

Jihad - Sacred Struggle

By Dr. Mohammad Shafi

First written for Dar al Islam Institute Alumni News Letter, Fall 2003

The Qur'an uses the word *Jihad* in the broad sense of the intense and committed struggle of a believer so as to remain true and steadfast to the requirements of the belief. All aspects of a believer's life require intense struggle, the *Jihad*, to control the tendencies of self-centeredness, and rebellion, and to bring about justice, equity and balance in his/her life, in the society in which he/she lives, and in the world. The Qur'an never uses this word as synonymous with, or a substitute for, war or fighting; the Qur'an explicitly uses the word *Harb* for a battle and *Qital* for fighting. (We will deal with these words in separate pieces). Dealing with the word *Jihad* in the usual style of this series is problematic because of complicating factors outside of the Qur'an.

The complications come, primarily, from the fact that unlike the previous concepts we have discussed, this word has acquired meanings beyond what the Qur'an gives it. The additional meanings given to the word are all related to war or fighting. These extensions of the meaning are very pervasive and need to be explored, at least, at a basic level for English-speaking people. While the complications are pervasive in the Arabic literature (and other major Muslim languages) as well, I will deal here primarily with the usage of this word in English.

The Arabic-English dictionaries (see, e.g., Arabic English Dictionary by Hans Wehr) define the *J-H-D* words primarily as: to endeavor, strive, labor, take pains, put oneself out, to over-work, overtax, fatigue, exhaust someone to endeavor and strive. But these are followed by secondary meanings as: To fight (for something), to wage holy war against the infidels, to strain and exert (at something).

The English-Arabic Dictionaries are even more problematic. For instance, the Al-awarid by Munir Ba'albaki translates the English word Jihad into Arabic as: Holy war fought for the victory of Islam. He does not, however, list the English word "Holy War" under his long list of holy-everything-else. More interestingly, he does not call Crusades as "holy" but simply as "the attacks by the crusaders". So, why is Al-Mawarid being so strangely inconsistent? The best answer seems to be that Munir Ba'albaki assumes that his audience is primarily English speaking, or intends to become English speaking, and he, therefore, decides to take the easy way out by simply following the lead of the English Dictionaries.

The English Dictionaries reverse Wehr's order. My copy of The Concise Oxford Dictionary (fourth edition, 1961 printing), emphasizes the religious basis of wars. It defines *Jihad* as: Religious war of Mohammedans against unbelievers, Crusade for or against a doctrine etc. We note that The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines Crusades as: Christian expedition to recover Holy Land from Mohammedans; war instigated by Church for alleged religious ends. The Webster, Second Edition, does somewhat better by not calling Muslims Mohammedans but considers *Jihad* as holy war and a crusade. It defines *Jihad* as: A holy war undertaken as a sacred duty by Muslims, any vigorous, emotional crusade for an idea or principle. It defines the Crusade as: Any of the religious expeditions undertaken by the Christians of Europe in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries for the recovery of the Holy Land from the Muslims; any war carried on under papal sanction; any vigorous, aggressive movement for the defense or advancement of any

idea, cause, etc. It is interesting to note that *Jihad* is labeled as a “war” that is religious and holy but the Crusades are “expeditions” that are religious.

The Webster also gives us two good pieces of information. It tells us that the origin of the word *Jihad* is Arabic and it means: struggle, strife. It also tells us that the word came into English usage during 1865-70. This period is the beginning of the popular struggle against the British in India as well as in Egypt and Sudan after the fall of their governments to the British. Notable among the new leaders is Mohammad Ahmed, the Mahdi, of Sudan who waged a vigorous *Jihad* against the British to liberate Sudan (he is a celebrated villain in the British, and British-inspired, History and the foe of the British hero ‘Lord Gordon of Khartoom’). Thus the word ‘*Jihad*’ comes into English usage at the time some Muslims were mobilizing under this slogan to expel the external conquerors.

This leads us to another notable phenomenon. Since Muslim Jurists have sanctioned fighting against oppression or for liberation as a part of *Jihad*, Muslims have often termed their wars against the outside enemies as *Jihad* to give the struggle the legitimacy with the general population. But labeling a war as a *Jihad* does not give it religious and legal legitimacy. Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, in their *The Vision of Islam* (Paragon House, 1994), describing the tendency of many Muslim leaders, Kings and Dictators of calling every war a *Jihad*, say “But there have usually been a good body of the ulama who have not supported wars simply because kings declared them. Rather, they would only support those that followed the strict application of Islamic teachings. By these standards, it is probably safe to say that there have been few if any valid Jihads in the past century and perhaps not for the past several hundred years”.

