

Jihad – Myth & Reality

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No religion in the modern world is as feared and misunderstood as Islam. It haunts the popular Western imagination as an extreme faith that promotes authoritarian government, female oppression, civil war, and terrorism. Karen Armstrong asserts that the [this] fastest-growing faith is a much richer and more complex phenomenon than its modern fundamentalist strain might suggest.¹ The heightened interest for better understanding Islam is important not only for the non-Muslims but is critical for Muslims who have grossly misunderstood and misrepresented their religion. Jihad is one example of this lack of understanding which, in addition to tarnishing the image of Islam, has done incalculable damage to Muslim's economic and political interests around the world. Terrorists use this misrepresented doctrine primarily to recruit young, ignorant Muslims to commit terrorist acts with the guarantee to heavens if they die. Muslim countries use it as a training tool for their armies to fight political wars. The classic unintended consequence of this flawed application was the 8-year old Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when both Muslim countries were fighting "jihad" against each other. It is important to state the facts about the original concept of jihad and demolish the myth.

The gap between the Qur'anic teachings of peace, tolerance, and social justice are obvious by their absence in the conduct of Muslims as a group or community. The common understanding and practice of jihad by Muslim communities today is diametrically opposed to that practiced during the life of Prophet Mohammad^{sa*}. Starting from his life time and continuing for several centuries, Muslim societies were known for their social justice, tolerance, multiculturalism and had become centers of excellence in sciences, arts, and literature and made significant contributions to mathematics, astronomy, medicine, etc. Today, Muslim societies lack these basic ingredients that made them successful in the earlier days.

In the Middle East and Europe, for example, the Muslim Empire provided a safe home for the Jews when they were persecuted by the Christians. Similarly, the integration between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent during the Mughal Empire demonstrates excellent examples of Muslim tolerance and diversity. Karen Armstrong accurately captures the recipe for the rapid rise and success of Muslim Empire as "... the Quran, gave them a historical mission. Their chief duty was to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable, were treated with absolute respect."²

¹ Karen Armstrong "Islam: A Short History" dust jacket comment

* Customary salutation meaning peace be on him

² Karen Armstrong "Islam: A Short History", p x-xi

As already stated, jihad is the one Islamic concept which has conveniently been distorted by Muslims and non-Muslims alike: Muslims use it to justify terrorism and acts of violence around the world, both against non-Muslims and amongst themselves while non-Muslims use it to identify Islam with violence, condemn it for its barbarism, and confirm their jaundiced view that Islam supports terrorism. A critical review of jihad from the initial days to the present shows how the understanding of jihad has changed in response to specific political events when the strain of violence was interjected by a handful of supposedly well intentioned but naïve individuals; this transition is summarized in this article.

John Esposito asserts that the doctrine of violent jihad is not the product of a single authoritative individual or organization and its emergence in the mainstream is a recent phenomenon [~150 years old]; it is a product of diverse individuals and self-styled authorities interpreting and applying the principles of sacred texts to specific historical and political contexts.³ Ironically, while the enactment of these twisted pronouncements and misguided reactions, in response to specific political events may be explainable as reactionary and desperate moves for that specific event, their acceptance as part of the faith is simply repugnant to Islamic teachings. Even more detestable is the fact that mainstream Muslims did not reject these un-Islamic innovations and did not prevent them from being introduced into the faith. In fairness to the Muslims, it must be admitted that considerable discussion and opposition occurred within the Muslims of the time. This article will trace how violence became ingrained with Jihad and was conveniently used by terrorists as a religious obligation which confused many Muslims.

The arguments about the Qur'an sanctioning violence and killing of non believers is viscous propaganda and is readily rejected by several Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. Al-Qaida and Taliban radicals and their ilk can cherry pick and selectively quote Qur'anic references to support their untenable positions but that does not change the factual position that Islam does not sanction violence. According to Karen Armstrong, "The Qur'an began to urge the Muslims of Medina to participate in a jihad. This would involve fighting and bloodshed, but the root JHD implies more than a 'holy war'. It signifies a physical, moral, spiritual and intellectual effort. There are plenty of Arabic words denoting armed combat, such as *harb* (war), *sira'a* (combat), *ma'araka* (battle) or *qital*, which the Qur'an could easily have used if war had been the Muslims' principal way of engaging in this effort. Instead it chooses a vaguer, richer word with a wide range of connotations. The jihad is not one of the five pillars of Islam. It is not the central prop of the religion, despite the common Western view. But it was and remains a duty for Muslims to commit themselves to a struggle on all fronts – moral, spiritual and political – to create a just and decent society, where the poor and vulnerable are not exploited, in the way that God had intended man to live. Fighting and warfare might sometimes be necessary, but it was only a minor part of the whole jihad or struggle. A

