

# Misconceptions about the Islamic concept of *Jihad*

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## *Publisher's Note:*

Dr Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–1899) was a linguist and university academic who built the Mosque at Woking, Surrey, in 1889, where he also intended to establish an oriental university. This is an abridgement of an article he published in 1886 in his *Asiatic Quarterly Review*, October 1886. Writing as a Christian scholar of Islam and religious history, he has most ably clarified the concept of *jihad* in Islam. In this leaflet we have replaced certain antiquated names used in the original article by their proper, current equivalents. Hence *Muhammadans*, *Mussulmans*, *Muhammadanism* etc. have been replaced here by *Muslims* and *Islam*.

## Meanings of the word *jihad*

The subject of *jihad* is so thoroughly misunderstood both by Western scholars and by the bulk of Muslims themselves that it will be well to point out what really constitutes *jihad*. In order to do so, it is necessary to analyse the word and to show when and how it was first used.

Etymologically the root is *jahd*, “he exerted himself”, and the infinitive that is formed from it means “utmost exertion”. Its first use amongst Arabic authors refers to that particular exertion which takes place under great difficulties, and, when applied to religious matters, it means an exertion under religious difficulties on behalf of the true religion.

It will be seen at once how a word of this kind would be subject to interpretations according to circumstances. Taking into consideration the surrounding life of an Arab, if he forces his camel or horse to take a desperate ride through the night so as to surprise the violators of his peace before the early morn, it is *jihad*; if he appeals to his kinsmen to shake off their lethargy and to rally round the tribal standard or to spread the opinions of the true faith, it is *jihad*; and if he abstains alike

from worldly cares and amusements in order to find that peace which meditation alone can give in spite of an obdurate heart, it is *jihad*. Nor can the student's *jihad* in poring over his books, the merchant's *jihad* in amassing money, the ploughman's *jihad* in winning food from an obstinate soil, be forgotten.

So that when people say that *jihad* means the duty of the Muslims to wage war against a non-Muslim government or country and call this *jihad* (although it is possible that under certain circumstances this use of the word might be legitimate), they really talk nonsense, and cast an undeserved libel on a religion with which they are not acquainted.

### **Different meanings of the word *jihad***

Like other Arabic roots, *jihad* has first a concrete and then an applied meaning. This applied meaning varies according to the circumstances of Arabian life and the development of Arabic literature, but never loses its original keynote of **exertion against difficulties**.

*Jihad*, therefore, in the first form of that root, is applied to *exertion*, and in the third, sixth, and eighth forms to the *unsparing exertion in speech or action, or in order to arrive at a correct opinion in spite of difficulties*. Thus, an examiner in dealing with a candidate and a physician in treating a patient have tasks before them which tax their power; and so has a petitioner who wishes to extract a favour from an official.

In the third form, which adds the notion of *causation* to that of the original meaning, the object which causes exertion is obviously put into the foreground, and as resistance is greater, so efforts must be increased. These adverse things are generally objects of disapprobation. As with the Christian, the Muslim has to wage war with "the world, the flesh, and the devil," and so *jihad* is of three kinds, namely, against a visible enemy, against the devil, and against one's self; and all these three opponents are included in the term *jihad*, as used in the 22nd chapter of the Koran, verse 27. Thus, to fight an enemy under conditions of great difficulty and opposition, the enemy doing the same, is *jihad*, it being remembered that the earliest enemies with whom Islam had to fight for its very existence were non-Muslims desirous of suppressing a hated religion. It was only natural that when reference was made to a "*jihad* in the path of God" the word should have come to mean a fight in the

cause of religion, and that, finally, when the words “in the path of God” were dropped in ordinary conversation, or writing, it should assume the meaning of a “religious war”, which it has kept to the present day.

### **Various other forms of the word *jihad***

The other forms of the word *jihad* continue the general meaning of the original form as modified by the super-added value of the derived form. Thus, to the labourer it becomes in the fourth form the entering upon land, such as is termed “*jihad*, a desert, a plain”, or “open, barren country,” whilst in dealing with affairs, that form adds “the necessity of prudence, precaution, and sound judgement.” The physical result of this is the old man’s hoariness and the appearance of white hair in the dark beard, but exertions steadfastly prosecuted have the effect of both concrete and abstract difficulties being removed, and, therefore, *ajhad* means that “the earth, the road, or the truth become open to him who takes trouble,” and finally *ajhad* means that “the matter in hand becomes within one’s reach.”