The tendency of Muslims to call their wars as *Jihad* is not as pervasive as some claim. The invocation of *Jihad* has come more often when Muslims in a given area are under intense difficulty. Even then, other Muslims have seldom rushed to their rescue. The Muslim potentates sat impassively in Damascus when the Muslims of Jerusalem were pleading for help against the Crusaders. The reason for this is that the scholars are wary of accepting wars as *Jihad*. Yusuf Ali, who is the least careful among the English translators in translating the word *Jihad*, is unable to miss the Qur’anic emphasis. In his translation, *The Holy Qur’an*, he says in footnote 1234 to Ayah 67 of Surah 8: “An ordinary war may be fought for territory or trade, revenge or military glory—all ‘temporal goods of this World.’ Such a war is condemned. But a *Jihad* is fought under strict conditions, under a righteous Imam, purely for the defense of faith and God’s Law. All other motives are, therefore, strictly excluded....” Nonetheless, the tendency of Muslims to couch their conflicts in religious term is common.

But Muslims are not alone in this tendency. People, throughout the ages, have sought to sanctify their conflicts with others by invoking higher religious authority, preferably that of God Himself. Moses instructs the Israelites to kill all male Midianites and all married women under orders of the Lord (Numbers, Chapter 31). Joshua completes the process with his campaigns against all other peoples of the area. When it is not possible to claim direct instructions from God, people simply claim that God is on their side, that the other side is evil and wicked.

The Christians of Europe forged their identity as Europeans by waging Crusades, during the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries of the Common Era, against far away people by declaring them as

enemies and invoked God and the sanctity of the Church to do so. In more recent times, the favorite Muslim of the Western secularists, Mustafa Kamal, assumed the title of 'Ataturk', (the father of Modern Turkey), after he liberated Turkey from the occupying forces of the Greeks and others after the World War I. For this liberation, he needed the full support of the people of Anatolia who did not care much about nationalism. So he marshaled them for the fight under the title of 'Ghazi', (the fighter for the holy cause of Islam), and acquired the support of the famous Sayyid Ahmad, The Grand Sanusi of Libya, who went to Anatolia to personally recruit people for 'Ghazi' Mustafa Kamal. After coming to power, the 'Attaturk' went about eliminating most of Muslim practices from the government and from the daily life of the Turks. And interestingly enough, the buckle-belts of the German soldiers during the same World War I carried the inscription "Gott mit uns" (God is with us).

Have we become more enlightened recently so that we no longer invoke Religion and God for our campaigns against others? Have we stopped singing the Battle Hymn of the Republic? Has the demonization of others stopped? Well, not quite. Osama bin Laden and his ilk invoke *Jihad* for their nefarious activities. But so do those fighting the "Al-Qa'ida" or the "Terrorists". Each side is claiming 'Gott mit uns'. President George Bush labeled the war against the Terrorists a Crusade. (He may have meant it in the sense of a general Holy Struggle but the Arab and the Muslim World understood it in the historic meaning and as a continuation of the Crusades of the Middle Ages.) The President has backed down from the use of the word Crusade but continues to demonize those who are not with him, even if they are not against him. The Attorney General Ashcroft remarked that the "Muslim God" asks that you sacrifice your sons for Him whereas the Christian God sacrifices His Son for you. During the week of October 20th, 2003, NBC and the Los Angeles Times (and subsequently others), reported on the speeches made by Lt. Gen. William G. "Jerry" Boykin, deputy undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, to Evangelical Christian audiences over the previous two years. He sees his job in clearly religious terms and considers the enemy as evil and demonic. It is difficult to deal intelligently with people of other nations if you see them in such a light. Worse, he shows contempt for the religion of Muslims in general. Describing his campaign in Somalia against 'Aidid, in the early 90s, he said he was sure of prevailing because "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew my God was a real God and his was an idol".

Similar examples of self-righteousness can be given from Jewish leaders in Israel, or Hindu leaders in India and elsewhere. Such attitudes were not as devastating in the past as they are in today's ever-shrinking world. This inter-connected technological world enables arrogant and self-righteous leaders of governments, as well as small well-disciplined groups, to kill thousands of people indiscriminately, without much injury to their side.

A just and peaceful world requires that all people of faith commit to the fundamentals of recognizing the full dignity of each human being and the uniqueness of each individual and of the different peoples of this small globe. We believe that returning to the original meaning of the sacred struggle as elaborated in the Qur'an can bring this about. This struggle is mandatory to control our egos, to restrain our tendencies to overstep boundaries and to resist evil in ourselves. The struggle to reform our societies and establish justice, equity, and harmony, while recognizing the uniqueness of people, is a communal responsibility of all people and nations.