³ John L. Esposito "Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam" p 64

well-known tradition (hadith) has Muhammad^[sa] say on returning from a battle, ‘We return from the little jihad to the greater jihad,’ the more difficult and crucial effort to conquer the forces of evil in oneself and in one’s own society in all the details of daily life.”⁴ John L. Esposito corroborates Armstrong’s views.⁵

The Qur’an, the Supreme law for Muslims, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad^{sa} over a 22-23 year period in short revelations; fortunately its original compilation exists in Arabic language and has no variants. Without forcing adherence to its teachings the Qur’an encourages people to ponder why the teachings are beneficial. Its message is of peace; it abhors violence, killing, exploitation, and injustice while promoting human rights, service to humanity, and freedom of conscience, equality, and justice. The Prophet’s life was a living example of Qur’anic teachings; his practices (*sunnah*) and sayings (*hadith*) exemplified those teachings in practical terms. Since the *sunnah* and *hadith* were recorded at a later date, the possibility of bias and error exists, although scribes took great pains to ensure their authenticity and accuracy. These are however, subordinate to Qur’anic teachings and can be rejected if contrary to the Qur’an.

Prophet Muhammad^{sa} practically demonstrated the concept of jihad during his lifetime (570-632 CE). He fought defensive wars and only after receiving Divine authorization. He accepted the enemy’s offer for peace, even though it appeared disadvantageous for the Muslims⁶, he did not harm non combatants and the elderly, preserved all places of worship, treated prisoners with respect and kindness. He forgave his enemies when he captured Mecca without a fight and without any casualties.⁷ As already stated, Prophet Muhammad^{sa}, urged Muslims to leave the “lesser” jihad and engage in the “greater” (intellectual) jihad which is against the individual’s arrogance, ego, and other selfish traits. He thus left a great example for Muslims to follow.

Several centuries later, Saladin demonstrated the same spirit of jihad after the capture of Jerusalem. According to Karen Armstrong, “On 2 October 1187 Saladin and his troops entered Jerusalem as conquerors. The sultan kept his word. Not a single Christian was killed. The barons could easily afford to ransom themselves, but the poor people could not, and they became prisoners of war. Large numbers were released, however, because Saladin was moved to tears by the plight of the families who were being separated when they were taken into slavery. Al-Adil, Saladin’s brother, was so distressed that he asked for a thousand prisoners for his own use and released them on the spot. All the Muslims were scandalized to see the richer Christians escaping with their wealth without making any attempt to ransom their fellow countrymen. When the Muslim historian Imad ad-Din saw Patriarch Heraklius leaving the city with his chariots groaning under the weight of his treasure, he begged Saladin to confiscate this wealth to redeem the remaining prisoners. But Saladin refused; oaths and treaties must be kept

⁴ Karen Armstrong “Muhammad: Biography of a Prophet”, p 168

⁵ John L. Esposito “Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam” p 28

* Customary salutation meaning peace be on him

⁶ Karen Armstrong “Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Times” p 175-189

⁷ Ibid, p 198-205

to the letter. “Christians everywhere will remember the kindness we have done them.” Saladin was right. Christians in the West were uneasily aware that this Muslim ruler had behaved in a far more “Christian” manner than had their own Crusaders when they conquered Jerusalem. They evolved legends that made Saladin a sort of honorary Christian; some of these tales even asserted that the sultan had been secretly baptized.”⁸

The above examples clearly show that the jihad practiced by the early Muslims was different from that practiced by the radicals today. Let us now explore how the peaceful concept of jihad was subsequently turned on its head and used to justify terrorism. Esposito⁹ and Armstrong¹⁰ correctly identify the founders of Egyptian Brotherhood, Jamaat-i-Islami, and Islamic Jihad, as the main culprits for innovating and interjecting violence in jihad. Unfortunately, these and similar other groups are still the torch bearers for propagating this sad and destructive phenomenon. Esposito documents how a handful of supposedly well intentioned but naïve individuals were able to transform jihad from a noble and peaceful concept to a destructive tool for terrorist organizations to justify their cruel actions.

Some detail is necessary to fully understand the events and the indefensible reasoning used by these individuals for interjecting violence in jihad.

