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What is Jihad?

BY ISLAMFYI ([HTTPS://ISLAMFYI.PRINCETON.EDU/AUTHOR/IFYI95ADMIN/](https://islamfyi.princeton.edu/author/ifyi95admin/)) • JUNE 1, 2017 ([HTTPS://ISLAMFYI.PRINCETON.EDU/WHAT-IS-JIHAD/](https://islamfyi.princeton.edu/what-is-jihad/)) • 6 MIN

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For centuries, *jihad* has been associated in the Christian West with conquest and nowadays with terrorism. It evokes the same feeling that Muslims and Jews have when they hear the word Crusade.

But, *jihad* is not conquest or terrorism or holy war.

***Jihad* is an Arabic word that simply means struggle. In its religious context, it means sacred struggle for God. In the Islamic tradition, there are over 70 types of *jihad* – the greatest one, according to a tradition**

from the Prophet Muhammad, being the struggle against one's own ego and vices. As such, night vigil prayers, which are recommended for spiritual development, are known as *tahajud* – a word that shares the same root as *jihad*.

Jihad also has a social application – the struggle to enjoin good and oppose wrong; the struggle for social and economic justice. So, the effort to fight poverty and its root causes, for example, is *jihad*.

In the Islamic tradition there is also an intellectual *jihad* – the struggle of the mind and the pen to determine what is good and to promote that good in society. As such, the word for independent juristic reasoning is *ijtihad* – another word that shares the same root as *jihad*.

One of the forms of *jihad* is undoubtedly also fighting in God's cause. It is referred to specifically in the Qur'an as *qital*. This type of *jihad* is not desired. From time to time, to defend the lives, rights and property of Muslims and humanity at large, fighting might be necessary. But the Qur'an states that when your enemies turn toward peace, that Muslims too should embrace peace (8:61).

The Qur'an in chapter 22:41 – the foundational passage on the permissibility of fighting – clearly states that *qital* is a defensive measure to protect people from tyranny and oppression. *Qital* is an organized state function. Vigilantism has no Islamic basis. This type of *Jihad* must be conducted carefully and ethically, similar to the Just War Theory in Christian ethics.

Is Jihad Holy War?



In chapter 2, verse 90 the Qur'an clearly states that even when *qital* is permissible, its conduct must not transgress sacred bounds. All passages in the Qur'an about *qital* must be read and understood in their textual and historical context. If this is not done, erroneous and dangerous interpretations emerge.

Some of the sacred bounds governing *qital* from the very earliest period include a prohibition against killing any innocents, especially women and children and monks and priests in their monasteries; It also prohibits cutting down fruit bearing trees or poisoning the wells of enemies or killing livestock for reasons other than for food.

Terrorism and vigilante violence in the name of *jihad* is a bastardization of the religion.

Islam is not, historically or constitutionally (through the Qur'an and hadith), a pacifist religion. But, a preference for peace, diplomacy, treaties and ethical war are all clearly established in scripture and in historical precedence.

Soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, Islam quickly gathered steam and grew into an empire with a flourishing civilization – one of the greatest in human history. This empire of faith grew, like any other empire and civilization, partly through conquests. Commerce and conversions played a major role too as Muslims traveled from region to region.


What did not happen, for the most part, is forced conversion. When Muslims conquered lands they largely allowed for people of other religions to freely practice their faith. So, even though Muslims ruled over India for several centuries, for example, the majority remains Hindu to this day. In other places like Egypt, for example, Muslims only became the majority after two or three centuries after conquest. So, while jihad – historically speaking – as fighting in God's way was employed by Muslims to expand the borders of Islam's civilization, it did not result in forced conversions as is often wrongly perceived in the West.


Every age has a different sacred struggle. Many Muslims see the jihad of today to be the struggle of the intellect and pen as well as the struggle to reform Muslim societies. Many Muslims who are involved in social justice efforts, humanitarian relief and anti-war movements do so with the larger spirit of jihad as a sacred struggle for God as a guiding motivation.


Further Resources


- *War and Peace in Islam: The Uses and Abuses of Jihad*, H. R. H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (<https://www.amazon.com/War-Peace-Islam-Abuses-Jihad/dp/1903682835>)
- *Striving in the Path of God – Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought*, Asma Afsaruddin (<https://www.amazon.com/Striving-Path-God-Martyrdom-Islamic/dp/0199730938>)
- *Jihad and the Modern World*, Sherman Jackson (http://lamppostproductions.com/files/articles/JIHAD_MOD_WLD.pdf) (PDF)
- *Jihad is Not Perpetual Warfare*, Zaid Shakir (https://www.newislamicdirections.com/notes/jihad_is_not_perpetual_warfare/)

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