

Jihad: A Victim of Policy and Misinterpretation

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the meaning and the use of the word *jihad* in the Holy Quran and how this word is deteriorated semantically. Recently, the word *jihad* has been associated with terrorism and killing. This negative shift in meaning expands to include Muslims all over the world. The authors hope this effort would help to sort out some of the fears and distortions swirling around the meaning of *jihad*. The usage of the word *jihad* in the Holy Quran has been detected and investigated to find out the actual meaning and the situations in which this expression is used. The rationale behind this paper is purely linguistic one and the authors don't intend to find any excuse for any action carried out under the name of *jihad*. So, this paper is limited by its specific purpose. It turns out that this word has been misused by both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Keywords: Jihad, Jihad in Holly Quran, semantics, misinterpretation, semantic shift

1. Introduction

Linguistically, the word *jihad* means effort or having effort. It is derived from [*juhd*] which means having an effort which is connected with suffering. That is, somebody is suffering from an external or internal power then he makes an effort to get rid of it or free himself from that misfortune. For instance, if somebody is suffering from a lack of money and he works hard or doing an effort to have money, this effort is called jihad. It is a common human trait to work very hard in order to achieve some goal. There are words in every language including Arabic, to express this human quality. The word *jihad* conveys this same sense of striving, that is, a great striving. There is a difference, however between the word, *struggle* and *jihad*. The word 'struggle' does not connote the sense of reward or worship in the religious sense of the word. But when the word *jihad* became a part of Islamic terminology, the sense of reward or worship came to be associated with it, that is to say, if struggle is struggle in the simple sense of word, *jihad* means a struggle which is an act of worship, the engagement of which earns reward to the person concerned. As the Quran says:

"Strive for the cause of Allah as you ought to strive." (Q 22:78). There is a big difference between *jihad* and [*qitāl*] (fighting). Although [*qitāl*] means fighting, it is used in many places in the Holly Quran as defensive and Allah prevents Muslim to be offensive for instance,

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ (Q 2:190)

"Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors" (Q 2:190) (Note 1)

In this verse, Allah asks Muslims to fight those who fight them and they should stop fighting when they (non-Muslims) stop; that means Muslims should not be transgressors. In contrast with [*qitāl*], *jihad* is primarily defensive. The negative meaning of *jihad* has become a universal phenomenon and has been used intensively to describe Muslims after September, 11th 2001. A century ago, this word had no political implication and it was not as terrifying as it is recently. However, we should not ignore that the concept *jihad* has been used since the beginning of Islamic empire history in various forms, and with various implications for Muslims and non-Muslims alike by different people.

During the history of Islam, *jihad* is used whenever Muslims are being tortured. Recently, the invasion of Afghanistan by Russian troops and the occupation of Palestine by Jewish could be considered as the point of the

break out of *jihad*. This situation is accompanied by undemocratic regimes in most if not in all Arab and Muslim states. These regimes controlled these states as a post colonist stage. These two factors are accompanied by what was going on in Chechnya and Bosnia. The picture is like this, many young Muslims were encouraged by America and their states to fight in Afghanistan. They were supported by weapons and money. Accordingly, we have a group of Muslim fighters so proud of what they gained, proud of their action. They were rich and well-trained fighters. At the same time, those fighters were moving between Bosnia and Chechnya. The progress of the fighters who has become well-known as [*'almujāhidīn*] (those who perform *jihad*) in Afghanistan and other areas rose the spirit of the fighters and Muslims all over the world. They started thinking of the glorious Islamic civilization in the past. McCabe (2009: 108) points to this idea and states that "Islam, a superior faith and civilization, is under assault and profoundly humiliated by its enemies. Once the leading civilization in the world, Islam has been far surpassed by its inferiors."

Many names became famous such as Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azaam, etc. Suddenly, the war in Afghanistan ended. At that time, the spirit of *jihad* was up.

