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**THE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR *JIHAD*,  
WAR AND REVOLUTION IN ISLAM**

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## **Abstract**

Religion has been used for centuries to justify and legitimise warfare. The September 11 attacks on the US show that Islam is not immune from this debate. Indeed, long before the strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the name of *Allah* had been used as justification for political assassinations, hostage taking, suicide bombing, and violent revolution. Even the moderate Muslim world has not always been able to unconditionally condemn the acts of divine violence perpetrated by its radical elements. While the foundations of Islam's religious texts and traditions may be inherently peaceful and cooperative, they are also vulnerable to the powers of subjectivity and manipulation. Using a host of contemporary examples, this paper explores the circumstances in which Islam has been used to justify *jihad*, war and revolution in the Middle East.

# **The Justifications for *Jihad*, War and Revolution in Islam**

*by Brek Batley<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

The September 11 attacks on the US have generated a new round of debate, among Muslims and non-Muslims alike, on the role of *jihad*, war and revolution in Islam. This debate, which has plagued the Muslim community for centuries, questions the various Islamic justifications used in the perpetrating of religious-sanctioned acts of war and revolution. Throughout Islamic history, the religion of Islam has been used to legitimise political assassinations, hostage taking, suicide bombing, invasion and violent revolution. It seems that the foundation upon which such actions have usually been launched is grounded in the vague Quranic notion of '*jihad*', literally meaning to struggle. However, given the fact that no universally accepted interpretation of *jihad* is offered by the three main sources of Islamic guidance: the Quran, the Prophetic traditions, and Islamic jurisprudence, this noble concept of struggling in the path of God is open to dangerous interpretation. Further adding to the complexity of the situation in the Middle East, the focus of this paper, are the regional elements of colonialism, corruption, pan-Arabism and nationalism. Within such a multi dimensional and unregulated framework, the Islamic justifications for *jihad*, war and revolution are endless.

This paper will explore the problematic nature of identifying the circumstances in which Islam has been used as justification for *jihad*, war and revolution. It will cite the three main sources of Islamic authority, together with a range of contemporary case studies involving both moderate and radical Muslims. Following an introductory analysis of *jihad* and the complexity of its interpretation, this paper will discuss four broad themes on acts of war and revolution in the name of Islam. Firstly, it will examine the relationship between Islam, *jihad* and the concept of 'defence'. Secondly, the role of perceived oppression and injustice, including the influence of imperialism and colonialism, will be discussed. Next, the paper will investigate the various circumstances argued by some to warrant the waging of unconditional Islamic warfare. Finally, the paper will look at the social, economic and political conditions which have justified an Islamic call to revolution.

## The Complexity of Jihad

For over a millennium, Muslims have disagreed about the meaning of *jihad*. As no single doctrine on the concept has been universally accepted, it has been subject to numerous interpretations and manipulation throughout Islamic history, often as a means to legitimise the pursuit of political or material interests. Much of this debate stems from the ambiguous Quranic use of the term, which presents the notion of *jihad* in 33 differing contexts, the extensive warring actions of the Prophet Muhammad, and also the failure of Islamic jurisprudence to subsequently unify opinion on the issue.<sup>2</sup> Understanding this web of complexity is essential to comprehend the wider justification of Islamic war and revolution.

Firstly, *jihad* is multi-dimensional, referring to struggles of varying levels and circumstances. Though Western convention tends to refer solely to *jihad* as holy war, most Islamic jurists cite the Prophet Muhammad's distinction between an *al-jihad al-akbar*, or greater *jihad*, and an *al-jihad al-asghar*, or lesser *jihad*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, John Esposito, one of the United States' foremost authorities and interpreters of Islam, also highlights the double nature of *jihad*, describing it initially as the struggle pertaining to the difficulty and complexity of living a good life: struggling against the evil in oneself in order to be virtuous and moral.<sup>4</sup> He adds, however, that *jihad* can also mean fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, and creating a just society through preaching, teaching and, if necessary, armed struggle.

This concept of the greater *jihad*, which embodies Islam as a religion of peace, is widely regarded as the highest form of *jihad*. Islamic scholars and jurists have, for the most part, agreed that the greater *jihad* is, in fact, a religious responsibility for every Muslim. It was during the initial 'Meccan' phase of the Quranic revelation (610-622 C.E.) that the term *jihad* was used in a moral, ethical, and spiritual sense, as a means of maintaining one's faith and serenity in the midst of adverse conditions. This greater sense of *jihad* continues to be widely regarded as an inner struggle to overcome personal temptations and the carnal self as a necessary part in the process of gaining spiritual insight. In this respect, any number of personal challenges can be regarded as justification for peacefully struggling to be a better Muslim. Though not dealt with in this paper, this 'greater' and often less discussed aspect of *jihad* best represents the morally rich and peaceful nature of Islam.

