

Clarification of the Concept of Jihād = War

Imam A. M. Khattab

The Sunday Magazine announced¹ that the Islamic Jihad Movement in Gaza Strip declared that if the United States attacks Iraq, they would strike the interests of the United States in the Middle East by using suicidal attacks. Of course, when the American people hear this, they have their own interpretation of a statement like that, but, some of us Muslims, living in this society, sometimes lend a stick to the people to beat us with, by advocating ideas which need to be thought over, in terms of Islam, before blindly supporting them.

The situation, at the time of the report in the Sunday Magazine, between Iraq and the United States,² is referred to as a problem between the United Nations and Iraq, and that United States is not a party to the dispute. But when we think deeply about what is going on in the world at the present time, then, it is easy to see the United Nations as an extension of the United States Department of State, because whatever the United States wants that is what the United Nations does. Let us look at the situation from the Islamic point of view.

The word which figures prominently in the

vocabulary of every American now, and which he or she is capable of pronouncing correctly without any accent is “jihad”. And we, the Muslims, also don’t understand the meaning of jihad. I think the time has come for us to know what jihad is. This will draw us into a little bit of grammar, English as well as Arabic, in order to understand what that term really means.

There is a word in Arabic *yaqtul* – present tense – which means “he kills”. The past tense is *qatala* – he killed. The active participle, as it is called in English, is *qaatil* – the killer – the one who commits the act. The one who receives the action or is the object of the action – the passive participle – is called *ism maf’ool* in Arabic. The passive voice is *qutila* – he was killed. All these verbs are related to killing. But sometimes the word “kill” is employed in some other sense. In Lebanese slang – and it is the same in Egypt and in other areas – when a naughty boy is reprimanded by his mother, she will usually say to him, “Your father will kill you!” Of course, the father will not kill his son, but that is called *majaaz* in Arabic, and metaphorical language in English. It means “he will beat you” although the actual word used is “he will *kill* you”.

Applying this grammar to the term *jihad*, the present tense is *yujāhid* – he struggles. The past tense is *jahada* – he struggled. The active participle is *mujahid*. The passive

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²“Surrender the Weapons of Mass Destruction or Face War”

participle is *jahada* also, the same as the past tense. The infinitive is *juhd*. The word “jihad” is adapted from the infinitive *juhd*. *Juhd* means “intensive efforts/struggles”. The English word “war” is translated into Arabic as *harb*, and *yuhaarib* is the present tense.

Qur’anic language is very rich and capable of conveying great depth of meaning. A linguist studying the Arabic language is like a doctor, but instead of dissecting cadavers, he takes every word in the Qur’an and dissects it to arrive at its root meaning, then derives every possible word that can be modified from it in order to arrive at the most appropriate meaning in a particular context. As a result, if you ask one shaykh³ about the meaning of jihad he will give you an answer different from another shaykh. Why? Because the term is broad, and it has many meanings. But we, the Muslims, have taken that word “jihad” and made it synonymous with war. This is not correct. In fact, the West has equated the term “jihad” with war, and, unfortunately, the Muslims, without giving it much thought, have readily agreed with that interpretation.

“War” is translated into Arabic as *harb* while the concept of “intensive efforts, hard striving, struggling, hard labor, toiling and sweating, diligence”, is translated into Arabic as *jihad*. So, when you say this man is *mujahid*, it means that the man exerts much effort: he is *mujahid*. It means that when you are exerting effort, you are in a state of *jihad*. And that effort could be in any field or area. A farmer struggling to cut and harvest his wheat under the heat of the sun, with his primitive serrated reaping hook, is in a state of *jihad* because he is exerting effort. A man toiling on the assembly line all day is in a state of *jihad*. A door-to-door salesman selling carpets, trying to earn a living for his children and family, is in a state of *jihad*; all these are instances of *jihad*. So *jihad* is not synonymous with war. *Jihad* signifies struggle in any endeavor and war happens to be one of them. But the West has equated *jihad* with war, and the Muslims have accepted that interpretation, and act upon it accordingly. Following the defeat and withdrawal of the former Soviet Union from Afghanistan,⁴ there are now several factions who were former allies, but, now, are fighting each other; and *all of them are Muslim*. And everyone calls himself *mujahid*! And it is true, because everyone is exerting effort in killing his brother: so, he

is in a state of *jihad*! They are all *mujahideen*⁵ because everyone is trying to kill his brother, and is exerting maximum effort to achieve that end. But notice that you are talking about the word “jihad” only, and that word, by itself, has its own meaning, but to use the word *jihad* in the context of Islam, there is another phrase which has to be attached to it – *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah*.⁶ *Jihad* in the cause of God, or exerting effort in the cause of God, is what Islam requires in order for any war to be truly equated with *jihad*.

Jihad fi-Sabeelillah has many varieties. If I am exerting effort to earn my living from *halal*⁷ means, I am in a state of *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah*. If I am exerting efforts to help the needy by giving *zakah*,⁸ I am in a state of *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah* also, because I am giving all my earnings for that day to a brother who is in need; that is *jihad*. When you go to Hajj,⁹ you are in a state of *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah*: you undertook that journey purely for the sake of God, so, that is *jihad*. If someone attacks your house to rob you at night, and you get into a fight with him, you are in a state of *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah*, because you are defending your wife, you are defending your money, you are defending your house. So, when it comes to the word “jihad”, it has to be understood in terms of the meaning of *that term*, and not only *jihad* as a war, because, *jihad* signifies struggle in different things, and war happens to be one of them; and when we are engaged in *jihad*, it has to be for the cause of God. An Arab Bedouin came to the Prophet and said, “Some people are fighting for gaining booty and wealth from the war; some people are fighting so others will say ‘Oh, Mr. So-and-So is a very, very brave man. He liberated that village.’ Some people are fighting so others will look upon them as being in a more prestigious position in the society – which one among them is fighting in the cause of God?” The Prophet put it in very simple and easy terms: “The one who is fighting to make the Word of God supreme is the one who is *fi-Sabeelillah* – fighting in the cause of God.” Can we say that any of our people who are fighting nowadays – *anywhere in the world* – is fighting *fi-Sabeelillah*? Everyone is fighting for the chair of authority.

