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**Michael Bonner: Jihad in Islamic History**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# *Introduction*

### *What Is Jihad?*

In the debates over Islam taking place today, no principle is invoked more often than jihad. Jihad is often understood as the very heart of contemporary radical Islamist ideology.<sup>1</sup> By a sort of metonymy, it can refer to the radical Islamist groups themselves.<sup>2</sup> Some observers associate jihad with attachment to local values and resistance against the homogenizing trends of globalization.<sup>3</sup> For others, jihad represents a universalist, globalizing force of its own: among these there is a wide spectrum of views. At one end of this spectrum, anti-Islamic polemicists use jihad as proof of Islam's innate violence and its incompatibility with civilized norms.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, some writers insist that jihad has little or nothing to do with externally directed violence. Instead, they declare jihad to be a defensive principle,<sup>5</sup> or else to be utterly pacific, inward-directed, and the basis of the true meaning of Islam which, they say, is peace.

<sup>1</sup> Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*.

<sup>2</sup> Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*.

<sup>3</sup> Barber, *Jihad versus McWorld*.

<sup>4</sup> Pipes, "What Is Jihad?"

<sup>5</sup> For a nuanced argument along these lines, see Sachedina, "The Development of Jihad in Islamic Revelation and History," and "Justifications for Just War in Islam."

Thus Islam, through jihad, equals violence and war; or else, through jihad, it equals peace. Now surely it is not desirable, or even possible, to reduce so many complex societies and polities, covering such broad extents of time and space, to any single governing principle. And in fact, not all contemporary writers view the matter in such stark terms. Many do share, however, an assumption of nearly total continuity, in Islam, between practice and norm and between history and doctrine. And it is still not uncommon to see Islam described as an unchanging essence or a historical cause. The jihad then conveniently provides a key to understanding that essence or cause, and so we are told that Islam is fundamentally “about” war, that it “accounts for” the otherwise inexplicable suicidal activity of certain individuals, that it “explains” the occurrence of wars in history, and so on.

None of this so far has told us what jihad actually is, beyond its tremendous resonance in present and past. Is it an ideology that favors violence? A political means of mass mobilization? A spiritual principle of motivation for individuals?

While we do not wish for this to be an argument over words alone, we cannot understand the doctrines or the historical phenomena without understanding the words as precisely as possible. The Arabic word *jihad* does not mean “holy war” or “just war.” It literally means “striving.” When followed by the modifying phrase *fi sabil Allah*, “in the path of God,” or when—as often—this phrase is absent but assumed to be in force, *jihad* has the specific sense of fighting for the sake of God (whatever we understand that to mean). In addition, several other Arabic words are closely related to *jihad* in meaning and usage. These include *ribat*, which denotes pious activity, often related to warfare, and in many contexts seems to constitute a defensive counterpart to a more activist, offensive *jihad*. *Ribat* also refers to a type of building where this sort of defensive warfare can take place: a fortified place where garrisons of volunteers reside for extended periods of time while holding Islamic territory against the enemy. *Ghazw*, *ghazwa*, and *ghaza*<sup>7</sup> have to do with raiding (from which comes the French word *razzia*). *Qital*, or “fighting,” at times conveys something similar to jihad/*ribat*, at times not. *Harb* means “war” or “fighting,” usually in a more neutral sense, carrying less ideological weight than the other terms. All these words, however, have wide semantic ranges and

frequently overlap with one other. They also change with distance and time.

Jihad refers, first of all, to a body of legal doctrine. The comprehensive manuals of classical Islamic law usually include a section called *Book of Jihad*. Sometimes these sections have different names, such as *Book of Siyar* (law of war) or *Book of Jizya* (poll tax), but their contents are broadly similar. Likewise, most of the great compendia of Tradition (*hadith*; see chapter 3) contain a *Book of Jihad*, or something like it. Some Islamic jurists also wrote monographic works on jihad and the law of war. Not surprisingly, these jurists sometimes disagreed with each other. Some, but not all, of these disagreements correlated to the division of the Sunni Muslim legal universe into four classical schools (*madhhabs*), and of Islam as a whole into the sectarian groupings of Sunnis, Shī'is, Kharijis, and others. Like Islamic law in general, this doctrine of jihad was neither the product nor the expression of the Islamic State: it developed apart from that State, or else in uneasy coexistence with it. (This point will receive nuance in chapter 8.)