Justification for the lesser *jihad*, however, has been subject to far greater disagreement, and forms much of the focal point of this paper. The broad Islamic notion of fighting injustice and oppression, spreading and defending Islam, and creating a just society has provoked some Muslims to actively engage in armed struggle to achieve such divine goals. Justification for this type of *jihad* is often founded upon events of the ‘Medinan’ period of the Quranic revelation (622-632 C.E.). During this period, in which war continued to be the natural state in Arabic lands, the word *jihad* came to encompass the struggle of the individual or the community with the Meccans and others, who continued to persecute the new Muslim community. The problem in subsequent years has been that Islamic jurists, military officers, and radical groups have used Muhammad’s seventh century justifications for warfare in a vastly different modern setting to justify their own armed struggles.<sup>5</sup> These actions of Muhammad’s nascent community have in fact provided a highly influential guide for later Muslim generations in dealing with persecution and rejection, threats to the faith, and the security and survival of the community. The concept of the lesser *jihad*, therefore, is not only subject to the differing radical and moderate interpretations of the ideal goals to be emulated, but is also challenged by a modern twenty-first century civil society, very different to the society of Muhammad’s lifetime.

Secondly, and further complicating the interpretation of *jihad* and holy war, is the manipulation of the term by Muslim authorities and jurists in the years following Muhammad’s life. While the Quran stressed making “God’s cause success” (Sura 8:39), some jurists have since exploited this and similar ambiguous terms as a means to engage in territorial expansion.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, *jihad* was regarded by some jurists as a requirement in a world divided between what they called *dar al-Islam*, land of Islam, and the *dar al-harb*, the land of war. In fact, *Shariah*, or Islamic law, John Esposito argues, clearly stipulates that it is a Muslim’s duty to wage war not only against those who attack Muslim territory, but also against polytheists, apostates, and People of the Book who refuse Muslim rule.<sup>7</sup>

The jurists also provided fuel to the flame of Islamic radicalism by classifying *jihad* into four types: *jihad* by the heart (faith), by the tongue (right speech), by the hands (good works) and finally by the sword (holy war).<sup>8</sup> This has been used by extremist elements as further justification of legitimate unconditional warfare against unbelievers or for expansionist or radical goals. In response to this, James Turner Johnson, the former Director of Religious Studies at Rutgers University, argues that the Quran uses two distinct terms for military activity.<sup>9</sup> *Jihad* is reserved for the overall religious

struggle, whether in the form of personal purification or the collective effort to establish an Islamic social order, while military activity, he stresses, is consistently identified by other terms, such as *qital* or “fighting”.

Finally, modern interpretation and practise of *jihad* has done little to ease growing tensions. Disagreement continues within the Muslim intelligentsia on concepts such as the ‘defence’ of Islam, ‘oppression’, ‘injustice’, warfare, and reform. Islamic revivalists argue, for example, that by limiting *jihad* to self-defence, the apologists and modernists were in fact debasing the most dynamic qualities of *jihad*. The revivalists elaborate that, in the later years of Muhammad’s life, *jihad* clearly meant the struggle to propagate the Islamic order worldwide. In 1926, Pakistani fundamentalist, Syed Abul Ala Mawdudi, affirmed that the concept of *jihad* meant ‘revolutionary struggle’.<sup>10</sup> This is one of the key theories espoused by the Middle Eastern Islamists, including Osama bin Laden. The duty lies not in converting people to Islam, such Muslims argue, but rather overthrowing un-Islamic regimes that corrupt their societies and divert people from the service of God. It is, in fact, Muslim countries that have been identified as the most un-Islamic regimes, leading to the concept of *jihad* often being synonymous with Islamic revolution.<sup>11</sup>

The following contemporary examples further outline the complexity of the call to *jihad*. Perhaps best exemplifying the impact of the Palestinian issue on Middle Eastern Islam is the 1973 call to *jihad* by the rector of the highly influential Egyptian *al-Azhar* University. He asserted that this particular *jihad* against Israel was an obligation incumbent upon all Egyptians, both Christians and Muslims.<sup>12</sup> Also, in 1978, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat sought *al-Azhar*’s religious endorsement before agreeing to the Camp David peace accords. As it turned out, even this was not sufficient to protect him against his assassin’s holy grievances. Ayatollah Khomeini was also one who continually reframed and promoted the concept of *jihad*, occasionally for peaceful endeavours. In the summer of 1979, following the social and economic devastation caused by his revolution, he in fact called for a *jihad* as a means of “reconstructing the nation”.<sup>13</sup> During the Gulf War of 1991, Abbas Madani of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), called for the overthrow of Kuwait for its clinging on to colonial-drawn borders. Such a call to *jihad* could enflame the entire Middle East in socio political upheaval. Finally, an example of the diplomatic potency and ambiguity of the term was Yasir Arafat’s May 1994 call for a “*jihad* to liberate Jerusalem”.<sup>14</sup> Following pressure from Israel, he later clarified that he was in fact only referring to a “peaceful *jihad*”, and nothing more.