The Kharijites represent early examples of the way in which dissent could turn to unholy war in the name of Islam. Initially Ali’s followers, the Kharijites turned against him and subsequently assassinated him for accepting arbitration to settle a long, drawn-out war with Muawyah, the ruler of Syria. As a separate community, on the margins of mainstream Islam, they proclaimed a radical, militant form of jihad believing that the Qur’anic mandate to “command the good and forbid evil” must be applied literally, rigorously, and without qualification or exception. Their world was divided neatly between belief and unbelief, Muslims (followers of God) and non Muslims (enemies of God), peace and warfare. Any action that did not conform rigorously to the letter of their interpretation of the law constituted a grave or mortal sin. Sinners were guilty of unbelief and thus excommunicated *takfir*, (exclusion for unbelief), became apostates, guilty of treason and meriting death unless they repented. The Kharijites viewed other Muslims who did not accept their uncompromising viewpoint as infidels or idolaters, and thus the enemies of God who must be killed.¹¹ The Kharijites thus assumed the role of judging the person’s belief by their own flawed standards and excommunicating them from Islam – a practice forbidden by the Qur’an (no compulsion in religion) and frowned upon by Prophet Muhammad^{5a}. Being on the fringe of mainstream Islam, it is ironic that they assumed that role! Furthermore, after excommunicating the “unbelievers” they went on to sanction their death – again in total contradiction to Qur’anic injunctions.

⁸ Karen Armstrong “Jerusalem: The City of Three Faiths” p. 293-294

⁹ John Esposito “Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam” p 43-64

¹⁰ Armstrong Brotherhood and JI

¹¹ John L. Esposito “Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam” p 41-42

Fortunately, the Kharijites' viewpoint did not gain currency among mainstream Muslims but their rationale was to be revived by future radical groups.

Ibn-Taymiyya (1268-1328), a medieval scholar and political activist, lived through the most disruptive period of Islamic history. He was forced to flee to Damascus after Baghdad, his native town, fell to the Mongols. He hated the Mongols and through a *fatwa* (religious decree) declared them unbelievers (kafirs) and thus excommunicated (takfir) from Islam. His action was based on the Kharijite doctrine. He also added another deviant concept of *dar ul Islam* and *dar ul harb* to that flawed concept. Dar al-Islam represented the land of Islam where the Islamic Law was fully practiced and Dar al-Harb, the Land of Non-Muslims which had to be subdued through occupation or treaties. Ibn Taymiyya established a dangerous precedent of declaring Mongols as non-Muslims and apostates – despite their claim to be Muslims – and hence the lawful object of jihad. Ibn Taymiyya decreed that Muslim citizens were required to revolt against them, to wage jihad to kill them.¹² Like the Kharijites, he also went against the fundamental teaching of Islam (there is no compulsion in religion) and established a very dangerous precedence by assuming the right to certify a person's faith! This ridiculous "authority" is still exercised by several Muslim groups and haunts the Muslim world. Ibn Taymiyya thus justified and expanded the scope of the Kharijites' un-Islamic viewpoint after almost six centuries.

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791; founder of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi sect) reinforced violence in Islam and built on Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine. He joined his religious zeal with military might as he allied with Muhammad Ibn Saud (founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), a local tribal chief, to form a religio-political movement. Ibn Saud used Wahhabism as a religious ideal to legitimate his jihad to subdue and unite the tribes of Arabia, converting them to his puritanical version of Islam. Like the Kharijites, the Wahhabi viewed all Muslims who resisted as unbelievers (who ought to be fought and killed). They were therefore to be subdued in the name of Islamic egalitarianism.¹³

Muslims in India were subjected to severe atrocities by the British after the Indian War of Independence in 1857. Dejected Muslim survivors from Delhi founded an influential but depressingly narrow-minded Wahhabi-like madrasa at Deoband, 100 miles north of Delhi in order to return to what they regarded as pure Islamic roots. Ironically, one hundred and forty years later, the Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan and Afghanistan created the Taliban who formed the most retrograde Islamic regime in modern history, a regime that in turn provided the crucible from which emerged al-Qaeda, and the most radical and powerful Islamic jihadi movement.¹⁴

¹² John L. Esposito "Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam" p 46

¹³ Ibid p 47-48

¹⁴ William Dalrymple "The Last Mughal: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857" p 485

The concept of violence propagated by the Kharijites and expanded by Ibn Taymiyya and Saudi Arabia's Wahabi movement appealed to the modernist Islamic movements – Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Society) – who combined religious reform and political mobilization. They framed their struggle in a call for a jihad against British imperialism and corrupt Muslim rulers and the adoption of the expanded Kharijites doctrine gave them the power to condemn people for being non Muslims and then justifying their murder.

It is noteworthy that both organizations – Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami, established in 1928 and 1941 respectively – were formed within Muslim societies in crisis. Hasan al-Banna, a teacher, and Maulana Maududi, a journalist, were both educated individuals with traditional Islamic religious backgrounds and knowledge of Western thought. Placing the primary blame for the ills of their society and for the decline of the Muslim world upon European imperialism and westernized Muslim elites, they initially called for moral and social reform of the society but soon also became embroiled in political activism and opposition. When Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) established the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Maulana Maududi (1903-1979) created the Jamaat-i-Islami in undivided India, few in the West or in their own societies took serious notice. Both al-Banna and Maududi recognized that change would be slow to come, and expecting rejection and persecution, focused on training future generations. [They established themselves in educational institutions and were very successful in achieving their goal.] Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) built upon and further radicalized the deviant ideas of al-Banna and Maududi and created an ideological legacy that incorporated all the major historical forms of jihad, from the reforms of Muhammad to the extremes of the Kharijites. Within a few short decades, the ideas of al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood and Maududi's Jamaat-i-Islami, often viewed through the prism of Qutb's more radicalized interpretation, became the primary models for new activists and organizations across the Muslim world.¹⁵

