

WHAT *JIHAD* ACTUALLY MEANS

“*Jihad*” (from the verb “*jahada*”) on its own simply means “to struggle”, “to exert effort”, “to exert oneself”, “to toil” or “to strive”. *Jihad* simply means to strive hard or struggle in pursuit of a just and goodly cause in a manner that is in line with the guidance/way/path of Allah (*fi sabilillah*).

Jihad in Islamic teachings refers to the unceasing effort that an individual must make towards self-improvement and self-purification in Allah’s cause. It also refers to the duty of Muslims, both at the individual and collective level, to struggle against all forms of evil, corruption, injustice, tyranny, and oppression – whether this injustice is committed against Muslims or Non-Muslims, and whether by Muslims or Non-Muslims. In this context, *jihad* may include peaceful struggle or, if absolutely necessary, armed struggle. What should be very clear is that *jihad* cannot be reduced or restricted to simply warfare or fighting, and that the very important phrase that qualifies and determines the permissibility and acceptance of any form of *jihad* is “*fi sabilillah*” – in the way or cause of Allah, or to achieve the higher intents of Islamic teachings (*Maqasid al-Shari’ah*) – i.e., accruing benefit for all and prevention of harm from society.

Use of the term “*Jihad*” in the Qur’an

The Qur’an generally uses the term “*jihad*” in the broader sense of struggle for Allah’s cause (which could include fighting). It is noteworthy that the term was first used in verses revealed at Mecca, long before the early Muslims were permitted to fight such as:

“And whoever engages in striving (*jihad*) he does so for his own soul...” (Qur’an 29:6)

“And those who engage in striving (jihad) in Our (cause), We will certainly guide them to Our paths.” (Qur’an 29:69)

“Therefore, listen not to the unbelievers, but engage in striving (jihad) against them (with the utmost endeavour)¹, with it (the Qur’an).” (Qur’an 25:52)

“Go forth light and heavy, and strive (jihad) hard in Allah's way with your property and your persons; this is better for you, if you know.” (Qur’an 9:41)

Other Medinan verses reiterate a similar message:

“The believers are only those who believe in Allah and His Apostle then they doubt not and struggle hard (jihad) with their wealth and their lives in the way of Allah; they are the truthful ones.” (Qur’an 49:15)

“Not equal are those of the believers who sit (at home), except those who are disabled (by injury or are blind or lame), and those who strive hard (jihad) and fight (qital) in the Cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Allah has preferred in grades those who strive hard (jihad) and fight (qital) with their wealth and their lives above those who sit (at home). Unto each, Allah has promised good (Paradise), but Allah has preferred those who strive hard and fight, above those who sit (at home) by a huge reward.” (Qur’an 4:95)²

¹ Ibn Kathir states that this was also the interpretation of Ibn Abbas. See, *Tafsir al-Qur’an al-Azim*, (ed. Sami bin Muhammad Salamah), Dar al-Tayba, 2nd ed., 1420AH, vol.6, p.116.

² Other similar verses include Qur’an 2:190 – 193, 2:216, 4:74, 4:89, 9:29

The many meanings of “*Jihad*” in the Hadith

Abu Dharr said that the Messenger (pbuh) said, “*The best jihad is for one to perform jihad against his own self and against his desires.*”³

Another man asked, “What kind of *jihad* is best?” The Prophet (pbuh) replied, “*A word of truth before an oppressive ruler.*”⁴

Aisha asked, “O Messenger of Allah, we see *jihad* as the best of deeds, so shouldn’t we join it?” He replied, “*Hajj is the most excellent of all jihad (for women).*”⁵

The Messenger (pbuh) also said, “*...the one who engages in jihad (mujāhid) is he who strives against himself for the sake of Allah, and the one who emigrates (muhājir) is he who abandons evil deeds and sinfulness.*”⁶ Ibn Umar reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said, “*The best jihad is that of one who strives against his own self in the Cause of Allah, Most Great and Glorious.*”⁷

Ibn Umar reported that “A man came to the Prophet of Allah (pbuh) and said, ‘Allow me to fight.’ The Prophet (pbuh) asked him, ‘Are your parents alive?’ ‘Yes,’ replied the man. ‘Then go back and exert your utmost (*jihad*) in their service,’ said the Prophet (pbuh).”⁸

³ Collected by ad-Daylami, Abu Nu’aim and Ibn an-Najjar, authenticated by Al-Albani, *Saheeh Jaami’ as-Sagheer*, 3rd edition, al-Maktub al-Islami, Beirut, 1990, Hadith no.1099

⁴ *An-Nasa’i*, Hadith no.4209

⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Hajj, Hadith no.2784

⁶ *Sahih Ibn Hibban*, no.4862, Tirmidhi, Ahmad, cited in Jalal Abualrub, *Holy Wars, Crusades and Jihad*, Medinah Publishers and Distributors, 2002, p.80

⁷ Collected by al-Tabarani in *Al-Mu’jam al-Kabir*, authenticated by Al-Albani, *Saheeh Jaami’ as-Sagheer*, no.1129, and cited in *Mishkat al-Masābīh*, vol.1, pp.15-16

⁸ Reported by *Al-Bukhari*, Hadith no.3004; *Abu Dawood*, Hadith no.2529; *An-Nasa’i*, Hadith no.3103; and *Al-Tirmidhi*, Hadith no.1671

On another occasion, the Prophet (pbuh) said, *"The one who strives for a widow and the poor is like the one who performs jihad in the way of Allah, and like the one who spends his night praying, and his day fasting."*⁹