## The Defence of Islam

The Quranic verse most often cited as justification for acts of war as a means of self-defence in the name of Islam is, on its own, unambiguous. It states that Muslims should ‘fight in the way of *Allah* against those who fight you, but do not attack them first. For God does not love the aggressors’ (Sura 2:190).<sup>15</sup> Adding to this are other early Quranic verses that describe the compulsion by which Muhammad and his followers had to fight to defend both their lives and the Islamic faith in a sea of savage persecutors. Such a notion of a direct threat to a Muslim community, often effected through invasion, assassination, expulsion or imprisonment, solidly justifies a religiously sanctioned call to arms. The most pertinent example is that of the invading Christian crusaders whom the Muslim community justifiably perceived as a direct threat to God’s will.<sup>16</sup> This type of *jihad*, which requires the use of the tongue, hands or sword, is the outward struggle of Islam against direct enemies of the faith.

The conflict against Israel is similarly regarded within the context of self-defence and preservation. Indeed, Zionist settlement in Palestine was viewed as a threat to Islam even prior to Israel’s declaration of statehood in 1948.<sup>17</sup> The subsequent displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, the annexation of Jerusalem by Israel and ongoing Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank are justifiably considered direct threats. In this context, the Quran, Prophetic tradition and Islamic jurisprudence all support a *jihad* against Israeli forces. The Quran clearly justifies the waging of a *jihad* by ‘those who are driven from their homes without a just cause except that they say: “Our Lord is *Allah*”’ (Sura 22:39-40). A *jihad* was fully justified for Israel’s formal annexation of East Jerusalem, according to Saudi Arabia at the World Islamic Conference in September 1980. The Muslim foreign ministers at the conference devised a 24-point ‘final declaration’ outlining that ‘Islamic countries have an obligation to proceed with a full *jihad*, regarding it as resistance in every political, economic and cultural field, together with its military aspects.’<sup>18</sup> Of particular interest in the Palestinian conflict is the Quranic notion that, “if the enemy moves towards peace”, Muslims must follow, provided that the terms of peace are not immoral or dishonorable.<sup>19</sup> Once again, defining such abstract terms as ‘honour’ and ‘morals’ become subject to the will of the various Muslim groups.

The problem, however, in justifying an Islamic ‘defensive’ war is its susceptibility to the forces of subjectivity and manipulation. ‘Protecting freedom of religion’, ‘preventing injustice’ and ‘preserving social order’ are all noble causes worthy of defence. However, such broad terms can easily

be twisted, expanded and ultimately exploited for other means. Prominent modern *Shiite* scholars, such as Ayatollahs Mahmoud Taleqani and Murtaza Mutahhari, for example, argue that *jihad* is the defence of one's life, faith, property, and the integrity of the Muslim *ummah*.<sup>20</sup> But they have also broadly interpreted defence to include resistance to oppression not only in one's society, but also against oppression faced by all on earth. Similarly, al-Banna of the *Muslim Brotherhood* emphasised that "if you rise up against us or stand in the path of our message, then we are permitted by God to defend ourselves against your injustice".<sup>21</sup> These types of defensive postures are easily manipulated to form offensive justification for war or revolution. Perhaps best surmising the pitfalls of *jihad* in this context is Muslim intellectual Hasan Moinuddin, who states that *jihad* "must be conducted with upright intentions and not for material gains or the sake of glory and power".<sup>22</sup>

In the case of the Iran-Iraq War during the 1980s, both sides used and abused the religion of Islam in justifying their actions. Saddam Hussein sought both *Shiite* and *Sunni ulama*<sup>23</sup> approval for his unprovoked attack, intended solely for the territorial and strategic benefit of his regime. Similarly, Iran's initial religiously sanctioned defensive posture against the direct threat of Iraqi troops was subsequently transformed into a 'divine' offensive with territorial ambitions. The Ayatollah Khomeini regime transformed the war into a cosmic struggle between good and evil, claiming "You fight for the sake of God, and the Iraqis fight for the sake of Satan".<sup>24</sup> Indeed, at least to begin with, most Iranians could readily accept this religious assertion whereby they were fighting a just war in defence of faith, land and revolution against an invading army headed by a secular regime. However, protests grew as Iranians, including *Shiite* clerics, began to see the struggle in terms of "Khomeini's personal war". To a certain extent, the Iranian people had decided that the holy war against Iraq was no longer justified.

Finally, the notion of a pre-emptive strike in the name of self-defence is, according to some, sanctioned in both the Quran and *hadith* traditions. The Quranic verse 'O ye who believe: Fight those of the disbelievers who are close to you' (Sura 9:123) has been used to attack geographically close targets or communities without any provocation.<sup>25</sup> As further justification, radicals cite the Prophet's use of the right to 'self-defence' in 632 C.E. in response to the perceived threat from his surrounding enemies, the Roman Empire to the north and the Persian Empire to the east. He prepared an army to invade, stressing that it was the best strategy for the defence of the new Muslim community.<sup>26</sup> In this context, fears among Arab states of an Iraqi nuclear and bio-chemical weapons build-up to be used against them could

justify the launching of a defensive attack on religious grounds. However, as discussed earlier, such logic contradicts the Quranic verse 2:190, which clearly states that God does not approve of aggressors.

