



A Closer Look

Understanding Jihad in Muslim Thought and Developing a Christian Response

By Dr. N. S. R. K. Ravi

September 11, 2001, was the bloodiest day in the history of the United States (U.S.). Two of the largest office towers in the world—the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center—were destroyed. In addition, the Pentagon, the center of American military might, sustained heavy damages and casualties. As a result, American complacency has been shattered to its core.

In the past months, there have been terrorist acts in many places—a homicide bomber attacked a crowded marketplace in Jerusalem, another blew up a bus full of women and children in Tel Aviv, and others have annihilated villages in Algeria. The list of events worldwide that have come to symbolize this kind of Islamic terrorism is endless.

Recently, the British government has identified 21 organizations as notorious terrorist groups—and a vast majority of them are Islamic.

THE 21 TERRORIST GROUPS:

1. Al-Qaida—Bin Laden
2. Armed Islamic Group—Algeria
3. Salafist Group for Call and Combat—Algeria
4. Egyptian Islamic Jihad
5. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya—Egypt
6. Revolutionary Organization 17 November—Greece
7. Mujahedeen-e Khalq—Iranian dissidents in Iraq
8. HAMAS—Israel, through the Palestinian Authority
9. Palestine Islamic Jihad—Israel

10. Harakatul-Mujahidin—Kashmir
11. Jaish-e-Mohammed—Kashmir
12. Lashkar-Tayyiba—Kashmir
13. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—Sri Lanka
14. Hizballah—Lebanon
15. Babbar Khalsa—Sikh, in India
16. International Sikh Youth Federation—Sikh, in India
17. Abu Nidal—Palestinian
18. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)—Spain
19. Kurdistan Workers' Party—Turkey
20. Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front—Turkey
21. Islamic Army of Aden—Yemen¹

The U.S. State Department has designated 15 of these organizations as Islamic terrorist groups.

Some of these organizations spread hate, recruit, and raise funds in the name of jihad. We find many references to this understanding of jihad against the West, and America in particular, in the news today. This raises serious questions. Is Islam a religion of terror? Do these organizations represent true Islam? To find the truth we must examine the very source of the concept of jihad.

Jihad is an Islamic ideology, which is revealed in the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book. Throughout history, Islamic and non-Islamic scholars have debated the concept of jihad. Even among Islamic scholars there are various interpretations of this principle.² Some

¹<http://www.townhall.com/news/politics/200103/For20010301a.html>.

²Examples of various interpretations. Sayyid Abul Ala Maudoodi, said, "To change people's views by means of the pen and the tongue, and to bring about a revolution in their minds, is also jihad. And to spend money for this end, and to exert oneself physically, is jihad too" (*Tafhimat—I*, p. 69). Allama al-Qastalani, classical scholar stated, "Jihad against one's desires and against the devil to be the greatest jihad" (*Irshad as-Sari fi Sharh al-Bukhari*, Vol.V, p. 37). And, in the view of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, "Jihad is not just taking up the gun or raising the sword. Jihad is to invite to the Book of God and the Example of the Prophet, to hold fast to them, and to stick to them despite difficulties, distresses and afflictions of all kinds" (*Umm al-Qura*, Makka, 24 April 1965, <http://tariq.bitshop.com/misconceptions/jihad/jleaders.html>).

Islamic scholars consider jihad to be the sixth pillar of Islam. According to the Qur'an, jihad assures various rewards—even paradise itself. Muslims believe that jihad is the best thing that a Muslim can voluntarily offer. Some Islamic scholars consider jihad superior to the obligatory acts of *salat* (prayers), *sawm* (fasting), *Zakat* (almsgiving), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage). Clearly, the concept of jihad is worth examining in view of its crucial place in Islamic doctrine.

WHAT IS JIHAD?

The term *jihad* is derived from the Arabic verb *jahada*, which means, *to endeavor, to strive, to struggle*. It is sometimes translated as *holy war*. The closest Arabic words for *war* are *harb* or *qital* which are found in the Qur'an and its companion commentary—the *Hadith*. In religious contexts *jihad* means *to struggle against one's evil inclinations, to strive for the moral strengthening of society, or to promote the spread of Islam*.³ However, in many circles *jihad* is understood in a military sense, rather than its universal meaning in the Qur'an and *Hadith*.

MUSLIMS MUST MAKE JIHAD

According to Islamic teachings, *jihad* is *fard*, or *an obligation*, for every individual Muslim. The Qur'an says, "Fighting is prescribed for you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you, and that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But Allah knoweth, and ye know not" (Al-Baqarah [Chapter 2] 216, Yusufali).

The Qur'an says that believers who participate in *jihad* will be rewarded. "Let those fight in the way of Allah who sell the life of this world for the other. Whoso fighteth in the way of Allah, be he slain or be he victorious, on him We shall bestow a vast reward" (An-Nisa [Chapter 4] 74, Pickthal).