These treatments of jihad in manuals and other works of Islamic law usually combine various elements. A typical *Book of Jihad* includes the law governing the conduct of war, which covers treatment of nonbelligerents, division of spoils among the victors, and such matters. Declaration and cessation of hostilities are discussed, raising the question of what constitutes proper authority. A *Book of Jihad* will also include discussion of how the jihad derives from Scripture (the Quran) and the Example of the Prophet (the Sunna), or in other words, how the jihad has been commanded by God. There are often—especially in the hadith collections—rhetorical passages urging the believers to participate in the wars against the enemies of God. There is usually an exposition of the doctrine of martyrdom (see chapter 5), which is thus part of jihad. The list of topics is much longer, but this much can begin to give an idea of what the jihad of the jurists includes.

Jihad is also more than a set of legal doctrines. Historians of Islam often encounter it and try to understand its meaning and especially when they think about such things as motivation, mobilization, and political authority. For instance, regarding the earliest period of Islam, why did the Muslims of the first generations fight so effectively? What was the basis of their solidarity? How did they form their armies? Why did they assume the attitudes that

they did toward their own commanders and rulers? For historians interested in such questions, it is impossible to study the historical manifestations of jihad apart from the legal doctrine, for several reasons. First, some—though far from all—of the historical narratives that are available to us regarding early Islam seem to have been formed by juridical perspectives, no doubt in part because many of the early Muslim historians were jurists themselves.<sup>6</sup> Second, the doctrine of jihad had a role of its own in events, a role that increased over time (see chapter 8). And not only the doctrine, but also its exponents and champions: the jurists and scholars known collectively as the “learned,” the *‘ulama*: many of these were protagonists in the ongoing drama of the jihad in several ways including, at critical junctures, their participation (both symbolic and physical) in the conduct of warfare (see chapter 7). Jihad, for the historian, is thus not only about clashes between religions, civilizations, and states but also about clashes among groups within Islamic societies. Equally important, jihad has never ceased changing, right down to our own day. If it ever had an original core, this has been experienced anew many times over.

### *Just War and Holy War*

The concept of just war, *bellum iustum*, has a long history in the West.<sup>7</sup> The medieval part of this history is particularly Christian, in part because of the emphasis on love (*agapē*, *caritas*) in Christian doctrine and the difficulties this created for Christian thinkers and political authorities in their conduct of war. Then, with the introduction of natural law theory into the law of war in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and with Europe’s increasing domination of the seas, Western doctrines of just war came to prevail over both Christian and non-Christian states—whether they liked it or not—and their interactions in war and peace.

<sup>6</sup> Brunschvig, “Ibn ‘Abdalkam et la conquête de l’Afrique du Nord par les Arabes.”

<sup>7</sup> A starting point is provided by the essays collected in Kelsay and Johnson, eds., *Just War and Jihad*. See especially Johnson’s “Historical Roots and Sources of the Just War Tradition in Western Culture,” 3–30; also his *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*; and Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages*.

Now, it is possible to draw meaningful parallels between these Western doctrines of just war and the classical doctrine of jihad expressed by the Muslim jurists. However, there are also differences. For the most part, the Muslim jurists do not make the “justice” of any instance of jihad the term of their discussion. Likewise, the concept of holy war, at least as we use it now, derives from Christian doctrine and experience, especially relating to the Crusades. Scholars of the ancient Near East and the Hebrew scriptures have broadened the concept, and so too have anthropologists. This anthropological literature on holy war may help us to ask about the links between the jihad, as it first emerged, with warfare in Arabia before Islam. It may also help us to see the role of jihad in the conversion to Islam of other nomadic and tribal peoples, such as the Berbers in North Africa and the Turks in Central Asia. At the same time, we must remember that the Muslim jurists did not usually discuss these matters in these terms; for them any authentic instance of jihad was necessarily both holy and just.