However, it is also important to note that the US led 'war on terror' risks being viewed by much of the Muslim world as a war on Islam. The invasive nature of the attack on Iraq in 2003, combined with other elements of US and Israeli policy, such as Washington's contradictory stance on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East which fails to include Israel in ridding the region of WMD, and its new immigration laws largely focused towards Muslim states, has led many in the region to view US policy as not only oppressive but also as a direct assault on Islam. That the three most holy sites in the Islamic world (Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem) are subject to significant 'humiliation' or foreign control, largely as a result of US policy, only serves to reinforce the ideology that Muslims must attack the 'infidel' aggressors. Osama bin Laden asserts "what is wrong with resisting the aggressor? The North Koreans, the Vietnamese, they all resisted the Americans. This is a given right".<sup>27</sup> Despite the likely good intentions of US and UN administrations in Iraq and Afghanistan, they both run the risk of contributing to the ideological foundations of a defensive *jihad* against the 'occupying West'.

### **Oppression and Injustice**

Many Muslims remain acutely conscious of Islam's glorious past, a time when the Islamic world was home to many of the world's richest cities and highest centres of learning. Christian Crusaders and Western Imperialism remain a living legacy, an experience very much alive in Muslim consciousness and political rhetoric.<sup>28</sup> The current socio-economic and political turmoil in much of the Middle East today only reinforces such historic grievances and calls for action. Indeed, most contemporary discussions of *jihad* regularly assert that Islamic wars are in fact justified by *Shariah* law when conducted to end exploitation and oppression by rival powers, such as the US, or to achieve liberation from the forces of imperialism. Indeed, this dynamically combines with the forces of pan-Arabism and nationalism. Furthermore, the effects of the loss in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war cannot be over-stated. Within weeks, the whole structure of Nasserist Arabism seemed to collapse, not only in Egypt but also across the world. Muslim communities felt an overwhelming sense of defeat at the hands of Judaism, imperialism and western domination. The term *jihad* became the favoured word among Muslims in this struggle that had been waged for well over a century.

Firstly, the justification for Muslim rebellions against Western political domination, corrupt Muslim governments, and other injustices has inevitably found its prototype in the community of seventh-century Medina. In the same way the Prophet Muhammad defended his followers and faith from unjust persecution and elimination, many Islamic jurists, intellectuals and revolutionaries argue that a proactive armed defence against this perceived Western cultural assault is currently necessary. It seems contemporary Muslims have feared that, over time, the identity and soul of Islam may be assimilated into a larger Western liberal culture. Such conditions, some argue, are tantamount to a direct territorial invasion, no less threatening than the former Soviet tanks advancing on Afghanistan. Combined with issues such as its role in the control of the region's oil supplies; funding and support for Israel; and regional military presence, the West is often accurately accused of employing a wide range of oppressive weapons aimed at containing the prosperity of the Islamic *ummah*. Indeed, the global *jihad* waged by al-Qa'ida is seeking to defend Islam and its followers from many of these 'threats', and bin Laden strongly asserts that "[c]arrying out terrorism against the oppressors is one of the tenets of our religion and Sharia".<sup>29</sup> Additionally, bin Laden is pushing for a revolutionary uprising to rid the Islamic world of corrupt and unholy regimes like that of the Saudi royal family. Furthermore, the US-led operations *Enduring Freedom* against global terrorism, and *Iraqi Freedom* in the Gulf, are already perceived by many Muslims as part of a 'war on Islam'. Just as dangerously, any prolonged US military or UN administrative presence in Iraq following the 2003 war would almost certainly be viewed by radicals and some moderates as further evidence of the West's ongoing oppression and manipulation of Islam.

Secondly, two contemporary figures were extremely influential in bolstering Islamic opinion and will to end the foreign occupation of Muslim lands in the face of foreign powers.<sup>30</sup> Both Hassan al-Banna's *Muslim Brotherhood* in Egypt and Mawdudi's *Jamaat Islami* in Pakistan sought the ideal Islamic union of religion and state. They influenced Islamic thinking at every level of society by arguing that such significant foreign threats represented an unacceptable oppression of Islamic culture, identity and will. Additionally, the militant *jihad* ideology of Egypt's Sayyid Qutb is founded upon the idea that the movement of true religion "does not confine itself to mere preaching to confront the physical power" of infidel oppression.<sup>31</sup>

Again, the Arab-Israeli conflict provides an apt example of the types of circumstances in which Islam justifies an armed *jihad* in the face of perceived injustice and oppression. Indeed, the *Hizbollah*, *Hamas* and *Islamic Jihad Palestine* all characterised their 'struggle' against Israel as an obligation to emancipate the Palestinian people from unjust suffering and control. While most Muslims regard the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation as a legitimate war against a foreign occupier, many also identify with the injustice and oppression perpetrated against its people and faith. The result is a dynamic combination of Islam and Arab nationalism. Ultimately, the liberation of Palestine has become, for both secularists and Islamists, a great *jihad* against Western imperialism, serving only to reinforce the classical concepts of *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*.

