

The Origins of *Jihad*

As a word, *jihad* means “to struggle.” What that struggle entails is far-reaching and can be applied to anything from warfare to private asceticism. *Jihad* is incumbent upon every Muslim, although it is not one of the “pillars of Islam” (fundamental religious acts). There are certain schools, such as the Maliki and Hanafi, which deem *jihad* a pillar of the faith, but these are typically outliers. Whether or not the struggle is considered a pillar, *jihad* is still an inescapable part of Muslim life. Every believer will have to struggle in some way: warfare aside, every faithful person must struggle with a tendency to sin.

The earliest record of the word lies in the *Qur'an* itself. However, the exact meaning of the term is far from obvious, as all possible nuances are applied to it. In *surah* (verse) 4:95, for example, it is written that “Not equal are those believers who sit at home and receive no hurt and those who [struggle] in the cause of Allah.” Those who do not risk their lives and property are not granted the same status in heaven as those who risk all that they have for Allah. *Surah* 9:73 is directed at Muhammad, although it applies to believers as well. He was told to strive against the unbelievers, but how that striving is meant to take place was not said. At times context for the meaning of *jihad* is given, but the wording of the verse itself proves a stumbling block. *Surah* 49:15 for example, is given context in the preceding verse, when the desert Arabs are admonished for giving a false profession of faith. It could have a spiritual leaning for its use of *jihad*, but the verse itself does not specify any particularity of the struggle mentioned. Instead, it only defines sincere believers as ones who never doubted Allah and his messenger (Muhammad) and “have since striven with their belongings and persons in the cause of Allah.” What the striving with person and property might entail, the verse leaves to the imagination. A few verses refer (perhaps purposefully) to both a spiritual and a physical struggle. *Surah* 2:218 states that

believers who have suffered exile and struggled for God will receive clemency, presumably for their sins, although it is unclear. In verse 2:217, God tells Muhammad that it is acceptable to fight in the sacred months: "Fighting therein is a grave (offence), but graver is it... to prevent access to the path of Allah... Tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter." Traditionally, this verse is believed to have been revealed just after the first successful caravan raid conducted by the Muslims. Given this context, the struggle mentioned in verse 2:218 would certainly be an armed engagement. However, this verse could also refer to the Muslims who suffered under the persecution of the Meccans. If this is the case, *jihad* is utilized in the verse to indicate that both the physical and spiritual conflict are rewarded by God's mercy.

The traditions of Muhammad (*ah-Haddith*) although intended to elucidate the *Qur'an*, only serve to make it more difficult to understand. As Richard Bonney notes, the sheer number of *hadith* transmitters made it virtually impossible to have a perfectly transmitted tradition. Abu Hurayra (c. 603-681), for instance, had over eight hundred students, while Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Bahili (d. 888), admitted to falsifying some of the traditions himself. The *hadith*, then, prove to be an even less reliable source from which to garner an understanding of *jihad* in the early Muslim community.

The numerous Islamic legal schools, which determined what was and was not "traditional," were themselves varied and take a plethora of approaches to the tradition of Muhammad and the interpretation of the *Qur'an*. There were, by the ninth century, four predominant schools, which coincidentally have survived to the modern day: Hanbali, Shafi'i, Hanafi, and Maliki. The schools are named for the scholars that originated the methods and interpretations that epitomize each school. Each school has slightly different methods and some differing sources of interpretation. The Maliki, for example, use the traditional practices of the

people of Medina in addition to the Qur'an, hadith, and the consensus of traditions of Muhammad's companions for their juridical rulings. By contrast, the Hanafi (the oldest of the schools) does not recognize the people of Medina as a legal source. Both regard *jihad* as incumbent upon all believers, but differ greatly on its meaning and practice. The Maliki view *jihad* as two-fold: spiritual and physical. The spiritual war against sin has no end and will abide no peace with the enemy (sin, Satan, etc); the physical war against non-believers is far more circumscribed. Maliki *Ulama* (jurists) believe that war of any kind is to be waged only in defense and within very strict limits of conduct (women, children, and non-combatants are not viable military targets, for example). The Hanafi and Shafi'i schools view all non-believers as constant targets of *jihad*, which they view as a spiritual and militaristic struggle. Unlike the Maliki, however, they view combat against the infidel as a spiritual venture, and thus not able to be mitigated nor ended.

This lack of real consensus is further convoluted by the tradition of *Naskh* (abrogation), whereby some verses of the *Qur'an* are believed to supplant others. That is to say, earlier verses are abrogated by later revelation. While Maliki believe that the infamous "Sword Verse" (9:5) does not abrogate Muhammad's call to peaceful religious discourse, the Hanafi and Shafi'i schools most certainly do, and they accuse the other schools of infidelity in their reticence to wage war on non-Muslims. Richard Bonny, author of *Jihad: From Qur'an to Bin Laden*, noted that this disparity in interpreting such a vital part of Islamic theology and practice has existed since the arguments were first recorded in the eighth century.

---JR Morrel

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[Further Reading:](#)

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