

Editorial

Understanding Jihad

If we were to make a list of all the Islamic terms and concepts that have been inadvertently misconstrued or deliberately distorted, by the apologetic Muslims or Western orientalist, then Jihad can easily be placed at the top of that list.

Although the significance of Jihad in the Qur'an and Sunnah cannot be overstated, its exact place in the overall framework of Islamic values and imperatives has been a matter of some debate. Some writers have described Jihad as the fifth pillar of Islam, while others have relegated it to a mere *Fard Kafayah* (a collective, rather than personal, duty). A highly misleading but popular idea in this respect is that any war in which the Muslims are engaged, even if the motives are other than purely Islamic, is *Jihad fi Sabeel lillah*. In view of the confusions and misunderstandings that surround this most fundamental of Islamic concepts, we are going to discuss here, very briefly, the meaning and import of Jihad vis-à-vis the other duties and obligations of a Muslim.

The word Jihad is not synonymous with "Holy War" which is what the Western media wants everyone to believe. After four decades of Cold War, the Western powers suddenly found themselves without a legitimate enemy, and, consequently, they have designated Islam and the Muslims as the most deadly threat to world peace. The image of all Muslims as terrorists was inculcated by numerous so-called documentaries, like the infamous *Jihad in America* (PBS). In the face of such widespread media stereotypes, it is indeed an uphill task to educate the non-Muslims regarding the true meaning of Jihad. Much more important, however, is the task of removing the misconception which are prevalent among the Muslims themselves.

The foundation of the edifice of Islam consists in the verbal testimony of God's unity and Muhammad's (SAW) prophethood. Built upon this foundation are the four pillars of Islam with which all of us are familiar, i.e., Salat, Zakat, Saum, and Hajj. Please note, however, that Iman (or faith) also has two pillars: an unshakable inner conviction in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the struggle in the path of Almighty Allah (SWT). This has been described in the Qur'an thus:

They alone are the *mo'min* who come to believe in Allah and His messenger and afterwards never doubted, and who strive in the way of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Only they are truthful and sincere. (Al-Hujurat 49:15)

What does this ayah really mean? It implies that there is absolutely no way, for a person who claims to be a believer, to avoid *Jihad fi Sabeel lillah* and still remain a believer in the sight of Almighty Allah (SWT). Indeed, the very definition of a *mo'min*, as given in Surah Al-Hujurat, necessitates that a strong faith and state of inner certitude be coupled with an active struggle in the path of Allah (SWT).

The word Jihad and the verb that goes with it mean to struggle against some opposition. Thus, each and every human being is engaged in Jihad, in the sense that everyone has to struggle for his existence. However, the kind of Jihad we are talking about should be qualified as *fi Sabeel lillah*, that is to say, trying and exerting one's utmost in the path of Almighty Allah. It is an earnest and ceaseless activity involving the sacrifice of physical and mental resources, wealth, property, and even life, only for the sake of attaining the pleasure Almighty Allah (SWT).

In order to understand the meaning of striving in the path of Allah, we should first have a clear concept of the responsibilities of a Muslim. According to the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the obligations of a Muslim are three-fold: A Muslim is required to become an obedient slave of Almighty Allah (SWT), he is required to mold his life, his values, his priorities, and his ambitions according to the commands of his Lord. Secondly, he must preach and disseminate the ideational and practical guidance of Islam to his fellow human beings, to enjoin all that is good and prohibit all that is evil. Thirdly, he must try his utmost to establish the domination of Islam over all other systems of life, all over the world.

Even a superficial analysis of these three obligations is enough to establish the fact that none of them is easy to fulfill. There are immeasurable difficulties to overcome, all sorts of oppositions to put up with, and countless problems to solve at each of the three levels. A Muslim must put in a great deal of hard

labor in fulfilling these obligations, he must exercise all his abilities and all his resources if he is to fulfill his duties. In other words, he is required to engage in a constant Jihad. This struggle or Jihad covers a wide spectrum of religious obligations, and its inherent activism can be understood as having nine different stages or aspects, as explained below:

In trying to live a life of total obedience to Almighty Allah (SWT) and to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), a Muslim must resist the following:

the sinful impulses and evil inclinations of his own nafs;

the temptations implanted by Iblees and his progeny;

the ridicule, opposition, and pressures from the un-Islamic society in which he happens to live.