However, as a result of the Islamic vision of the inseparability of religion and politics, oppression and injustice has sometimes been equated with unbelief.<sup>32</sup> Though most modern Muslim thinkers make that distinction, others feel that such social and political injustice is a sufficient condition for waging war. As testimony to this, the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords were denounced in Egyptian protest demonstrations as a treasonous act of an "unbeliever".<sup>33</sup> During the Gulf War of 1991, Baghdad called for a *jihad* against "the assemblies of infidelity and polytheism ... the forces of injustice, evil and world Judaism."<sup>34</sup> Saddam Hussein claimed that the armed struggle was against oppressive imperialism and against Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and their allies. These countries, he reasoned, had gone too far in their support for the US, a sentiment shared by many Muslims across the region.

Additionally, the concept of dealing with oppression and injustice has regularly been used to wage wars in pursuit of territorial expansion. Ellis Goldberg of the University of Washington argues that such manoeuvring was the creative response of political activists, not traditional scholars, using Islamic concepts as a way to find a place in the anti-colonial movements of the day.<sup>35</sup> In 1981, the *jihad* to liberate Jerusalem and the occupied territories was announced by Saudi Arabia under these very pretences. The Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal explained that his Kingdom had "no other recourse but to call for *jihad* for the sake of establishing the supremacy of righteousness and justice and eliminating falsehoods and injustice."<sup>36</sup> However, by late 1980, this *jihad* also covered Egypt, for it having made peace with Israel in the Camp David Accords, Libya, because it condemned the Saudi Royal family as reactionary, Iran because its leaders were working for the downfall of Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, whose leaders were in league with the atheistic Soviet communists.<sup>37</sup> Though of

justifiable intentions originally, *Wahhabi* Islam had subsequently exploited the contradictory circumstances in which the Quranic verses and Prophetic tradition dealt with *jihad*.

### **Islam and Unconditional Warfare**

In addition to the arguments justifying religious aggression in the face of a direct attack, oppression or injustice, Islam can be, and has been, used to justify its own propagation and empire-building through unconditional warfare. Again, the interpretation of the ambiguous Quranic stance and *hadith* traditions on forced conversions, or the “spreading of Islam”, needs investigation. This debate is also centred on the position of classical jurists, who essentially outlined that non-Muslims had no right to resist Islamic military expansion.<sup>38</sup>

Firstly, armed struggle formed an integral part of Islam’s formative period. One hundred years after the Prophet’s death, the borders of the Islamic Empire stretched from India to France. Mohammad had often used force, or the threat of it, to unify the nomadic tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, between 622 C.E. and his death in 632 C.E., Prophet Muhammad participated in no less than 27 military expeditions.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, his successors, the Caliphs, successfully took up arms against the Christian Byzantine Empire in Egypt and the Holy Land.<sup>40</sup>

One’s interpretation of these battles forms the foundation upon which armed aggression is perceived as either holy or unholy. Most judge these wars as having been justifiable on the simple grounds of protecting the need for Muslims to worship freely, secure from attack and persecution. However, more radical elements argue that this ‘spreading of Islam’ is a divine responsibility. As sanctioned in verse 9:29 (refer below), they argue such unbelievers must be given the simple choice between Islam, payment of Islamic tax, or fighting.<sup>41</sup> The group behind the assassination of Anwar Sadat, *Jamaat al-Jihad*, for example, maintained that *jihad* was the sixth pillar of Islam and that Muslims were duty bound to take the military initiative against unbelievers.<sup>42</sup>

Standing in middle ground are the likes of Sheik Shaltut of *al-Azhar*. Such Muslims cite the early conquests of Islam, including the Muslim conquests of Byzantine and Persian territory, as reinforcing the view that Islam was permitted recourse to military force only when resistance to Islamic conversions and contempt for Islamic missions were perceived as a danger to Muslims or the spread of Islam.<sup>43</sup> At the other extreme, however, lie the majority of Muslims who see their religion as being the subject of manipulation. Dr Muhammad Sa’id al-Ashmawy, one of Egypt’s leading

intellectual secularist voices, stresses that Muslims who have interpreted *jihad* as anything more than self-defence, have historically distorted the real concept in pursuit of their own political interests.<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, the Quran fails to finalise the matter. Two particular Quranic verses, often referred to as the ‘sword verses’, have come to best represent both classic post-Quranic thinking and modern radical Islam:

*“When the sacred months are past, kill the idolaters wherever you find them, and seize them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush; but if they repent, pray regularly, and give the alms tax, then let them go their way, for God is forgiving, merciful.”* (Sura 9:5)<sup>45</sup>

*“Fight those who do not believe in God or the Last Day, and who do not forbid that which has been forbidden by God and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of truth from among the People of the Book, until they pay the al-jizya (the poll tax) with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.”* (Sura 9:29)<sup>46</sup>

The Quran also offers many other verses which, if read in isolation, provide circumstances by which Islam can justify unconditional war. For example, verse 8:39 which requires that Muslims “fight (*qatilu*) against unbelievers until there is no dissension (*fitna*) and the religion is entirely God’s”, can be construed in terms of a moral requirement to fight persecution. On the other hand, if the verse is interpreted in terms of the development of Islamic political power, then it could credibly justify wars of expansion. Furthermore, according to the Quran, the practice of armed *jihad* is not justified if it leads to the death of women, children and other innocent individuals.<sup>47</sup> In this respect, the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US and the recent Bali bombings have attracted condemnation from many within the Islamic intelligentsia, despite, in some cases, a sense of sympathy with the cause. Interestingly though, suicide bombings against Israeli targets, often innocent civilians, have attracted less abomination from Muslim communities worldwide.