⁵ Plural of *mujahid*

⁶ *fi-Sabeelillah* means, “in the cause of God.” *Jihad fi-Sabeelillah* means, “exerting effort, or struggling, in the cause of God”

⁷ By honest and lawful means

⁸ The obligatory poor-due

⁹ The Pilgrimage to Makkah

³ Religious leader

⁴ In April 1992

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The Westerners say, people, your Islam likes blood, everything in your Qur'an is saying jihad, jihad, jihad, and when you see the blood you are very pleased. Then, some of us will be put on the defensive and say no, no, no. This is not right, we make a distinction between defensive war and aggressive war; what Islam talks about is the defensive war: if someone attacks me I defend myself, but I do not aggress on him. I'm not supposed to aggress on people. So, we talk in this fashion and end up defending ourselves in a wrong way. Why did the West come to equate the word "jihad" with war? The reason is that there are two concepts, in Islam, they don't understand: the concept of *Deen*, which we sometimes translate as "religion", and the concept of *ummah*, which we translate into English as "nation". And both these concepts, Deen and ummah, even we, the Muslims, don't understand them.

Deen, to the West, is a group of rituals: if you go to church every Sunday, sing the hymns, listen to the religious music – that is their Deen. And too many Muslims think the same way: when they come to the mosque they think that they have become *very* religious. We show up every Sunday here in the mosque, eat *fatayur*, taste the *kobbi*,¹⁰ drink coffee, then we come and do two *rak'ats*¹¹ here, and we consider that is Deen. Why? Because we are influenced by the West.

The concept of *ummah* is understood by the West as a group of people who share certain essential traits and traditions; for example, they look like each other, they have a unity of language, a unity of race, and that is what they consider "ummah". Our understanding of ummah is not like that. When you analyze the Muslim nations from Indonesia to Morocco, you'll find different races, different languages, different colors, and different traditions, but all these are blended into what is called *Ummat-ul Islam*.¹² So, our understanding of the concept of ummah is different from that of the West. Our understanding of religion or Deen is different from that of the West. Religion, to us, is not coming to the mosque, but religion, for us, is a way of life – *a way of life*. Every minute of your life is religion; it is not only when you come to the mosque. Your whole pattern of behavior every second of your life, including your thoughts, is religion. If your

thoughts are bad, you are committing a crime.¹³ If your thoughts are good, you are doing a good deed, and that is why the Prophet, peace be upon him, said, "Actions are to be judged according to intentions." So, you are accountable even for your thoughts – that is religion. It is not the rituals, it is not the appearance which we are disagreeing about today: you man, you have to have a beard; you woman, you have to have a hijab,¹⁴ this, this, this. ¹⁵And I'll tell you, we are emphasizing appearance nowadays to the point where we have lost the religion.

A young Arab lady, who is related to Dr. Mansoor,¹⁶ phoned me, "Imam, I have a question. I have a cousin, who was born in America, and a young man is coming from the Middle East and he is interested in marrying her. They agreed, and everything is fixed, but now, two weeks before the wedding, he is insisting that the girl wear a hijab otherwise the marriage would be off. Is it true that a hijab is that important in Islam and to the extent that not wearing it could stop an impending wedding in its tracks?" I had her reaffirm her statement that her cousin was born in this country, then, I asked if she prays?

She said: "No, she doesn't even know how to read Al Fatihah."¹⁷ "Does she fast?"

"No, she doesn't know what Ramadan means."

I said to her, tell the good Muslim guy, who is coming to marry her, that there are priorities. Start with the essentials and she will don the hijab by herself. So, here we are *stressing* and *emphasizing* appearances while forgetting about the core.

Islam, truly, is a revolution – a universal revolution. How, and in what way? Islam *requires* that *every human being* on earth should live the comfortable life; it doesn't matter if he is Muslim, Christian, Jew, or anything else. *That* is what the Qur'an tells us! The Qur'an does not say, "O you believers, or followers of Muhammad" but it says, "O *mankind*, worship your God who created you and who created those before you." The order is not directed to the believers, or to the Muslims only; it is directed to all human beings. It means that the Islamic revolution wants everyone to follow certain rules – a unity of rules and laws – that will cause the happiness of *all mankind* in

¹⁰ Lebanese and Egyptian foods

¹¹ Prayer, or salah

¹² The Ummah of Islam

¹³ Crime, in Islam, is synonymous with sin

¹⁴ The traditional Arab female headdress

¹⁵ Imam speaks in a low voice with extreme urgency

¹⁶ One of the pioneers of the Islamic Center.

¹⁷ The first chapter of the Qur'an consisting of seven lines

this world and in the world to come. Another Qur'anic verse which is very powerful, but you will find *hardly* anyone quoting it, rather, we all quote only half of the verse and say, "The recompense for an injury is an injury equal thereto in degree", but that is only half of the verse; the rest of the verse says that anyone who will forgive and reconcile with his *human brother*, God will reward him.¹⁸ Do you find this written so plainly in any scripture other than the Qur'an? His human brother includes the Christians and the Jews and everybody else. God

ordered the Prophet: "Say to them, O Muhammad, [Imam quotes Arabic verse, the translation of which is:]

"O People of the Book,¹⁹ come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: 'Bear witness that it is we who are *muslimūn*' [3:64].

¹⁸ 42:40

¹⁹ The Christians and the Jews