All the supporters of those fighters (i.e. USA and Muslim and Arab Countries) stopped supporting them. Their countries have not been able to accommodate them for many reasons. One of these reasons is that they have felt that these regimes torture their nations in different ways. They have rejected the behavior of these regimes. At the same time their religious ideas scared these regimes. The supporters of the past became the new enemies. Those fighters felt that they had the responsibility of protecting Muslims all over the world. What is going on in Palestine and in many Arab states pushed those people to consider USA as the first enemy. According to them, USA supports these evil regimes, torturing Muslims all over the world; it puts pressures on the police, agencies, and the regimes in their countries to chase them (fighters). McCabe (2009: 101) states that:

Clearly, U.S. policies in the region are a major factor; American support for Israel and the U.S. occupation of Iraq are massively unpopular. However, this is only part of the problem. The United States is widely, if not generally, viewed as a predatory power out for oil at best and a predatory power at war with Islam at worst.

As soon as cold war between Russia and western states ended, Islam has been treated as the first enemy and according to many western politicians and writers it forms a serious threat to the West. "The security agenda of world politics in the post-cold war era has been shaped largely along a new 'Islamic threat'". (Almogly and Rivkind, 2007: 551)

They started carrying out actions against USA under the name of revenge. The situation has been changed dramatically since September, 11th 2001. The war that was declared immediately after 9/11, easily conceptualized the terrifying meaning of Islam in general and *jihad* in particular.

September, 11th is considered as a juncture in the history of Islam. The meaning of the words Islam, Muslim and *jihad* have been deteriorated. Islam which means peace, Muslim which means a peaceful person and *jihad* which means doing an effort to get rid of being tortured have been associated with evilness. Ali (1985: 3) states that:

Its (Islam) primary significance is the 'making of peace', and the idea of 'peace' is the dominant idea in Islam. A Muslim, according to the Holy Quran, is he who has made peace with God and man, with the Creator as well as His creatures. Peace with God implies complete submission to His will Who is the source of all purity and goodness, and peace with man implies the doing of good to fellow-man.

The war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the killing and torturing of Muslims in these states complicated the situation and helped the fighters to spread their ideas and thoughts. However, such situations were accompanied by the appearance of an Islamic State in Iran which raised the slogan of the evilness of USA and Western states. This idea is in consistence with the feeling of Muslims. The rising of this state as a super power has frightened USA and western countries.

Media play a vital role in the semantic shift of the meaning of these expressions. The words *Islam* and *jihad* have been connected with terrorism. Recently terms like Al-Jihad, Islamic Jihad, Gamaa Islamiyya, Hizb-ut Tahrir, Army of God, Islamic Liberation Front, Armed Islamic Group, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al-Qaeda, make the headlines almost daily in connection with terrorism, which makes a direct link between a religion (in this case Islam) and international terrorism.

Media play a vital role also in attributing terrorism to Islam and *jihad* intentionally or unintentionally. Headings of news papers, TV news, and political interviews appear with titles like:

“terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, jihad” (Internet 1).

Not only do some writers and politicians associate *jihad* with terrorism, but they also translate it into ‘holy war’. Let us take the following examples:

“Violent radical Muslims – [*jihādīs*] (holy warriors)” (McCabe, 2009: 99).

“The religious government and society of contemporary Northern Nigeria have their historical roots in a *jihad* (Muslim holy war)” (Waldman, 1966: 286)

“the idea of undertaking a holy war (*jihad*) directed at” (Milton-Edwards, 1992: 49). Although Milton-Edwards states in his article that *jihad* is originally defensive rather than offensive. “this call to *jihad* to liberate the land from Israeli control meets the most basic rules of justification - it is a defensive act against aggressive oppressors occupying the land” (Milton-Edwards, 1992: 51).

