

When Jihad Refers to Fighting

Although jihad is often translated into English as "holy war," it must be noted that war has never been described as "holy" in any of Islam's primary texts or even early Islamic literature. Linguistically speaking, jihad is an Islamic term that applies to a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from daily striving to meet the day's challenges, to striving against one's desires and self, to the struggle to provide for one's family. Its basic definition is "the act of striving or struggling in the way of Allah." Therefore, jihad is not limited to war; it includes struggling with one's soul, speech, body, and wealth so that the message of Allah reaches all humans willing to receive it.

Islamic scholars have referred to different types of jihad, such as jihad against the self (to understand Islam, act upon it, call others to it, and be patient with the difficulties of making this call), jihad against the Devil (repelling satanic whispers, doubts, and lusts), jihad of the tongue (controlling it, using it to enjoin what is good, forbid what is wrong, spread the correct teachings of Islam, and answer false ideologies), jihad against aggression (with the purpose of protecting Islam and the lives, honor, and property of Muslims), and other types of jihad like jihad against the hypocrites, jihad against oppressors, and jihad against mischief-makers.

Jihad — in the context of fighting — has specific rules and conditions that need to be met before it is initiated. The first rule is that people are not to be fought because of what they believe or to coerce them into accepting Islam. The second rule is to "fight only those who fight you" and never initiate unprovoked aggression (Qur'an 2:190). This means that Muslims are only allowed to fight back rather than initiate fighting; however, "fighting back" includes defending against actual aggression as well as proactively addressing real threats of aggression. In both cases, Muslims are instructed to be prepared and ready to defend their nation before they actually engage in military conflict. There are additional conditions, but the above-mentioned rules are vital for understanding jihad in its broader meaning and placing it in the proper context.

Another condition of the sort of jihad that involves fighting is that it should take place only under an Islamic authority that "raises the banner" for such jihad. It is not in accordance with the Sunnah for any individual or self-appointed group of Muslims to

wage war on behalf of a nation. Instead, Muslims should be united under the single authority of an imam or khaleefah (caliph), except in the case where an individual needs to defend his own family and property, or to help his neighbor do so. This is proven by the example of the early Muslims, as well as texts in the Qur'an and the Sunnah:

"When there comes to them [the hypocrites] a matter related to [public] safety or fear, they spread it about; if only they had referred it to the Messenger and to such of them as are in authority, those among them who are able to think through the matter would have understood it." (Qur'an 4:83)

"Hudhayfah ibn Yaman asked the Prophet (ﷺ): 'What if (the Muslims) have no single leader (and are divided into disputing groups)?' The Prophet (ﷺ) answered: 'If they have no single leader or unified group, then leave all these disputing groups, even if you have to bite on a tree until your death.'" [part of a longer hadith recorded by Bukhari]

There are other conditions for jihad. In general, the rules laid out for war in Islam should be upheld unless there is some legitimate need or strategy when fighting occurs that would necessitate going against those rules. A Muslim should not kill himself or herself, nor kill another Muslim, except by accident (Qur'an 4:92). Women, children, the elderly, and other non-combatants should not be harmed. Land should not be destroyed, nor trees cut down. Corpses should not be mutilated. Islam should not be imposed upon non-believers. Rather, if combatant non-Muslims choose on their own to embrace Islam, even if only as a deceitful trick, it should be accepted by the Muslim leadership, and fighting should stop. Peace should be sought before lives are lost. Treaties and agreements should be upheld. Prisoners should be well-treated. Above all, justice must be done.

"Fight in the path [according to the rules set by Allah] of Allah only those who fight you, but do not commit aggression [transgress limits], Allah does not love aggressors. ...And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is [freely embraced] for [the individual's faith in] Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no aggression except against transgressors." (Qur'an 2:190, 193)

"Allah does not forbid you from being good, kind, just, and fair to those who have not fought you because of religion, nor driven you from your homeland. Allah loves those who are just. Allah forbids you from giving allegiance to those who have fought you because of religion and have driven you from your homeland, and those who supported your expulsion..." (Qur'an 60:8-9)

In addition, the Muslim nation is encouraged to maintain strong military capabilities to promote justice and to deter acts of war and aggression.

"And make ready for them [their potential aggression] all you can of power, including steeds of war, to deter the enemy of Allah and your enemy, and others besides, whom you may not know but whom Allah knows." (Qur'an 8:60)

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