Most notably, the Quranic verses in which forced conversion is described as being deviant from the path of God are plentiful. One particular verse can be subject to little misinterpretation or complexity. For God clearly stated that “there is no compulsion in religion” (Sura 2:256). This, however, is sometimes neglected or ‘divinely’ overridden by Quranic verses judged more supportive of the political or material interests of the group or ruler.



Finally, with regard to classical Islamic jurisprudence on the matter, the early jurists formulated the rules of *jihad* in an era of continued Islamic conquests, mostly at the expense of non-Muslims. Their interpretation of *jihad* consequently reflects the interests of the established Muslim authority which sought the expansion of the *dar al-Islam*, rather than the creation of a just social order as insisted upon in the Quran. These views, shared subsequently by the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini, generally held that wars to conquer the *dar al-harb* were a religious obligation and that the *jihad* should be conducted by the Muslim community until all unbelievers submitted to Islamic rule.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, while in exile in Paris, Khomeini conveyed that “holy war means the conquest of all non-Muslim territories. Such a war may well be declared after the formation of an Islamic government”.<sup>49</sup> It is this wish for internal reform and the harnessing of Islamic *Shariah* law that represents the final dimension to the concept of Islamic revolution.

### **Reform and Revolution**

Within Muslim society, it is argued that the “state” should represent only the political expression of an Islamic society. Once Muslims realise that public life has moved away from the moral values and norms of the Islamic religion, they are obliged to rise to reform their social and political attitudes and institutions. More often than not, such divine deviance is exemplified through political fragmentation, and economic and social decline. In fact many of the previously examined concepts, such as injustice, corruption, imperialism and colonialism, have played a large role in Islamic revolutionary movements. It is ultimately the *Shariah* law which must guide the *ummah* back to the path of God, as it was in Muhammad’s time in Medina, as a means of restoring its past glory and power.

Indeed, much of the powerful revivalist spirit that gripped the Islamic world in the eighteenth century was a response to economic and socio-moral decline, military defeats, and political divisions within the imperial sultanates. The cause was identified as being a Muslim departure from true Islamic values resulting from the infiltration and assimilation of indigenous, un-Islamic beliefs and practices. Similarly, further challenges arrived in the form of European colonialism, and the subsequent failure of many modern Muslim states. Many concluded that western dominance and Muslim dependency on such powers were, again, the result of a departure from the path of Islam. Whilst many were quick to denounce the evils of imperialism and the threat of the West, most ‘revolutionaries’ realised that the Muslim predicament was first and foremost a Muslim problem. In this process of purification and returning to the pristine teachings of Islam, two Quranic



verses stand out. The repeated injunction to eradicate “corruption on earth”, as well as to “enjoin the good and forbid the evil”, represents a religiously-sanctioned warning to revolution.<sup>50</sup>

In analysing the circumstances by which Islam justifies revolution, focus must be directed again on the influential role of contemporary revivalist figures. Sayyid Qutb, the inspiration for many of the revolutionary groups of the 1970s, stressed the significance of *jahiliyya*. This classic Islamic concept describes the ignorant and savage state of pre-Islamic society. He argued that any government that allowed such a decline to occur was liable to face a *jihad* of the people. Qutb’s teachings recast the world into black and white polarities. Since the creation of an Islamic government was a divine commandment, he argued, it was not an alternative to be worked towards.<sup>51</sup>

Both al-Banna and Mawdudi, however, only accepted the notion of revolt if the state took a resolutely anti-Islamic stance and if all means of peaceful protest had been exhausted.<sup>52</sup> Al Banna believed that “if the government should become so alien as to transcend the *Shariah*, then (the individual) has the right and obligation to revolt. This is the revolutionary element in Islam.”<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Mawdudi held that it was impossible for a Muslim to observe successfully “an Islamic pattern of life” under the rule of a non-Islamic system of government.<sup>54</sup> He believed that states dominated by corrupt and immoral politicians mold all institutions and the citizenry in their own image. These types of political and social circumstances have now been engrained in more modern revolutionary organisations. The *Islamic Liberation Organization* and *Tkafir wal-Hijra*, which both evolved after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, interpreted the humiliating Egyptian defeat and the loss of Jerusalem as clear signs of a politically impotent, inept, and corrupt system of government.