In the medieval Islamic world, there were philosophers who, unlike the jurists, were willing to foreground questions of justice and injustice in their discussions of warfare. They did this by adapting Islamic concepts into a Greek, mainly Platonic field of reference.<sup>8</sup> The most important of these philosophers was the great al-Farabi (d. 950). Al-Farabi considers a range of situations in which wars may be considered just or unjust. They are unjust if they serve a ruler’s narrow, selfish purposes or if they are devoted solely to conquest and bloodshed. Just wars may, of course, be defensive, but they may also, under some circumstances, be offensive: what makes them just is their role in achieving the well-being of the “virtuous city,” that association which we all need in order to attain happiness.<sup>9</sup> Here al-Farabi uses not only the Arabic word *harb* (war) but also, on occasion, the word *jihad*, though not quite in the technical sense assigned to it by Islamic legal doctrine. It seems likely, all the same, that al-Farabi was trying to find a philosophical place for the juridical doctrine of jihad within his teachings regarding the virtuous city and its ruler, the Islamic philosopher-king.

<sup>8</sup> Kraemer, “The Jihād of the Falāsifa”; Heck, “*Jihad* Revisited,” esp. 103–106.

<sup>9</sup> Butterworth, “Al-Fârâbî’s Statecraft,” 79–100.

We find a synthesis of juridical and philosophical views in the famous *Muqaddima*, or introduction to the study of history, of Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406).<sup>10</sup> Ibn Khaldun begins his discussion of wars by saying that these “have always occurred in the world since God created it,” naturally and unavoidably, because of men’s desire for revenge and their need for self-defense. Ibn Khaldun then identifies four types of war. The first of these “usually occurs between neighboring tribes and competing families.” The second is “war caused by hostility,” whereby “savage nations living in the desert” attack their neighbors, solely with a view to seizing their property. These two types are “wars of outrage and sedition” (*hurub baghy wa-fitna*). The third type is “what the divine law calls *jihad*.” The fourth consists of “dynastic wars against seceders and those who refuse obedience.” Of these four types, “the first two are unjust and lawless,” while the last two are “wars of jihad and justice” (*hurub jihad wa-’adl*). In this way, as Charles Butterworth remarked, Ibn Khaldun “distinguishes just war from jihad and allows neither to encompass the other.”<sup>11</sup>

The juridical discourse on jihad had incomparably more influence on intellectual life within premodern Muslim societies than did these philosophical discussions. The same applies to its influence over preaching, the popular imagination in general, and the running of the affairs of armies and states. Modern and contemporary Muslim thinkers, on the other hand, have had a great deal to say about justice and injustice in relation to the doctrine of jihad and war in general,<sup>12</sup> but this takes us farther than we can go here.

### *Warfare and Jihad*

We have seen that certain philosophical writers distinguished between, on the one hand, jihad, which they understood to be a part of the divine law of Islam, and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of warfare, which has occurred throughout history in all places inhabited by humans. In addition to this philosophical discourse, the premodern Islamic world was familiar with several other ways

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2:73–74; Kraemer, “The Jihad of the Falāsifa,” 288–289.

<sup>11</sup> Butterworth, “Al-Fārābī’s Statecraft,” 96–97, n. 17.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Sachedina, “Justifications for Just War in Islam.”

of speaking and writing about warfare, distinct from—though often related to—the practice and doctrine of jihad. Here we may briefly mention a few of these.<sup>13</sup>

Islam arose in an environment where warfare—or at any rate, armed violence with some degree of organization and planning—was a characteristic of everyday life. Even if it often amounted to little more than livestock-rustling, its threat was never far away, especially in those regions of the Arabian peninsula that lay beyond the control of rulers and states. We see this in the great corpus of pre-Islamic poetry, our most vivid and extensive source of information about Arabia on the eve of Islam. Some of this poetry was devoted entirely to the joys and travails of fighting, especially in the poems collected afterward under the rubric of *hamasa* (valor). War also loomed large in the countless dirges composed in honor of its victims. And in the songs of praise that the poets recited in honor of their patrons, their kin, and themselves, martial valor usually topped the list of virtues, followed closely by generosity. In all these poems, war typically appears as something ordained by fate, unwelcome but necessary, often imposed by the obligation to seek revenge for wrongs done to one's kin. Sometimes we find a willingness to be the first aggressor, together with a grim enthusiasm for the activity of fighting itself: "Yea a son of war am I—continually do I heighten her blaze, and stir her up to burn whenever she is not yet kindled."<sup>14</sup> Most often, however, this enthusiasm is tempered by patient endurance (*sabr*) in the face of the constant, lurking possibility of violent death, as well as the inevitability of death itself, which here is the extinguishing of the individual, the end of everything. Thus the old Arabic poems, together with the prose narratives that accompany them, express a heroic ideal, where the courage and endurance of a few individuals illuminate a dark, violent world.