In Islam, the world is divided into two spheres: *al-Jahiliyyah*, or *the way of ignorance*, and *al-Islam*, or *the way of submission to God*. Human beings have a choice to live in ignorance or to submit to and be obedient to God. Those who live in ignorance and disobey God live in a land called *dar al-harb*—which is *the abode of war*. Those who submit and are obedient to God live in a land called *dar al-Islam*—which is *the abode of peace*.⁴

According to Islam, non-Muslims are divided into two types. The *Kafir* are those who refuse to see the truth—infidels who worship idols, unbelievers, or the enemies of God. The *ahlal-kitab*, or the *dhimmi*, are the people of the book and are protected non-Muslims—this includes Christians and Jews.

³Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), pp. 209-10. And Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 7, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp.88-89.

⁴Cyril Glasse, pp. 93, 204. See George W. Braswell Jr., *What You Need to Know About Islam and Muslims*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), pp. 37-38.

THE PURPOSE OF JIHAD

Muslims contend that the main purpose of *jihad* is to protect and preserve the *haqq*, or *truth*. Some believe that the way to deal with those who pose obstacles to the propagation of Islam is to declare *jihad* against them. They find support for this position in the Qur'an. "We shall show them Our portents on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that it is the Truth. Doth not thy Lord suffice, since He is Witness over all things" (Fussilat [Chapter 41] 53, Pickthal).

Islam teaches that Muslims have a two-fold responsibility. The first responsibility is to bring those who are in *al-Jhiliyyah*, or the way of ignorance, to *al-Islam*, the way of submission, by various means.

The second obligation is to put Allah ahead of loved ones, wealth, and worldly ambitions, and to maintain dedication to Allah by a range of means—including the inner spiritual struggle.

The Qur'an states, "And strive for Allah with the endeavor which is His right. He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in religion any hardship; the faith of your father Abraham (is yours). He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Scripture), that the messenger may be a witness against you, and that ye may be witnesses against mankind. So establish worship, pay the poor-due, and hold fast to Allah" (Al-Hajj [Chapter 22] 78, Pickthal).

The Qur'an also states, "The (true) believers are those only who believe in Allah and His messenger and afterward doubt not, but strive with their wealth and their lives for the cause of Allah. Such are the sincere" (Al-Hujraat [Chapter 49] 15, Pickthal). *Jihad* is personal and community commitment to spread and defend the faith of Islam.

JIHAD THROUGH PEACEFUL MEANS

For many Muslims, *jihad* is a holy campaign to bring about a spiritual revolution in the world. This struggle can be both defensive and offensive. The spread of Islam is encouraged both through peaceful means and by force. Muslims believe that peaceful *jihad* can be achieved in three ways:

1) Jihad with the tongue, or speaking the truth.

The Qur'an states, "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way. Lo! thy Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is Best Aware of those who go aright" (An-Nahl [Chapter 16] 125, Pickthal).

The Qur'an teaches that if parents encourage their children to follow a religion other than Islam, the children need to disobey them. "We have enjoined on man kindness to parents: but if they (either of them) strive (to force) thee to join with Me (in worship) anything of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not. Ye have (all) to return to me, and I will tell you (the truth) of all that ye did" (Al-Ankaboot [Chapter 29] 8, Yusufali).

2) Jihad with heart, or with feelings and intentions.

The Qur'an states, "And strive for Allah with the endeavor which is His right. He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in religion any hardship; the faith of your father Abraham" (Al-Hajj [Chapter 22] 78, Pickthal). Al-Ankaboot (Chapter 29) 6 (Pickthal) says, "And whosoever striveth, striveth only for himself, for lo! Allah is altogether Independent of (His) creatures."

3) Jihad with hand, or with good works.

The Qur'an encourages good works. "As for those who strive in Us, We surely guide them to Our paths, and lo! Allah is with the good" (Al-Ankaboot [Chapter 29] 69, Pickthal).

JIHAD THROUGH OFFENSIVE MEANS

However, the Qur'an also encourages jihad with a sword, which includes both defensive and offensive measures. In a defensive posture, jihad is often taken to mean merely war, which is caused by conflicting national interests.

However, in Islam, war, or *qital*, can be undertaken in an offensive posture for the sake of Allah, and carried out according to the instructions of the Qur'an. *Qital* is one form of struggle to achieve the establishment of Islam and generally occurs when there is an Islamic state to carry it out.⁵ Here, jihad has a broader sense.

1) Jihad can be against disbelievers.

The Qur'an says, "O Prophet! Strive against the disbelievers and the hypocrites! Be harsh with them. Their ultimate abode is hell, a hapless journey's end" (At-Tawba [Chapter 9] 73, Pickthal). Al-Furqan (Chapter 25) 52 (Pickthal) says, 'So obey not the disbelievers, but strive against them herewith with a great endeavor.'

2) Jihad is God's cause.

The Qur'an says, "Lo! those who believe, and those who emigrate (to escape persecution) and strive in the way of Allah, these have hope of Allah's mercy. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (Al-Baqarah [Chapter 2] 218, Pickthal).

3) **Jihad is against idolaters.** At-Tawba (Chapter 9) 5 (Pickthal) teaches, "Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."

4) Jihad may be against the people of the Book.