Almogly and Rivkind (2007) give a very strange definition of *jihad*. They claims that *jihad* means “fighting anybody who stands in the way of spreading Islam . . . or refuses to enter Islam” (Almogly and Rivkind, 2007: 502). They add that the only way to guarantee entrance to paradise is to die in *jihad*. They refer to (Q 4:89). If we investigate the verse which they use as a reference, we realize that the word *jihad* has not been mentioned at all in that verse. The verse says:

وَدُّوا لَوْ تُكْفِرُونَ كَمَا كَفَرُوا فَتَكُونُونَ سَوَاءً فَلَا تَتَّخِذُوا مِنْهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءَ حَتَّىٰ يُهَاجَرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَحُذُوهُمْ وَأَقْتُلُوهُمْ حَيْثُ وَجَدْتُمُوهُمْ وَلَا تَتَّخِذُوا مِنْهُمْ وِلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا (Q 4:89)

“They but wish that ye should reject Faith, as they do, and thus be on the same footing (as they): But take not friends from their ranks until they flee in the way of Allah (From what is forbidden). But if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them wherever ye find them; and (in any case) take no friends or helpers from their ranks” (Q 4:89).

As can be noted, the above verse (Q 4:89) has nothing to do with what is mentioned by Almogly and Rivkind, (2007: 502). The context of this verse is the exile of Muslims from Mecca and the atrocities which they faced.

Others go far beyond the above descriptions to compare Islam to Nazis or as the most dangerous enemy for the West.

Koontz (2003) makes it clear that for those with a substantial knowledge of both the Nazis then and the Middle East and Islam in general and radical Islam today, the parallels are terrifying.

Kuznechevsky (2000) states that the West did not immediately understand that a new powerful force had appeared in the world; it was too busy fighting communism in the person of the socialist camp to notice the appearance of a new dangerous enemy under its very nose. The other way of attacking Islam and humiliating Muslims is by describing the struggle as a struggle of civilization, a struggle between civilized society (western society) and primitive society (Islamic society). Ethnic, religious and cultural differences and their potential to create conflicts between different groups have been extensively studied from different perspectives (Appleby, 1994; Ashmore, et.al, 2001).

According to Huntington (1993), civilizations mean large groups with common denominators in culture, religion and identity. He adds that clashes between civilizational identities would be inevitable in the post-cold war era or post-ideological world, forming the next dominant pattern of conflict at the global level. Huntington argued that the differences between civilizations were “far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes” (Huntington 1993: 25) and that they inevitably would lead to clashes. He points at a potential conflict between democratic, liberal civilizations and Islamic ‘totalitarian’ civilizations. In this light, the ‘other’ for Western civilization after the cold war was identified as Islamic totalitarianism. Many scholars who agreed with this view argued that Islamic civilization should be expected to clash with Western values because of its ‘conflictual’ nature (Torres, Jordan, and Horsburgh, 2006).

On the other hand, Wright (1992) underlines the challenge of Islamic resurgence against the West arguing that Islam is the only major monotheistic religion that offers not only a set of spiritual beliefs but a set of rules by which to govern society. Aydin and Ozen (2010: 547) say that “...the role of globalization in transforming the current ethnic and religious awakening to threat should not be exaggerated. In other words, globalization has not directly led to the resurgence of identity-based threats; rather it has acted as a contributing factor.” So the word *jihad* is misleadingly translated as ‘holy war’.

2. Data and Discussion

The word *jihad* is derived from the trilateral root (j-h-d). Semantically, it is different from [*qitāl*] (fighting). Generally *jihad* is translated as ‘strive or striving’. It appears in 18 surah in the Quran which consists of 114 surah. Generally it appears once, twice or three times in each surah except in [*’attawba*] ‘Repentance’ (Q 9) in which it appears ten times. The situations in which the word *jihad* appears can be classified as follows:

First: ten times out of 41, the word is connected with the emigration of Prophet Mohammad and his companions from Mecca to avoid being tortured by non-Muslims. So Allah gives the permission to those who emigrate to strive in order to protect themselves. For examples:

1- (Q 2:218) *إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أُولَئِكَ يَرْجُونَ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ*