The Messenger (pbuh) said (during his farewell Hajj), *"Should I inform you of who the Mu'min (true believer) is? It is he from whom people are secure with regard to their wealth and their own selves. The (true) Muslim is he from whom people are safe from (being harmed by) his tongue and hand. The (true) Mujāhid is he who performs jihad bi al-Nafs (struggle with the self) in the obedience of Allah. And the (true) Muhājir (migrant in the Cause of Allah) is he who abandons transgression and sin."*¹⁰

Ibn Abbas reported that Allah's Apostle (pbuh) said, "There is no Hijra (i.e. migration) (from Mecca to Medina) after the Conquest (of Mecca), but Jihad and good intention remain; and if you are called (by the Muslim ruler) for fighting, go forth immediately."¹¹

Abdullah bn Masud said: I asked Allah's Messenger (pnuh), "O Allah's Messenger (pbuh)! What is the best deed?" He replied, "To offer the prayers at their early stated fixed times." I asked, "What is next in goodness?" He replied, "To be good and dutiful to your parents." I further asked, what is next in goodness?" He replied, "To participate in Jihad in Allah's Cause." I did not ask Allah's Messenger (pbuh) anymore and if I had asked him more, he would have told me more.¹²

⁹ *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith no.7659; Muhammad Naqib, Ishan Jan and Abdulrashid Lawan Haruna, *International Humanitarian Law*, IIUM Press, Gombak, Malaysia, 2015, pp.203-219.

¹⁰ *Musnad Ahmad*, Hadith no.23958; Al-Hakim, *Al-Mustadrak*, Hadith no.24; Al-Tabarani, *Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir*, Hadith no.796

¹¹ *Sahih al-Bukhari* Vol. 4 Book 52, Hadiths 42.

¹² *Sahih al-Bukhari* 2782.

The usage of the term “*jihad*”, “*mujahid*” (a person involved in *jihad*), and its different derivations in the various Hadiths above is enough evidence that the Prophet (pbuh) did not restrict its meaning to warfare.¹³

Use of the term “*Jihad*” by Jurists

Even though the Qur’an and Hadith give a variety of meanings to the term “*jihad*” as illustrated above, scholars of Islamic jurisprudence have usually been more concerned with the military form of *jihad* as this requires more jurisprudential elaboration of its legal regulation. Hence, the sections that deal with warfare in traditional Islamic law literature are usually under sections or books titled “*jihad*”. However, while such jurists acknowledge the various meanings of the term “*jihad*” as used by the Qur’an and Hadith, this technical or juristic meaning of “*jihad*” as used in books of law, has unfortunately led many uninformed students of Islam to conclude that “*jihad*” has the exclusive meaning of fighting or warfare (*qital/harb*).

However, rarely in the Qur’an is the word “*jihad*” used with the sole meaning of fighting. The most commonly used words for fighting or warfare, in the literal sense, in both the Qur’an and Hadith are “*qital*” and “*harb*”.

The “Best *Jihad*” and its Prerequisites

The methodology of *jihad* according to all Islamic sources, therefore, does not exclude non-violent resistance against oppression and tyranny, if the general conditions of the moment indicate that this approach is the most effective way to achieve the objective of lasting peace and security.

¹³ For more on the usage of *jihad* in the hadith, see *Sahih al-Bukhari* Vol. 4 Book 52, Hadiths 44, 46, 53, 54, 59, etc.

Depending on the circumstances and those involved, the best form of *jihad* may take several different forms, as cited earlier in the texts above. Thus, it may include, but is not limited to any of the following - being frank in advice to a tyrannical ruler; exercising discipline or self-restraint; *Hajj* (pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Mecca); taking care of one's parents; studying and self-improvement; teaching and sharing beneficial knowledge;¹⁴ and sometimes, it may be taking up arms to defend oneself and others, including non-Muslim citizens (*Ahl al-Dhimma*) in a "Just War".

This implies that Muslims would have to undertake *jihad* in many diverse forms in the course of their lives. The very important phrase or condition that determines the value and acceptance of any form of *jihad* is that it is done "*fi sabilillah*" – (literally) "in the way or path of Allah" or in the general sense, "for the sake of Allah". This means that one's intentions are sincere, the means or methods are permissible, and the *jihad* aims to achieve the higher intents of Islamic teachings (*Maqasid al-Shari'ah*) – accruing benefit for all and/or prevention of harm. *Jihad al-Nafs* – the struggle (*jihad*) to purify one's intention and heart, strengthen one's willpower, and ensure that all deeds are in accordance with Allah's guidance – is, therefore, the prerequisite of all other forms of *jihad*.

Ibn al-Qayyim summarizes this point very clearly:

"The *jihad* against the enemies of Allah with one's life is only a part of the struggle (*jihad*) which a true servant of Allah carries on with against his own self for the sake of the Lord ... This striving (*jihad*) against the evil tendencies which have dominated his mind and heart is more important than fighting against the enemies in the outside

¹⁴ Qur'an 9:122 which reads "And it is not (proper) for the believers to go out (to fight) altogether. Of every troop of them, a party only should go forth, that they (who are left behind) may get instructions in religion, and that they may warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware (of evil)."

world ... As long as (the servant of Allah) does not first strive (*jihad*) against his own evil tendencies in obedience to Allah's commands, it is not possible for him to succeed in striving against the enemies in the outside world."¹⁵

¹⁵ Ibn Qayyim, *Zaad al-Ma'ad*, Maktabah al-Manar al-Islamiyyah, Beirut, vol 3, p.5, 14th edition