Title: The Meaning of Jihad in Islam

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The Meaning of Jihad in Islam
Within Islam the term jihad refers to a large category of meanings. Today, however, there are attempts to isolate this term to only one form of jihad to the exclusion of all others. This includes a conception of jihad that at best refers only to armed struggle, and at worst to a barbaric form of warfare that seeks to destroy whatever peace may still remain in the world. This could not be farther from the concept of jihad as understood by Muslims throughout history and the world over. For Muslims, jihad is much more than armed struggle against an enemy from the outside for it includes constant struggles within both oneself and one’s own society. When jihad actually does take the form of armed struggle, Muslims are aware that it can only be done for the sake of a just cause.

Once, upon returning from a battle, the Prophet Muhammad said to his companions, “We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad; the jihad of the soul.” Here the term jihad refers to the spiritual exercise of opposing the lower self. This is referred to as the greater jihad since people spend their entire lives struggling against the base desires within them that can harm both themselves and those around them.

Jihad is also used to refer to the pilgrimage to Mecca. When Aishah, the wife of the Prophet, was asked about the jihad of women, she said, “Your jihad is to make the pilgrimage.” Here the pilgrimage is the lesser jihad of women and the elderly who are not members of the armies that fight in defense of the country, so pilgrimage, which is a journey that is comprised of great difficulties due to the crowds and the physically demanding nature of its practices, is called jihad. The term jihad is also used to refer to speaking truth to those in power, so in Islam government oversight is a form of jihad.

In addition to these meanings, the term jihad refers to the defense of a nation or a just cause. This is what jihad was legislated for, and it must be differentiated from indiscriminate killing by the condition that it be “in the way of God,” meaning to struggle in self-defense, to alleviate tyranny, or to prevent aggression. These are the characteristics that differentiate jihad from killing, which is a crime. These characteristics that amount to “in the way of God” are summed up in the Quran, “Fight in the way of God against those who wage war against you, but do not commit aggression – for, verily, God does not love aggressors,” [Quran, 2:190]. This verse summarizes everything that has been agreed upon concerning guidelines of warfare, including the first and second Geneva Conventions.

As for suicide bombing, Islam forbids suicide, it forbids the taking of one’s own life. In addition, Islam forbids aggression against others. Attacking civilians, women, children, and the elderly by blowing oneself up is absolutely forbidden in Islam. No excuse can be made for the crimes committed in New York, Spain, and London, and anyone who tries to make excuses for these acts is ignorant of Islamic law (shari’ah), and their excuses are a result of extremism and ignorance.

Gender Equality in Islam

Islam adopts the perspective of gender equality, but it does not endorse the idea of gender equivalency. Islam affirms the difference between the natural dispositions and constitutions of men and women. Women have the ability to bear and nurse children, whereas men do not, so there is a lack of equivalency in regards to the physical and psychological make-up of men and women, but both enjoy rights and bear responsibilities, in which respect they are equal.

It is from this perspective that the Quran says, “Do not covet the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others. Men shall have a benefit from what they earn, and women shall have a benefit from what they earn. Ask, therefore, God [to give you] out of His bounty,” [Quran, 4:32] which is reaffirmed by the saying of the Prophet, “God condems those men who seek to be like women, and He condemns those women who strive to be like men.” This is forbidden, and Muslims are enjoined to accept what has been allotted them by God; whether they are men or women they should be pleased with those particular masculine and feminine traits that God has bestowed upon them, and they should pray that God give them success in truly realizing them. The Quran says, “And women have rights similar to those [of men] over them in kindness,” [Quran, 2:228]. In this verse that speaks of rights and duties the Quran has affirmed equality. The verse continues and says, “And men are a degree above them.” This degree is clarified in another verse that discusses the issue of maintenance, which is a responsibility rather than an honor, “Men shall take full care of women with the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on the former than on the latter, and with what they may spend out of their possessions,” [Quran, 4:34].