Just as the interpretations of Hasan al-Banna and Maududi were conditioned responses to the political and social realities of their times, so too Sayyid Qutb's Islam grew out of militant confrontation between the repressive Egyptian state and the Brotherhood in the late 1950s and 1960s. Increasingly radicalized by Gamal Abdel Nasser's suppression of the Brotherhood, Qutb transformed the ideology of al-Banna and Maududi into a rejectionist revolutionary call to arms.¹⁶

Muhammad al-Farag, a member of the radical organization Islamic Jihad, the group that killed Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, drew heavily from al-Banna, Maududi, and especially Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb and articulated this ideology in "The Neglected Duty". Farag believed that the decline of Muslim societies was made possible by those who had lulled the community into believing that jihad was nonviolent; the restoration

¹⁵ John L. Esposito "Unholy War: Terror in the name of Islam" p 49-50

¹⁶ Ibid, p 56

of the Muslim world to the straight path of Islam hinged on reclaiming the true meaning of jihad, the forgotten or neglected requirement of Islam. Farag maintained that jihad was the sixth pillar of Islam, forgotten or obscured by the majority of ulema and Muslims. Farag maintained that conducting jihad was the task of a minority, a vanguard who must be prepared to fight against unbelief and apostasy, prepared to suffer and die for their faith. Looking at the state of the ummah, he concluded that unbelief and apostasy were endemic diseases and the punishment for the apostasy is loss of all rights, including their right to life.¹⁷

It is thus evident that while the concept of violence in the name of Islam, which first emerged few years after the Prophet Muhammad's death during the first Islamic civil war (also known as the first *fitna*, 658-661 CE), stayed out of the mainstream Islam; it was an imprudent reaction by those who rejected Ali's decision to compromise and make peace with Muawiyah. Ali was following Prophet Muhammad^{SA}'s example when he made peace with the Arabs under seemingly disadvantageous terms. Till the twelfth century (Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem), there is no evidence of this deviant concept coming up in Islamic history. It emerged again, in the thirteenth century after the Mongols captured Baghdad and was reinforced by Ibn Tayyimma but there is no evidence of its acceptance by mainstream Islam. It was not till the beginning of the twentieth century, in response to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the European colonization of the Muslim lands, that radical groups like Egyptian Brotherhood in Egypt and Jamaat-i-Islami in undivided India reinvigorated this concept of violence and adopted this destructive doctrine which was widely distributed through modern publication and information sharing technologies. European colonizing powers were blamed for the Muslim's economic and political decline and the Muslim youth were urged to wage jihad against them. Also targeted for the violent jihad were moderate Muslims who did not accept their convoluted doctrine of violence.

Thus in less than a century, these four individuals successfully transformed the original concept of jihad from a peaceful and constructive doctrine to a violent and destructive ideology. More than that, they also succeeded in getting tactical acceptance of their actions from mainstream Muslims who were confused because of their ignorance. Frustration, disillusionment and lack of education and critical examination of facts by the lay people were extinct in Muslims when Egyptian Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami were propagating violent jihad. After decades of propagating violent jihad as their only hope for redemption, Muslims and non Muslims are simply baffled at the unintended consequence of the irresponsible and short sighted ideology which allowed the terrorists to hijacked Islam and justify terror under the Islamic façade.

The histories of Islamic fundamentalism and Western Imperialism have, after all, often been closely, and dangerously, intertwined. Edmund Burke ..., rightly stated: those who

¹⁷ Ibid, p 62

fail to learn from history are always destined to repeat it¹⁸. It is important that we now learn from history and stop this vicious and destructive cycle of violence. Muslims must shun violent jihad and instead, adopt the intellectual jihad for social and moral restructuring of their societies. They should not use contrived religious arguments for resolving political matters. This will enable Muslims to adopt the spirit of the early days of Islam and use it to reform and reconstruct societies based on social justice, multiculturalism, tolerance and peace, in accordance with Qur'anic teachings and Prophet Muhammad^{sa}'s practices. Adopting the original spirit of Islam will enable Muslims to implement human rights, eliminate corruption and create an atmosphere of cooperation and brotherhood which is a prerequisite for education, growth and development. By no means, this will be an easy road but that surely will be the right direction.

¹⁸ William Dalrymple "The last Moughal:: The fall of a dynasty, Delhi 1857 " p.486