“Those who believed and those who suffered exile and fought (and strove and struggled) in the path of Allah,- they have the hope of the Mercy of Allah” (Q 2:218)

2- (Q 8:72) *الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ وَأَنْفُسِهِمْ*

“Those who believed, and adopted exile, and fought for the Faith, with their property and their persons” (Q 8:72)

3- (Q 8:74) *وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ*

“Those who believe, and adopt exile, and fight for the Faith” (Q 8:74)

4- (Q 8:75) *وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْ بَعْدُ وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا مَعَكُمْ*

“And those who accept Faith subsequently, and adopt exile, and fight for the Faith in your company” (Q 8:75)

5- (Q 9:20) *الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَهَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِأَمْوَالِهِمْ*

“Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive” (Q 9:20)

Accordingly, in all the above verses, *jihad* is defensive. It is as a result of the exile and torturing of Prophet Mohammad companions.

Second, it appears eight times in which Muslims were tortured and suffering from atrocities from non-Muslims. The context urged Muslims to be patient which means that they were suffering. For examples:

6- (Q 3:142) *أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُدْخَلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا مِنْكُمْ وَيَعْلَمَ الصَّابِرِينَ*

“Did ye think that ye would enter Heaven without Allah testing those of you who fought hard (In His Cause) and remained steadfast?” (Q 3:142)

7- (Q 16:110) *ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا قُتِلُوا جَاهَدُوا وَصَبِرُوا*

“But verily thy Lord,- to those who leave their homes after trials and persecutions,- and who thereafter strive and fight for the faith and patiently persevere” (Q 16:110)

8- (Q 47:31) *وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّى نَعْلَمَ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ مِنْكُمْ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَتَبْلُوَ أَخْبَارَكُمْ*

“And We shall try you until We test those among you who strive their utmost and persevere in patience; and We shall try your reported (mettle)” (Q 47:31)

As can be noted in the above verses, *jihad* is accompanied by urging Muslims to be patient.

Third, in the following situations, *jihad* is connected with torturing Prophet Mohammad:

9- (Q 5:35) *اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ*

“Do your duty to Allah, seek the means of approach unto Him, and strive with might and main in his cause” (Q 5:35)

10- (Q 9:16) *أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُتْرَكُوا وَلَمَّا يَعْلَمِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا مِنْكُمْ*

“Or think ye that ye shall be abandoned, as though Allah did not know those among you who strive with might and main” (Q 9:16)

11- (Q 9:41) *اْخْرُجُوا خِفَافًا وَثِقَالًا وَجَاهِدُوا بِأَمْوَالِكُمْ وَأَنْفُسِكُمْ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ*

“Go ye forth, (whether equipped) lightly or heavily, and strive and struggle, with your goods and your persons, in the cause of Allah” (Q 9:41)

12- (Q 60:1) *إِنْ كُنْتُمْ خَرَجْتُمْ جِهَادًا فِي سَبِيلِي وَابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِي*

“If ye have come out to strive in My Way and to seek My Good Pleasure” (Q 60:1)

Fourth, in some situations, the prophet companions begged him to allow them to strive their enemies as a result of their torturing the prophet companions. For example,

13- (Q 9:44) لَا يَسْتَأْذِنُكَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ أَنْ يُجَاهِدُوا

“Those who believe in Allah and the Last Day ask thee for no exemption from fighting” (Q 9:44)

The example above shows that *jihad* is defensive. The prophet’s companions asked him to give them the permission to strive after being tortured by their enemy.

Fifth, in two cases, the word *jihad* is used to mean if your parents try to force or convince you. Its meaning has nothing to do with fighting.

14- (Q 29:8) وَإِنْ جَاهَدَاكَ لِتُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا

“but if they (either of your parents) strive (to force) thee to join with Me (in worship) anything of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not” (Q 29:8)

15- (Q 31:15) وَإِنْ جَاهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا

“But if they (your parents) strive to make thee join in worship with Me things of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not” (Q 31:15)

According to the above verses, if the parents want to force their son to do or not to do something, this means *jihad* on the part of the son. So here *jihad* has nothing to do with fighting.