Islam made it obligatory for men to support and care for women, similarly this is one of the rights that women can demand of men. While women are permitted to remain at home, men are obligated to seek a means of sustenance for them. Women are free to care for their children and take on the role of educator and nurturer of the life that originated inside of them. In this respect Islam affords women the highest status. When asked whom one should love and respect the most, the Prophet said, “Your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your father.”

Islam says, “Men and women are brother and sister,” meaning, “Women have rights similar to those [of men] over them in kindness.” The status afforded men is one of responsibility, not honor. There is no prejudice in Islamic doctrine that prefers men over women. The Quran does not say it has preferred men over women, it says, “Do not covet the bounties which God has bestowed more abundantly on some of you than on others.” Some men may desire the praiseworthy characteristics of women, just like some men desire in women for the praiseworthy characteristics of men, but God forbade this desire. God gave preference to women over men in certain ways, but at the same time He gave preference to men over women others, each regarding particular traits He bestowed upon them. Everyone should be thankful for that which they have been given and strive to fulfill the potential of their unique characteristics. Men should be content with their masculinity, and women should be content with their femininity.
There is a disparity between men and women, but there is no discrimination. Gender discrimination is something that came from outside of Islam, from pre-Islamic concepts that were passed down. This is a perspective that claims women are to blame for humanity’s being dispelled from the Garden, but this is not the Quranic version of the story, the Quran states, “Satan caused them both to stumble therein, and thus brought about the loss of their erstwhile state,” [Quran, 2:36]. The non-Quranic perspective views women as the cause of sin, a seductress, and a devil, however Islam rejects this. The Quran speaks of, “And the righteous women are the truly devout ones, who guard the intimacy which God has [ordained to be] guarded,” [Quran, 4:34]. These are words that view women as human beings equal to men and sharing responsibilities side by side. This other perspective that was passed down by various peoples and religions has spilled over into the Islamic perspective. But Islam, when unadulterated by social customs and inherited cultural traditions, views men and women equitably without recourse to bias or discrimination.

Freedom of Religion in Islam

The essential question before us is can a person who is Muslim choose a religion other than Islam? The answer is yes, they can, because the Quran says, “Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion,” [Quran, 109:6], and, “Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve,” [Quran, 18:29], and, “There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is distinct from error,” [Quran, 2:256].

These verses from the Quran discuss a freedom that God affords all people. But from a religious perspective, the act of abandoning one’s religion is a sin punishable by God on the Day of Judgment. If the case in question is one of merely rejecting faith, then there is no worldly punishment. If, however, the crime of undermining the foundations of the society is added to the sin of apostasy, then the case must be referred to a judicial system whose role is to protect the integrity of the society. Otherwise, the matter is left until the Day of Judgment, and it is not to be dealt with in the life of this world. It is an issue of conscience, and it is between the individual and God. In the life of this world, “There is no compulsion in religion,” in the life of this world, “Unto you your religion and unto me my religion,” and in the life of this world, “He who wills believes and he who wills disbelieves,” while bearing in mind that God will punish this sin on the Day of Judgment, unless it is combined with an attempt to undermine the stability of the society, in which case it is the society that holds them to account, not Islam.

All religions have doctrinal points that define what it is to be an adherent of that religion. These are divine injunctions that form the basis of every religion, but they are not a means for imposing a certain system of belief on others by force. According to Islam, it is not permitted for Muslims to reject their faith, so if a Muslim were to leave Islam and adopt another religion, they would thereby be committing a sin in the eyes of Islam. Religious belief and practice is a personal matter, and society only intervenes when that personal matter becomes public and threatens the well-being of its members.

In some cases, this sin of the individual may also represent a greater break with the commonly held values of a society in an attempt to undermine its foundations or even attack its citizenry. Depending on the circumstances, this may reach the level of a crime of sedition against one’s society. Penalizing this sedition may be at odds with some conceptions of freedom that would go so far as to ensure people the freedom to destroy the society in which they live. This is a freedom that we do not allow since preservation of the society takes precedence over personal freedoms. This was the basis of the Islamic perspective on apostasy when committed at certain times and under certain circumstances.