The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran perhaps best showcases the range of grievances that seem to justify Islamic revolt. According to the Ayatollah Khomeini and his millions of followers, Iran had gravely strayed from the path of God. It was regarded necessary to depose this corrupt and illegitimate government in order to return to a more Islamic way of life, the *Shariah* law. In particular, the Shah was also accused of harbouring too close a relationship with the infidel west. He had not done enough to break the country free of colonialism and, more specifically, the might of the foreign petroleum companies. Iran’s continued and growing dependence on US support was also tantamount to one of the highest forms of oppression for an increasingly disgruntled Muslim community. Khomeini garnered support not only through his Islamic rhetoric, but also by dangling the incentive of a redistribution of the country’s oil wealth. Broadly speaking,

Khomeini's justification for revolt was founded upon his division of the world into two groups, the oppressed and the oppressors, from which he would emancipate the people of Iran.

The divine concept of fighting for an Islamic state, as witnessed in Iran, is still alive in many countries throughout the Middle East. The situation in Algeria perhaps most notably represents such a cause and the true potential for 'Islamic' revolution. Following the first round of legislative elections in December 1991, the victory of the *Islamic Salvation Front* (FIS), the largest Islamic opposition party, was nullified. Subsequently, groups, including the *Armed Islamic Group* (GIA), have fought under the banner of Islam to re-correct the injustice perpetrated following the elections. These groups are fighting, not only to install an Islamic state, but also against the broader concepts of oppression and injustice. In Egypt too, the secular regime of Mubarak is the focus of such groups as *Al-Gamma'a al-Islamiyya* (IG). Whilst these Egyptian groups may not necessarily generate the same ground swell of support that Khomeini achieved in 1979, their ambitions are perceived to be truly holy. They too see a secular government as being incapable of properly implementing and following the word of God, as could be achieved under an Islamic state. Most notably, al-Qa'ida is also seeking to rid the Islamic world of western and secular influence to pave a way for Islamic rule.

However, some "revolutions" in the Middle East have been far more transparent. Various leaders have often manipulated the concept of revolting in the name of Islam simply for military or political gains. In 1969, Qaddafi announced his 'cultural revolution' in Libya as an indigenous socialist vision rooted in Libya's Arab heritage and Islamic faith.<sup>55</sup> Like that of Iran a decade later, the rationale for Qaddafi's coup was based on socio-economic reform necessitated by the failure of a Western-influenced monarchy. However, Qaddafi was simply a military opportunist who had manipulated and extorted Islam for his own ends. Indeed, he himself had identified Islam as the only way to truly mobilise the masses. He had used Islam to legitimise Arab socialism and his radical populist state. Similarly, in Sudan, in September 1983, Gafar Muhammad Nimeiri declared an "Islamic revolution" whereby the Sudan would henceforth become an Islamic republic governed by Islamic law. Nimeiri had hoped to appeal to Islam not only to create a new way out of a deteriorating situation for himself, but also as a means of expanding his own power base and justifying his increasingly repressive regime. Interestingly, Nimeiri, unlike Qaddafi, was overthrown in a military coup less than two years later.

## Conclusion

Given the abstract notion of *jihad*, the ambiguity of the Quran and the lack of a central Islamic authority, Islam's position on *jihad*, war and revolution can be credibly interpreted in almost any number of ways. The Prophetic traditions and subsequent Islamic jurisprudence have only added an extra layer of complexity to these issues. Lying deeper below the surface, however, is the challenge faced by the Muslim world in overcoming the deep scars of imperialism and colonialism and interpreting Islam within the socio-political framework of the twenty-first century. However, the modern era is not void of new challenges. Muslim grievances surrounding the issue of Palestine and, to a lesser extent, the war on terror will continue to challenge Islam's posture as a religion of peace. Globalisation and its growing effects will also further undermine the ability of the Islamic world to form a united approach to issues such as modernisation and reform.