According to the Qur'an, jihad can be implemented even against the people of the Book—Christians and Jews. In At-Tawba (Chapter 9) 29 (Pickthal), the Qur'an states, "Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the Religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low."

5) Jihad is allowed against oppression and aggression.

The Qur'an says, "Fight in the cause of Allah, those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors. And slay them wherever ye catch them, and turn them out from where they have Turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter; . . . And fight them on until there is no more Tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah; but if they cease, Let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression" (Al-Baqarah [Chapter 2] 190-191, 193, Yusufali).

REWARDS OF JIHAD

Islam teaches that those who participate in jihad will receive rewards. However, only martyrs are assured of paradise.⁶ According to the hadith *Sahih Bukhari*, "The person who participates in (Holy battles) in Allah's cause and nothing compels him to do so except belief in Allah and His Apostles, will be recompensed by Allah either with a reward, or booty (if he survives) or will be admitted to Paradise (if he is killed in the battle as a martyr). Had I not found it difficult for my followers, then I would not remain behind any sariya going for Jihad and I would have loved to be martyred in Allah's cause and then made alive, and then martyred and then made alive, and then again martyred in His cause" (Volume 1, Book 2, Number 35: Narrated Abu Huraira, *Sahih Bukhari*).⁷

⁵For detailed study, see *Behind the Veil: Unmasking Islam*. pp. 31-73. And see Steven Emerson, executive producer and correspondent, "Jihad in America," (PBS Documentary, Washington: SAE Productions, 1994).

⁶The Qur'an describes paradise as a place where there will be fruit, delightful gardens, great food, maidens, immortal youth, no heat, no cold, spring water, silk attire, milk, and honey (see 2:2; 37:43; 38:50-51; 47:15; 76:12-13, 18-20).

⁷<http://answering-islam.org.uk/Index/index.html>

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS RESPOND?

This brief study reveals that Islam does not offer Paradise to all Muslims. It only assures paradise those who die in jihad. No wonder some extremist Muslims are willing to die in the name of jihad. They believe that as long as they are fighting Allah's cause and they die for it, they go to Paradise. However, Christians would contend that acts of terrorism do not assure anyone of Paradise, because those who do them are not fighting for God's cause. Rather, terrorists are committing a great sin. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3, NIV).

Jesus reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching that murder would bring God's judgment. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment'" (Matt. 5:21, NIV). Jesus also warned that many people who believe they are doing God's will are mistaken, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:21-23, KJV).

Islam does not promise heaven to all of its followers. It is only in Christianity that a repentant sinner is given absolute assurance of salvation. 1 John 5:13 (KJV) says, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life." Heaven is a free gift for those who believe in Him. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9, NIV).

CONCLUSION

America is a land of immigrants. Here we find people from all around the globe. America is committed to religious freedom and has thus opened its doors to adherents of many divergent faiths. It has given sanctuary to nearly every religion in the world and the vast majority of Americans say that they are religious.⁸

America's religious freedom is reducing the geographical distance between religions. In our neighborhoods we see people from various religious backgrounds. They may look different, dress different, and eat their customary foods; yet, they are our neighbors. They shop in the same stores we do, work in the same offices where we work, and their children attend the same schools as ours. A vast

majority of them hold the same family values as Christians, and their ethical and moral beliefs are similar. Many of these non-Christian people appear to be happy and satisfied with their religious practices. Many believe that they may go to heaven or even become gods themselves. This creates a dilemma for many religious people in North America. However, the Christian message is unique, and the people of these divergent faiths must be given an opportunity to hear it. The problem is that the vast majority of these people have never had a chance to respond to the love of Jesus Christ. Few immigrants are exposed to the love of Christ and His Word.

This raises a few troubling questions for Christians. Why have Christians failed in their responsibility to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to those who have never heard it? Also, what is the role of those who are saved by His grace in communicating the good news (see Rom. 10:13-15)? Where and when do obedient Christians start proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ (see Acts 1:8)?

North American Christians should realize the implications and responsibilities that come with living in a pluralistic society. We are called to share the love of Jesus Christ with followers of these divergent religious groups.

Christians need to follow a few practical principles in order to effectively to communicate the gospel.

- 1) Respect the religious freedom that the United States and Canadian constitutions guarantee to followers of Islam and other religions.
- 2) Be aware of Islam—and other religious groups—and its followers who live among us.
- 3) Study the beliefs and practices of Islam and other faiths in order to understand what and why they believe.
- 4) Realize that only Christ can fulfill the spiritual hunger experienced by all people.
- 5) Build bridges of friendship to communicate the gospel, in Christ's love, to Muslims and other religious adherents.
- 6) Share the unique message of Jesus Christ with non-Christians in ways that are appropriate for their cultural backgrounds.
- 7) Cooperate with other religious people in matters of social needs, societal ethics, and personal morals in ways that do not compromise the gospel or the unique Lordship of Jesus Christ.

⁸Jacob Neusner, ed., *World Religions in America*, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), pg. 1.

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<http://www.namb.net/interfaith>

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Note: This study used Pickthal and Yusufali translations of the Qur'an.



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