We now, passing over the sixth form as being very much the same in meaning as the first, approach the eighth, which has had such an importance in the theological government of the *Shi‘ah* community in which the *mujtahids* are the scholastic witnesses, commentators, and guides of the faith, whose words, whether it be at Lahore, at Lucknow, or at Tehran, the faithful of the *Shi‘ah* sect find it impossible to resist. *Mujtahid* as a conventional term means “a lawyer exerting the faculty of the mind to the utmost for the purpose of forming a right opinion in a case of law respecting a doubtful and difficult point by means of reasoning and comparison,” and, similarly, *ijtihad* means “the referring a case proposed to the judge respecting a doubtful and difficult point from the method of analogy to the Koran and the *Sunnah*.”

The simple noun, *jahd*, therefore, obviously means power, ability, labour, effort, a stringent oath, or else the difficulty, affliction, or fatigue with which the above-named qualities have to contend. Physiologically, of course, disease is *jahd*. The trouble of a large family combined with poverty, or the difficulty of a poor man in paying exorbitant taxes, are all *jahd*. Applied to land, *jihad* has already been explained to be the land, in which there is herbage, or level and rugged land, sterile and ungrateful, though it is also applied to land of which the herbage is

much eaten by cattle in the form *jahid*. *Mujhid*, if referred to a friend, shows that he is a sincere and careful adviser; if applied to oneself, denotes an embarrassed condition, and if to one's beast, one that is weak by reason of fatigue. The passive participle of *jahd* similarly refers to the distressed condition of affairs, of disease, of dearth, or drought; but we think we have said enough to prove that **none of the meanings in any of the forms necessarily implies the fighting of a man because he is of a different religion**, or the opposition to a non-Muslim government, and that it even does not go so far as the word *crusade*, as animating a community in an attempt to oust the unbeliever from foreign land in order to obtain the guardianship of the Holy Sepulchre, or to simply wrest land from the Muslims for the glory of a most Christian king.

*Jihad*, to summarise the ordinary meanings as given by Arabic lexicographers, is simply as follows:

- *Jahd* – To exert oneself, endure fatigue, to become emaciated from disease, to examine, to extract butter from milk, to wish for food, to live in straitened circumstances.
- *Jihadat* – The hard ground which has no vegetation.
- *Jihad* – War with an enemy.
- *Ijhad* – The increase of white hair, the unfolding of truth, exertion, and (in special applications) to divide and to waste property.

### The Prophet's perception of holy war

When some people applied to Muhammad for permission to join in a holy war against those who were oppressing Muslims, he replied to them:

“Your true *jihad* is in endeavouring to serve your parents.”

The Quran, when using the word *jihad*, seems preferentially to use it for war with sin:

“Whoever wages jihad in morality We will show him the true way.” (29:69)

Elsewhere (25:52), the Koran exhorts us to fight infidels with the “great *jihad*”, the sword of the spirit and the arguments of the Muslim Bible.

In the traditions regarding the sayings and doings of the Prophet, a band of holy warriors is returning cheerfully from a victorious war with infidels to the peace of their homes and the tranquil observation of their faith. In passing the Prophet, they exclaim:

“We have returned from the small *jihad*” (the war with the aggressors on the Muslim faith) “to the great *jihad*” (the war with sin).

### **No compulsion in religion**

The principal references in the Koran relating to religious war are found in the following chapters.

No violence is to be used in religious matters, although the popular impression is that this is the very essence of Islam. The second chapter of the Quran distinctly lays down:

“Let there be no violence in religion” (2:256).

This passage was particularly directed to some of Muhammad’s first proselytes, who, having sons who had been brought up in idolatry or Judaism, wished to compel them to embrace Islam. Indeed, even when the mothers of non-Muslim children wanted to take them away from their believing relatives, Muhammad prevented every attempt to retain them. The second chapter similarly says:

“Surely those who believe (*viz.* Muslims) and those who are Jews, and Christians and Sabaeans, whoever believes in God, in the last day, and does that which is right, they shall have their reward of their Lord” (2:62).

These words are repeated in the fifth chapter, and, no doubt, several Muslim doctors consider it to be the doctrine of their prophet that every man may be saved in his own religion, provided he be sincere and lead a good life. However, under the pressure of the followers of Muhammad, this latitude was curtailed and was explained to mean “if he became a Muslim,” though this explanation is manifestly a faulty one, because if an idolater became a Moslem, he would be equally saved, and so there would be no difference between him and an *Ahl-e Kitab* (possessor of a sacred book) namely, a Christian or a Jew.