Sixth, in four situations, Allah asks Muslim to strive against those disbelievers who tried to betray Muslims. For examples:

16- (Q 25:52) فَلَا تُطِعِ الْكَافِرِينَ وَجَاهِدْهُمْ بِهِ جِهَادًا كَبِيرًا

“Therefore listen not to the Unbelievers, but strive against them with the utmost strenuousness, with the (Qur’an)” (Q 25:52)

17- (Q 9:73) يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ جَاهِدِ الْكُفَّارَ وَالْمُنَافِقِينَ وَاغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ

“O Prophet! strive hard against the unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them” (Q 9:73)

18- (Q 66:9) يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ جَاهِدِ الْكُفَّارَ وَالْمُنَافِقِينَ وَاغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ

“O Prophet! Strive hard against the Unbelievers and the Hypocrites, and be firm against them” (Q 66:9)

The contexts in which the above verses appear indicate that *jihad* is used to protect Muslims, and generally it is used after being tortured by non-Muslims.

In the rest of the verses, Allah describes Muslims as the patient and [*mujāhidīn*] (performers of *jihad*) and comparing *jihad* with trading and other things.

We have to mention that *jihad* has two main types: [*aljihād al'kbar*] (big strive) which is used against man’s wells and desires and [*aljihād al'sghar*] which is used to protect Muslims from being tortured. That means it is defensive and cannot be offensive. Moreover, *jihad* could be in heart or mind (not to think of doing evil things); it could be by words (to say good things and to advise people to do good things). The meaning of *jihad* is completely different from what many people and politicians try to provide. “*Jihad* is, or has become to be, a loaded term. Some in the West think it means holy war, an inherently violent notion; others say it means holy struggle, more a spiritual than a martial concept” (Sivan, 1998:171). The connection between *jihad* and terrorism is a sort of prejudice against Muslim and Islam. The Muslim scholar Ibn-Khaldun (A.D. 1332-1406) observed that wars had existed from the beginning of human society and were rooted in humanity’s vengeful nature. Hence, a Muslim scholar (i.e. Ibn-Khaldun) regards secular wars as an evil which violated the divine laws and should be condemned. Islam permits only *jihad* and not [*harb*] (secular war) (Mohammad, 1985: 384).

3. Conclusion

A close look at the usage of *jihad* indicates that this word is misused and that its peaceful meaning has been deteriorated. It is not used in the Holy Quran to express offensive meaning. It is always used with a defensive

sense. Its defensive usage is limited to the protection of Muslims, their religion, lands and properties. The appearance of Islam is accompanied by atrocities and torturing carried out against Muslims. Accordingly, *jihad* appeared with its different forms to protect Muslims. It could be by heart, by words, by hands or it could be by sword which is the last resort. It could be by pen, tongue, media or, if inevitable, with arms. The deterioration of the meaning of this word by both Muslims and non-Muslims could be attributed to unstable political and military situations in most of Islamic countries and the invasion of many Islamic countries for political, economical and strategic reasons. *Jihad* in Islam is striving in the way of Allah for resisting pressure of parents, peers and society (Q 25:52), for staying on the straight path steadfastly (Q 2:18 and 3:142), or against unbelievers and hypocrites when they try to be against Muslims (Q 9:73, 66:9 and 25:52). However, *jihad* in Islam does not include striving for individual or national power, dominance, glory, wealth, prestige or pride. Finally, it is so strange and not fair to associate *jihad* with atrocities and killing or paraphrase it by 'Holy War'. This new interpretation of *jihad* is strikingly misleading. It has been taken as a fact by those who are not aware of the true spirit of Islam, those who are torturing Muslims, those who are occupying Islamic areas, and those who are killing the children and women of Muslims in different areas.

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Note

Note 1. All the Quranic translations used in this article are taken from YUSUFALI. Available at: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/>