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

*“Prepare against them (i.e., the enemy) with whatever force and trained horses you can in order to frighten thereby Allāh’s enemy, your enemy, and others besides them who you do not know but Allāh knows them.”*

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

*“But if they (the enemies) incline to peace, then you (also) incline to it, and put your trust in Allāh...”*

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

## **(b) The Problem of Text & Context**

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

It would be similar to someone searching through the Bible and picking the following words or sentences to prove that the Bible promotes violence:

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

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

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

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

Let us look at some examples of taking the Qur'anic 'text' outside its 'context'.

*First Example:*

Chapter 2, verse 191 is quoted as follows:

“Kill them wherever you find them.”

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

“And fight in the way of God *those who are fighting against you*, and *do not exceed the limits*, surely God does not love those who exceed the limits. And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drove you out— persecution is severer than slaughter.

And do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca] until they fight with you in it; but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers. But if they desist, then surely God is Forgiving, Merciful. And fight them until there is no persecution and religion should be only for God; *but if they desist, then there should be no hostility* except against the oppressors.”

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

*Second Example:*

Chapter 4, verse 74 which supposedly encourages blood shedding:

“So let those fight in the way of God who are willing to sell this world's life for the hereafter; and whoever fights in the way of God, then be he slain or be he victorious, We shall grant him a mighty reward.”



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

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

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

*Third Example:*

Chapter 9, verse 12:

“Fight the leaders of unbelief.”

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

“And *if they break their oaths* after their agreement and revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief—surely their oaths are of no value— so that they may desist.

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

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

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

*Fourth Example:*

Chapter 9, verse 36:

“Fight the polytheists all together.”

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

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

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

### **(c) Conclusion**

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

The verses regarding the idol-worshippers of Mecca are very specific and related to that time period. Revisiting Chapter 22, verses 39-40:

*“Permission (to fight) is granted to those who are fighting because they have been oppressed, and most surely God is well able to assist them. Those who have been expelled from their homes without a just cause except that they say, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’*

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

Islam deals with the realistic human society and not with the idealistic society. In the words of Dr. Sayyid Hussain Nasr:

“Muslims view the Christian ethics as being too sublime for ordinary human beings to follow; it seems that the injunction to turn the other cheek was being meant only for saints. Christian people over the centuries have not shown any more restraint in war than have non-Christians. The ideal preached and the practice followed have often little to do with each other.”<sup>2</sup>

This section will be concluded with chapter 109 of the Qur’ān:

*“Say: O those who do not believe! I do not worship what you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. Nor am I going to worship what you worship. Nor are you going to worship what I worship. You shall have your religion, and I shall have my religion.”*

## **Misuse of “Jihād”**

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

It is not only the likes of Bin Laden who hijack and misuse the noble terms of Islam; we have even seen the government of the United States of

America promoting the concept of minor jihād when it suited its own geopolitical interests.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 80's, the U.S. Agency for International Development spent millions of dollars to supply Afghan school children with textbooks filled with violent images and “militant Islamic” teachings. Published in the dominant Afghan languages of Dari and Pashtu, these textbooks were developed in the early 1980s under an AID grant to the University of Nebraska-Omaha and its Centre for Afghanistan

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

Studies. The agency spent \$51 million on the university's education programs in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1994.

The primers - which were filled with talk of *jihād* and featured drawings of guns, bullets, soldiers and mines - have served since then as the Afghan school system's core curriculum. Unlike the children in the rest of the world whose math textbooks have pictures of apples and oranges, the Afghan children were taught to count with illustrations showing tanks, missiles and land mines.<sup>3</sup>

And so when it suited its strategic interests, the United States of America promoted the culture of jihād among the Afghan children in the 80's and President Reagan even welcomed the Afghan “mujahideen” in the White House. (Even the Taliban used the American-produced books, though the radical movement scratched out human faces in keeping with its strict fundamental code.)

Now that this culture of violence has come back to haunt the West, the US administration is absolutely against the idea of jihād and expects Muslims to abandon the concept in totality.

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

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3 Information on US financed “jihādi culture” is based on the article of Joe Stephens and David B. Ottaway, “From U.S., the ABC’s of Jihad” in *Washington Post*, March 23, 2002, page A01.

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

## **Media & Stereotyping the Muslims**

In light of the above, there is no justification in linking 9/11 to the concept of the minor jihād in Islam.

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

Targeting the Muslims or Arabs based on guilt-by-association is absolutely wrong. The double standard in the media has reached appalling levels.

For example:

In the early days of September 2001, a bomb exploded in Northern Ireland near a Catholic school, in a Protestant neighbourhood. No one in the media blamed the entire Protestant community as “terrorists and murderers”.

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

When Dr. Goldstein, a Jewish settler in Israel, entered a mosque in Hebron and gunned down Palestinian worshippers, no one said that all Jewish people are “terrorists”.

When Serbians brutally massacred Muslims in Bosnia, the media never blamed the Serbian Orthodox Church, even though some priests of that church used to bless the Serbian militia before they embarked on executing Muslim prisoners.

Yet, we see that when a few Arabs or Muslims commit acts of terror, all Muslims and all Arabs are automatically branded as “terrorists and murderers.” As Muslims, we ask the media for fairness, and nothing more.

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

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## **Book 2:**

This text dissects the concept of jihad, and it's relation to peace as a core Islamic value. It also goes over Qur'anic verses related to Jihad, the true meaning behind them, and the misconceptions that have grown in recent years behind this concept.

It also addresses the misuse of the word "jihad", stereotypes in media and politics, and the issue of Qur'anic verses being quoted out of context.

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