The fact is that there is an essential difference between the chapters delivered at Mecca and those delivered at Medina. In the first case, we have the utterances of one who, as a true prophet, calls people to repentance and to a godly life apart from worldly considerations. In the chapters, however, given at Medina, we necessarily find these worldly considerations paramount, Islam struggling for its very existence, and being confronted, not only with the necessity of legislation among its own followers, but also with the organisation of war, and with the circumstances that give rise to it or the results that follow from it; so that it is obvious that instructions given to warriors or in a code of legislation must differ from appeals to salvation. It is only in bearing in mind the circumstances under which each particular instruction was given that we can come to a right conclusion as to whether war with infidels, as such, is legitimate or not.

We have no hesitation in stating that an unbiased study of the Muslim scriptures will lead one to the conclusion that all those who believe in God and act righteously will be saved. Indeed, the ground is cut off from under the feet of those people who maintain that *jihad* is intended to propagate the Muslim religion by means of the sword. It is, on the contrary, distinctly laid down in the chapter called *The Pilgrimage*, that the object of *jihad* is to protect mosques, churches, synagogues, and monasteries from destruction (22:40), and we have yet to learn the name of the Christian crusader whose object it was to protect mosques or synagogues. Of course, when the Arabs were driven from Spain, to which they had brought their industry and learning, by Ferdinand and Isabella, and were driven into opposition to Christians, the modern meaning of *jihad* as hostility to Christianity was naturally accentuated. Indeed, *jihad* is so essentially an *effort* for the protection of Islam against assault, that the Muslim generals were distinctly commanded not to attack any place in which the Muslim call to prayer could be performed or in which a single Muslim could live unmolested as a witness to the faith.

### **Permission to fight against aggression**

Fighting for religion is, indeed, encouraged in the second chapter, which was given under circumstances of great provocation, but even in that it is distinctly laid down:

“And fight for the religion of God against those that fight against you, but transgress not by attacking them first, for God loves not the transgressors; kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out of that whereof they have dispossessed you, for temptation to idolatry is more grievous than slaughter; yet fight not against them in the holy temple until they attack you therein, and if they attack you, slay them, but if they desist, God is gracious and merciful; fight therefore against them until there be no temptation to idolatry and the religion be God’s, but if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against the ungodly” (2:190-193).

In other words, fight sin but not the sinner in times of peace. Again, in the third chapter, when the Lord of Hosts is invoked as being more powerful than all the confronting armies of enemies, when the Quraish endeavoured to induce the Muslims to return to their old idolatry as they fled in the battle of Ohud, the encouragement to fight given in that chapter has, of course, only special application:

“How many prophets have encountered foes who had myriad troops, and yet they desponded not in their mind for what had befallen them in fighting for the religion of God, and were not weakened (in their belief), neither behaved themselves in an abject manner ...” (3:145).

“God gave them the reward of this world and a glorious reward in the life to come” (3:147).

And again: *We will surely cast a dread into the hearts of the unbelievers* (3:150), in allusion to the Quraish repenting that they had not utterly extirpated the Muslims, and to their beginning to think of going back to Medina for that purpose, but being prevented by a sudden panic which fell from God.

Again, in the fourth chapter, *Fight therefore for the religion of God, and oblige not any one to do what is difficult except thyself* (4:84). This is in allusion to the Muslims refusing to follow their prophet to the lesser expedition of Badr so that he was obliged to set out with no more than seventy men. In other words, the Prophet only was under the obligation of obeying God’s commands, however difficult.

“However, excite the faithful to war, perhaps God will restrain the courage of the unbelievers, for God is stronger than they and more able to punish. He who intercedes between men with a good intercession shall have a portion thereof” (4:84-85).

And further on, *When you are saluted with a salutation, salute the person with a better salutation* (4:86). In other words, when the purely Muslim salutation of *Salam aleikum* is given by a Muslim, the reply should be the same with the addition, “and the mercy of God and His blessing.” Again, in the eight chapter:

“All true believers! When you meet the unbelievers marching in great numbers against you, turn not your backs on to them, for whoso shall turn his back on to them in that day, unless he turn aside to fight or retreat to another party of the faithful, shall draw on himself the indignation of God” (8:15-16).

The fact was that on the occasion when the injunction was given, Muslims **could not avoid fighting**, and there was, therefore, a necessity for a special strong appeal; but *jihad*, even when explained as a righteous effort of waging war in self-defence against the grossest outrage on one’s religion, is strictly limited in the passage to which we have already alluded and which we now quote *in extenso* from the chapter entitled *Al Hajj* (The Pilgrimage):

“Permission is granted unto those who take arms against the unbelievers, because they have been unjustly persecuted by them and have been turned out of their habitations injuriously and **for no other reason** than because they say: our Lord is God. And if God did not repel the violence of some men by others, **verily monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of God is frequently commemorated, would be utterly demolished**” (22:39–40).

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