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What is Jihad?

NewMuslims.com : 6-7 minutes

Objectives

- To understand the linguistic and Islamic meaning of the word *jihad*.
- To understand the types of *jihad*.
- To learn who can do *jihad*.
- To understand the difference between *jihad* and terrorism.
- To understand modern day deviant, terrorist groups.

Arabic Terms

- *Jihad* - a struggle, to exert effort in a certain matter, and may refer to a legitimate war.

Background



Islam did not begin with violence. Rather, it began as the peaceful proclamation of the absolute unity of Allah by Prophet Muhammad (610 CE), may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, in the pagan-dominated town of Mecca. Within a few years, the Prophet and his adherents found themselves persecuted for their beliefs by the elite of the Quraysh^[1]. Prophet Muhammad proselytized among the tribesmen of the oasis of Madina, about 150 miles to the north of Mecca, who accepted his message. In 622 CE, Prophet Muhammad, together with the other Muslims, emigrated to this oasis.

When the Prophet of Islam emigrated from Mecca to Madina, the pagan tribes were aggressive towards him. But the Prophet always averted their attacks by the exercise of patience and the strategy of avoidance.

However, on certain occasions no other options existed, save that of retaliation. Therefore, he had to go into battle on certain occasions. It was these circumstances which occasioned the verses related to war.

Meaning

Jihad. The word has entered our everyday vocabulary, associated (by most non-Muslims) with unrestrained, unreasoning, total warfare. But what does it really mean?

Incorrect translation as “holy war” is associated with the medieval Crusades and is too narrowly Christian.

In Arabic, the word’s literal meaning is “striving” or “exerting oneself,” with the implication, on the basis of its usage in the Quran, “with regard to one’s religion.”

The word *jihad* stems from the Arabic root word J-H-D, which means "strive." Other words derived from this root include "effort," "labor," and "fatigue." Essentially *jihad* is an effort to practice religion in the face of oppression and persecution. The effort may come in fighting the evil in your own heart, or in standing up to a dictator. Military effort is included as an option, but as a last resort and not "to spread Islam by the sword" as the stereotype would have one believe.

Types of Jihad

Islamic scholars, from the time of the Prophet until today, have categorized *jihad* into more than fourteen distinct categories.

Jihad Against the Hypocrites

- By heart
- By tongue
- By wealth
- By person

Jihad Against the Unbelievers

- By heart
- By tongue
- By wealth
- By person

Jihad Against the Devil

- Fighting false desires and slanderous doubts in faith that he throws towards a person

- Fighting corrupt passion and desire that he throws towards a person

Jihad of the Self

- Striving to learn guidance and the religion without which there is no happiness in this life or in the Hereafter
- Striving to act upon it after learning it
- Striving to call to Allah and to teach it to someone who does not know it
- Striving with patience in seeking to call to Allah

Jihad as an Armed or Military Struggle

The armed struggle can be defensive or offensive.

The defensive *jihad* is fought when Muslim lands are invaded and the lives of people, their wealth and honor are threatened. So the Muslims fight back the invading enemy in self-defense.

In the offensive *jihad*, people who oppose the establishment of Islamic rule and prevent Islam from reaching the people are fought. In essence, it is a tool used to remove oppression. Islam is a mercy for all of mankind and came to bring people out from the worship of stones and humans to the worship of One True God, from the oppression and injustices of culture, people and nations to the equality and justice of Islam. Once Islam has been made accessible to people, there is no compulsion in accepting it – it is up to the people to accept or reject it. Only an established government can declare war. In other words, individuals can pray and give charity on their own, but they cannot declare wars of their own accord.

Most Islamic actions are governed by certain conditions. The waging of war is also subject to certain principles, one being that, even when a war has been declared by the state, it will be aimed only at the combatants. Targeting non-combatants will be unlawful. The Quran does not instruct to do battle with those who are not at war. Such people have to be dealt with kindly and equitably (60:8-9).

Jihad vs. Terrorism

Terrorism is not *jihad* and terrorists are not holy warriors for the following reasons:

- Islam does not instruct believers to threaten and attack civilians.
- Islam does not command Muslims to randomly kill the “infidels” and terrorize civilians.
- Terrorists go beyond the Islamic criteria for a just *jihad* and recognize no limits, employing any weapons or means.
- Terrorists reject Islamic law's regulations regarding the goals and legitimate means for a valid *jihad*: that violence must be proportional and that only the necessary amount of force should be used to repel the enemy, innocent civilians should not be targeted.

- *Jihad* must be declared by the ruler or head of state

Today, misguided individuals and groups like Al-Qaeda, ISIS or ISIL, Boko Haram, and others have seized the right to declare illegitimate and unholy wars of terrorism in the name of Islam. All recognized Muslim scholars and Islamic organizations have made it clear that their actions are wrong and against the teachings of Islam.