

## **Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought**

*Asma Afsaruddin*

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The term *jihad* is perhaps the most contentious Arabic word to enter the English language in recent decades. In public discourse it has become shorthand for “holy war” and synonymous with violent Muslim extremism. This scholarly examination of jihad and martyrdom by Asma Afsaruddin, a professor of Islamic studies at Indiana University, carefully disentangles their multi-valent meanings within Islamic scholarship from early Muslim history up to the present day. It also challenges the assertions of those who focus only upon martial connotations. Instead, she argues that “conceptualizations of *jihad* as *primarily* armed combat and of *shahada* as *primarily* military martyrdom are relatively late and contested ones and deviate considerably from the Qur’anic significations of these terms” (p. 5). In this substantial, dense text, comprising nine chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion, she demonstrates an impressive command of materials by skillfully engaging a representative range of Qur’anic exegetical works, Prophetic sayings, and *faḍā’il* literature.

The first chapter is prefaced with a detailed discussion of the first term’s etymological origin and semantic usage. Rooting her analysis in the Qur’an, she points out that its polyvalent nature cannot be reduced only to a combative

definition, for, as early Arabic lexicographers noted, the meaning of the basic verb *jahada* could be either “He strove, laboured, or toiled; exerted himself or his power or efforts or endeavours or ability...” (p. 10). Furthermore, derivatives based on the “Arabic root *jhd* occur in several verses in the Qur’an with multiple inflections, grounded as they often are in specific historical contexts” (p. 10). An important point is made here about the linguistic applications as regards these forms – which also imply the related terms *qitāl* (fighting) and *ṣabr* (patience).

The author goes on to explain her methodological approach by listing the early Qur’an commentators consulted, their biographies, and the historical period in which they lived: al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210), al-Qurtubi (d. 1273), and Ibn Kathir (d. 1373). In her investigation of the scriptural basis of warfare, scholarly exegesis of well-known Qur’anic verses (Q. 25:52, 29:69, 22:78) are systematically compared and contrasted during different historical junctures. This approach leads to another core argument: the underplayed pacific dimension of jihad in Qur’anic discourse and its association with the ideas of peaceful forbearance and *ṣabr*, which commentators from the ninth century onward uniformly understood to be attached to jihad.

Chapter 2 explicates the point at which jihad began to acquire its combative dimensions. Citing Q. 2:216, the author explains how the specific divine command to fight was issued and initially received, rather reluctantly, by some of the early believers. These verses also contextualize the reasons for combat and lay down the conditions and limits for when it becomes necessary. Among the passages analyzed here are Q. 22:39-40, 2:190-94, and 9:12-13. She explains each set of verses from the various exegetes, noting their points of agreement and disagreement. We are then given a sense of the consensus of acquired meanings and the reasons why the first Muslims were given permission to wage war: (1) to redress the injustice of being physically harmed and ejected from their homes in Makkah and (2), flowing from the first, to remind them that their persecution was due solely to their new-found faith. In other words, jihad became necessary because oppression could no longer be tolerated.

The Qur’an is often accused of containing passages that incite violence. However, both Muslims and non-Muslims have decontextualized such passages by deliberately omitting their beginnings and endings. Chapter 3 develops these themes further with a detailed discussion of the ethics of war and its limitations. The most commonly quoted guidance in relation to combat are grouped into three types of verses: those that obligate warfare under justified

circumstances, abstention from and termination of hostilities, and peace-making.

For example Q. 9:5, one of the most frequently cited verses by both jihadists and critics of Islam, states "...slay the polytheists wherever you may encounter them, seize them and encircle them and lie in wait for them." The first and last parts of this verse are rarely mentioned, and the historical circumstances in which these commands were explained is also routinely ignored. In addition, other Qur'anic teachings (e.g., Q. 69:7-9) about the importance of abstaining from and terminating hostilities are rarely given attention. This is also true of the various passages (e.g., Q. 8:61) that instruct believers to "seek peace and place their trust in God." Highlighting this contextualization is urgent, given the tendency of modern proponents of military jihad to rationalize their actions through isolated texts. Muslim scholars' differences of opinion on these key verses also need to be acknowledged in order to avoid the types of narrow scriptural literalism prevalent in much of the popular Islamic discourse.

In chapter 4, we are told that martyrdom in a "military sense is an inchoate concept in the Qur'an and not encapsulated in a single, specific term" (p. 95) and that the idea of the *shahīd* developed in the extra-Qur'anic literature found in exegesis, Hadith, juridical, and literary hortatory works. These are explored and lead to chapter 5's discussion of jihad and martyrdom in the Prophetic sayings. The multiplicity of competing meanings attached to these two terms are also found in the Hadith literature. Here, the author compares the works of Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani (d. 827), Ibn Abi Shayba (d. 849), and the well-known canonical collections of al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, Ibn Maja and al-Nasa'i. After surveying their viewpoints, she concludes that a consistent repertoire of relevant Hadiths had been established by the ninth century and were generally replicated by later compilations.

Chapter 6 explores the works by scholars writing on these two terms during the eighth and ninth centuries and reveals their emerging progressive, critical transformations. For example, Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak's (d. 197) *Kitāb al-Jihād* is considered the earliest treatise on military jihad, its merits and rules of engagement as derived from the Qur'an, Hadith, and the authority of such well-known Companions as Umar ibn al-Khattab. This text contains numerous reports to remind its readers of combative jihad's moral nature: fighting only for the sake of God, as opposed to such worldly motivations as military adventurism, fame, and glory.

The spiritual aspects of jihad are examined in chapter 7, where they are linked to the excellences of patience and forbearance as counter-narratives to

purely combative interpretations. Here again, the author recovers jihad's pacific dimensions by comparing a range of early exegetical, Hadith, and legal opinions on the virtues of patience as an alternative to war. Excursions into the viewpoint of Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350), the prominent student of the Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyyah, demonstrate that those classical-era figures who are popular among contemporary militants possessed highly nuanced views on both jihad and martyrdom, a fact that many modern followers deliberately ignore.

Penultimate chapters 8 and 9 focus on modern and contemporary debates. Each one provides informative summaries of the perspectives of various well-known ideologues and scholars. Chapter 8 surveys a selection of political theorists and scholars such as Hassan al-Banna, Abu A'la Mawdudi, Syed Qutb, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, Ayatullah Khomeini, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. This provides a contrast to the contextualist, polyesmic voices found in chapter 9, such as those of Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Banna, Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti, Wahiduddin Khan, Muhammad Fethullah Gülen, and Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, as well as fascinating profiles of less well-known activists like Syed Abd al-Ghaffar Khan (d. 1988) and Jawad Said (b. 1931), both of whom understood and advocated jihad as primarily non-violent resistance.

The conclusion restates the author's main argument of retrieving these two terms' multifaceted meanings as they were understood in early Muslim scholarship and then retrieve the non-combative dimensions of Qur'anic discourse attributed to the middle Makkan and early Madinan periods. Like other theological concepts, these differences of meaning have been influenced by political/ideological affiliations, cultural contexts, and history. In the end, she poses a series of questions about the future of such debates, which appears to be determined by the ongoing interpretive contestation between radicals and irenic orientations within the ummah.

This text makes a significant contribution to increasing our understanding of how the meanings of theological ideas evolve over time and space. It is rich in primary source material, systematic in its presentation, sharp in its analysis, and persuasive in counter-balancing the purely martial theorizations of jihad.

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