The perceived responsibilities to 'defend' Islam will remain highly subjective. Whilst Muslims may widely agree on the need to defend their faith and prevent oppression, injustice and corruption, the specific circumstances which justify armed action and revolt have evaded agreement for over a millennium. Based on the unresolved contradictions found within the three main sources of Islamic guidance and the current social, political and economic environment of the Middle East, Islam will be subject to continued variance in interpretation and manipulation. Indeed, the Islam of the twenty-first century will continue to offer moderates, traditionalists and radicals alike the opportunity to manipulate concepts such as *jihad*, war and revolution. The continued ambiguity of these concepts will allow Muslim individuals and groups to mold a religion that best fits their own particular circumstances and interpretation. In this context, Islam remains truly at the mercy of its own followers.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Mr Brek Batley is an analyst at the Australian Department of Defence and the Australian Terrorism Research Centre. A detailed profile of the author appears at the beginning of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Muzammil H Siddiqi, *Jihad: Its true Meaning and Purpose*, 28 September 2001. Accessed on 1 October 2002 at <http://www.isnacanada.com/Jihad01.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> It is said that, when Muhammad once returned from battle, he told his followers "We return from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*". Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.17.
- <sup>4</sup> John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.28.
- <sup>5</sup> Some of Muhammad's major battles included Badr (624), Ohad (625), the siege of Medina (627), Muta (629), Mecca (630), Hunain (630) and the expedition to Tabuk (630). Sourced from: John Laffin, *Holy War; Islam Fights*, London, Collins Publishing Group, 1988, p.53.
- <sup>6</sup> James Turner Johnson, & John Kelsay (eds), *Cross, Crescent, and Sword: The Justification and Limitation of War in Western and Islamic Tradition*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1990, p.37.
- <sup>7</sup> The People of the Book were first restricted to Jews and Christians but later extended to Zoroastrians and other faiths. Sourced from: John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.34.
- <sup>8</sup> John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.31.
- <sup>9</sup> James Turner Johnson, & John Kelsay (eds), *Cross, Crescent, and Sword: The Justification and Limitation of War in Western and Islamic Tradition*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1990, p.37.
- <sup>10</sup> Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Broken Crescent: The "Threat" of Militant Islamic Fundamentalism*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 1998, p.154.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Wuthnow (ed.), 'Encyclopaedia of Politics and Religion', Washington, DC, *Congressional Quarterly*, 1998, p.425.
- <sup>12</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.216.
- <sup>13</sup> Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Broken Crescent: The "Threat" of Militant Islamic Fundamentalism*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 1998, p.154.
- <sup>14</sup> Douglas Streusand, 'What Does Jihad Mean?', *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1997.
- <sup>15</sup> James Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*, University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p.61.
- <sup>16</sup> John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.40.

- <sup>17</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.216.
- <sup>18</sup> John Laffin, *Holy War: Islam Fights*, London, Collins Publishing Group, 1988, p.17.
- <sup>19</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Western Attempt to Understand Islam*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1991, p.208.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ummah* is understood to mean worldwide religious community.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Partner, *God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam*, London, UK Harper Collins, 1997, p.263.
- <sup>22</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.203.
- <sup>23</sup> Religious clerics and clergy.
- <sup>24</sup> George Gawrych, *Jihad, War and Terrorism*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute. Accessed on 7 October 2002 at <http://www.cgsc.army.mil/csi/research/writing/JihadGawrych.asp>.
- <sup>25</sup> Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), *Against Islamic Extremism*, Florida, University Press of Florida, 1998, p.116.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.116.
- <sup>27</sup> Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin (eds), *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2002, p.154.
- <sup>28</sup> John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.44.
- <sup>29</sup> More specifically, Osama bin Laden justified the *jihad* as a result of the following conditions. Firstly, the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia; secondly, US support for Israel in its oppression of Palestinian people and its occupation of Jerusalem; and thirdly, the suffering of the Iraqi people as a result of Washington's campaign against Saddam Hussein's regime. Sourced from BBC.com on 3 October 2002. Also see Barry Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin (eds), *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2002, p.252.
- <sup>30</sup> Fiona Symon, *The Roots of Jihad*, BBC News, 16 October 2001. Accessed on 5 October 2002 at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1603178.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1603178.stm).
- <sup>31</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, John Obert Voll, and John Esposito, *The Contemporary Islamic Revival*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.26.
- <sup>32</sup> John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.60.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.88.
- <sup>34</sup> George Gawrych, *Jihad, War and Terrorism*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute. Accessed on 7 October 2002 at <http://www.cgsc.army.mil/csi/research/writing/JihadGawrych.asp>.
- <sup>35</sup> Ellis Goldberg, *War, Terror, Jihad and Justice*, Washington DC, University of Washington, 11 October 2001.

- <sup>36</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.216.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.2.
- <sup>38</sup> Roy Andersen, Robert Seibert, Jon Wagner, *Politics and Change in the Middle East: Sources of Conflict and Accommodation*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1987, p.36.
- <sup>39</sup> George Gawrych, *Jihad, War and Terrorism*, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, Combat Studies Institute. Accessed on 7 October 2002 at <http://www.cgsc.army.mil/csi/research/writing/JihadGawrych.asp>.
- <sup>40</sup> James Deacon and Diane Brady, 'The Will to Fight and Die', *Maclean's*, 2 November 1991, Vol 104, Issue 6, p.39.
- <sup>41</sup> Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The End of the Jihad State*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1994, p.15.
- <sup>42</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.209.
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.205.
- <sup>44</sup> Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (ed.), *Against Islamic Extremism*, Florida, University Press of Florida, 1998, p.112.
- <sup>45</sup> Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.88.
- <sup>46</sup> James Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*, University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, p.62.
- <sup>47</sup> Yahiya Emerick, *What is the position of Islam on war and conflict?* Accessed on 5 October 2002 at <http://www.themodernreligion.com/jihad/def-emerick.html>.
- <sup>48</sup> John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (eds), *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1991, p.202.
- <sup>49</sup> John Laffin, *Holy War; Islam Fights*, London, Collins Publishing Group, 1988, p.23.
- <sup>50</sup> John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.44.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, p.60.
- <sup>52</sup> O. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, London, UK, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1994, p.41.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.41.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.61.
- <sup>55</sup> John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.77.

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