

The discussion around Jihad in recent years has become distorted by the actions of extremist Muslims as well as by the biases of certain “scholars” and pundits who comment on Islam. This brief introduction can hopefully serve as a starting point for further investigation.

[N.B. Numbers in square brackets refer to Chapter and verse numbers from the translation of the Qur’an.]

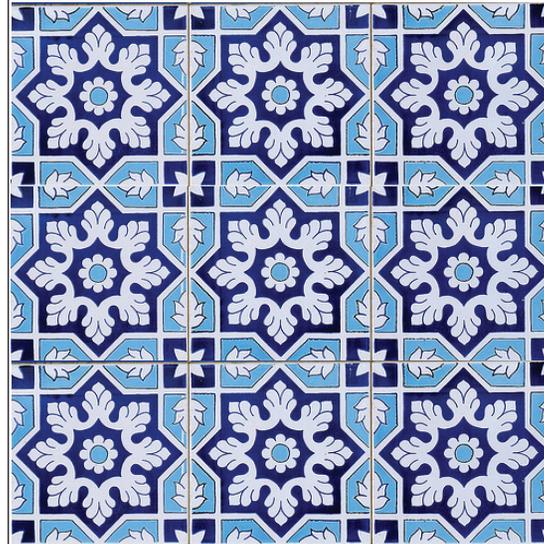


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Jihad or Holy War?



A Religion of Peace

Islam and Muslims deal with war and fighting with reference to certain basic principles inherent in the language itself. The word Islam is an Arabic word that means “surrender”; a derivative of this word is the Arabic word salam which means “peace.”

Muslims fundamentally understand Islam to be a religion based on attaining peace through voluntary submission to God. This concept of peace is comprehensive, encompassing peace within oneself, peace with those around us, peace with the environment and peace with the universe.

“There is no Compulsion in Religion”

In one of his sayings, the Prophet of Islam defines a Muslim as a person around whom people would be safe. In other instances, the Prophet urges Muslims to love for others what they love for themselves. The Qur’an prohibits converting people to Islam by force, saying, “There is no compulsion in religion” [2:256]; and it equates killing a single innocent person to the killing of the whole of humanity in the text reading, “We ordained for the children of Israel that whoever slew a soul – except as a punishment for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it is as though he slew all men” [5:32].

Finally, translating Jihad as “holy war” is misleading; the term “holy war” has not been mentioned once in the Qur’an. As a matter of fact, in the statement, “Fighting is ordained for you, even though it be hateful to you” [2:216], Qur’an says clearly that fighting is a hateful duty that Muslims must undertake only when it is absolutely necessary.

Jihad

Jihad is an Arabic word that means “strive” or “struggle.” The concept of Jihad in Islam is also comprehensive. It encompasses the struggle against the temptation to sin, the struggle against succumbing to one’s own desires and whims, the struggle against ignorance, and the struggle against oppressors. The struggle may be spiritual, intellectual or physical.

This means that Jihad can be accomplished by peaceful means as well as by force. A well-established principle in Islamic jurisprudence is that struggle by force can only be performed by the state. Only the state can declare war. This is an important concept because it negates the basis on which so-called “literalists” justify their acts of violence. Furthermore, for a fight to be an act of Jihad it must pass muster on three criteria: justice of the cause, nobility of the means, and the intent of Godliness.



The Criteria for War

War can be declared in cases of self defence, as the Quran said, “Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress the limits; for God loves not the transgressors” [2:190]. Equally, with reference to the words, “Those who have been wronged are permitted to fight” [22:39], it may be invoked to combat oppression and anarchy. A war can only be declared after certain criteria have been met: the war must have a noble cause; all peaceful means to resolve a conflict must have been exhausted; and the war must be the lesser of the two evils.

There is a strict protocol for the conduct of war in Islam. Under Islamic law, non-combatants are protected. Unnecessary harm to the environment is prohibited. The standing order for the army at war is “do not harm an innocent non-combatant, do not harm children, women, old people or priests/rabbis. Do not burn, cut or flood a tree nor kill an animal unless for food.” [Musnad Ahmad, Marasil Abu Dawud]

Thus the development and use of weapons intended to cause non-discriminate damage and carnage - so-called weapons of mass destruction - would be problematic from an Islamic point of view. Lastly it is incumbent on Muslims to come to peace if the enemy chooses to incline to peace at any time after the inception of hostilities, as the Quran has said, “And if the enemy incline towards peace, you also incline to peace and trust in God” [8:62].