In trying to spread the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and those of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to every nook and corner of the world, a Muslim will encounter three types of people, and therefore he must develop different approaches and levels of scholarship to cater for each of these groups:

the educated and intelligent classes;

the common people, or the masses at large;

the rigid and inflexible adversaries.

In endeavoring for the establishment of the ascendancy of Islam over all other systems of life, members of the Islamic movement will have to go through the following stages:

Passive Resistance, enduring all verbal and physical persecution without retaliation;

Active Resistance, challenging the un-Islamic system when there is enough strength available to do so;

and finally, the Armed Conflict.

It should be obvious from the above discussion that armed conflict or Qitaal constitutes only the last of the nine stages or aspects of Jihad, and that these two are not synonymous terms. Thus, we see that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) spent the entire twelve years of the Meccan period in calling people towards Islam, in organizing and training those who responded, and, during all that time, both he and his Companions endured all verbal and physical harassment with a non-violent attitude. It was only after Hijra, when a strong center of the Islamic Movement was established in Medina, that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) decided that now there was enough strength at his disposal to challenge the Quraysh, and only then the Islamic movement entered the phases of Active Resistance and Armed Conflict. In view of this, all the revivalist and revolutionary Islamic groups throughout the Muslim world must keep the following fact in mind: While an armed struggle against an un-Islamic political system is permissible under certain conditions (whether or not it is feasible in today's world is another issue), such a struggle cannot be launched without first going through the initial eight stages of Jihad.

It is vitally important that those who are trying to change the world in accordance with the will of Allah (SWT) must first change their own lives. It is indeed ironical that the life-style of many of the Muslims who are engaged in Islamic activism cannot be described as ideal or exemplary. We must keep in mind that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has described the struggle to make one's own self obedient to Almighty Allah (SWT) as the "Greater Jihad." We cannot expect to eradicate the evils in our society unless we first subjugate our own sinful impulses. Similarly, it is also essential that all the available means and resources be utilized in calling people towards the light of Islam, in removing their false beliefs, and in helping them realize the truth of Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) teachings, before initiating the final phases of Jihad.

What, exactly, is the nature of the relationship between Iman and Jihad, or faith and struggle? During the days of early, pristine Islam, we find that the two major realities — which formed the focus of attention for the Muslims — were Qur'an and Jihad. Qur'an was the source of Iman, and Iman manifested itself in Jihad. Primarily, it was the force and appeal of the Qur'anic verses that conquered the hearts and souls of the Companions (RAA), leading to a profound change in their values, priorities, ambitions, and thinking habits. This inner transformation quite naturally led to a sense of dissatisfaction and discontent with what was happening in their environment, resulting in the development of friction and a lack of harmony between the Muslims and their un-Islamic milieu. A genuine inner change necessarily leads to a conflict with the status quo. In the case of the Companions (RAA), the inner transformation was characterized by Iman, and the resulting conflict took the form of Jihad.

Things began to change, however, when Islam entered the era of "statehood" and ceased to be a "movement." As a result, the attention of the Muslim community gradually started to shift from the moving and inspiring verses of the Qur'an to legal and judicial matters, from the inner dynamics of Iman to the external manifestation of Islam, and from Jihad in the path of Allah (SWT) to warfare for the defense — or

expansion —of the Muslim territories. The idea that Jihad is a Fard Kafayah was made popular by the legalistic mind which equated it with the responsibilities of the armed forces.

How can we bring about an Islamic Renaissance in our own times? It will be possible only by following the methodology of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The only surefire and unfailing strategy for Islamic Renaissance, therefore, must involve the revitalization of Iman through the Qur'an, and the launching of an Islamic movement on the basis of the dynamism thus unleashed. We need to establish a strong nucleus of true conviction and faith among the educated and rational elements of the Muslim society — the brain-trust of the Muslim Ummah — by means of the propagation of the Qur'anic wisdom at the highest intellectual level. The light of Iman will then illuminate all other segments of the society. This is the essential prerequisite for Islamic Renaissance, as it constitutes the only methodology to generate the dedicated and committed man-power to undertake the Jihad for the establishment of the domination of Islam over all other systems of life, all over the world.

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