Long after the arrival of Islam, this ancient heroic ethos continued to hold considerable power and attraction. So for instance, when our sources report the death of a commander in the Islamic armies, they sometimes give the text of a dirge that was recited

<sup>13</sup> For the following, see also Donner, "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War."

<sup>14</sup> Charles Lyall, *The Dirvans of 'Abid ibn al-Abras, of Asad, 'Amir ibn al-Tufail, and of 'Amir ibn Sa'sa'a*, 29, verse 10; cited by Donner, "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War," 36.

on the occasion. Here we still find the thematics of the pre-Islamic poetry, praising the deceased for his courage and generosity, and for his steadfast defense of his kin and all those who sought his protection. More often, however, and in a great variety of contexts, we find the old Arab heroism blended together with Islamic piety. We do not have to consider this a contradiction, for it is precisely this combination of self-denying monotheistic piety and swashbuckling derring-do that we find in many genres of Islamic literature relating to the jihad—for instance, in popular poems and romances and even in (apparently) sober biographical literature (see chapter 7). Nonetheless, the old heroic ethos was not, in the end, an Islamic virtue, and it constituted, for many people, a point of controversy.

Rulers in the Islamic world sometimes supported the activity of religious and legal scholars who produced, among other things, learned treatises on the jihad. However, within the royal courts, and in the concentric circles of influence and prestige that emanated outward from them, there was also a keen interest in viewing warfare from a broader perspective. We find an early example of this attitude in the lengthy chapter on war (*kitab al-barb*) written, in the mid-to-late ninth century, by the polymath man of letters Ibn Qutayba.<sup>15</sup> This chapter opens with citations from the sayings of the Prophet (the hadith) and the Quran, and some narratives from the early, heroic period of Islam. Soon, however, Ibn Qutayba begins to quote from the literature of “the Indians” and especially “the Persians” of the Sasanian dynasty, which had been defeated and destroyed during the early Islamic conquests some two centuries previously. Here we find counsel on many matters, including strategy, tactics, and the correct demeanor to observe in battles and on campaigns. The sources of this advice are utterly non-Islamic, which implies that any civilized belligerent, of any religion, may take advantage of it if he wishes. And at times the advice is indeed quite worldly, as when the “strategems of war” ascribed to an anonymous Persian king include “distracting people’s attention away from the war they are involved in by keeping them busy with other things.”<sup>16</sup> This material is mainly in the mode—highly fashionable in Ibn Qutayba’s day and

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Qutayba, *Uyun al-akbbar*, 1:107–222.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:112.

long afterward—of advice for princes. At the same time, however, Ibn Qutayba returns repeatedly to narratives from the early Islamic campaigns and to religious norms regarding the conduct of warfare. He thus tries to integrate two different conceptions of war (Sasanian/imperial and Islamic/jihad), which nonetheless remain distinct.

Throughout the centuries there was a steady, if not enormous, production of manuals and treatises on technical matters such as tactics, siegecraft, armor, weapons, and horsemanship.<sup>17</sup> The audience for this literature must have consisted of military professionals—a group which, as we shall see, stood apart from the military amateurs who made up the units of “volunteers.” This technical literature tended to show less interest in the precedents of centuries past and more interest in the practices and activities of the enemy in the present time. For these and other reasons, it stands apart from the literature of jihad.

Finally, war is a central theme of the apocalyptic literature that flourished intermittently among medieval Muslims, as well as among their Christian and Jewish neighbors. Here war fills out the catastrophic scenarios that culminate in the end of this world as we know it—even though in these scenarios we do find, after a cataclysmic evil war, a just war led by the redeeming figure of the Mahdi. These apocalyptic wars are, of course, related to the Islamic notions of jihad and martyrdom,<sup>18</sup> but to a surprising extent, the relationship does not appear very close. It is noteworthy that at least from the second century of the Hijra/eighth century CE onward, Islamic tradition considered these matters under two different rubrics, *fitan* (wars of the Last Days) and *jihad*.<sup>19</sup>

Thus there were several ways available of thinking and arguing about warfare, its conduct, and its justifications. All the same, for most times and places in the premodern Islamic world, we must consider the religious discourse of jihad as the dominant one in this area, not only because of its prestige and its place in the central

<sup>17</sup> See Elgood, ed., *Islamic Arms and Armour*; and Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, with bibliography.

<sup>18</sup> Heck, “*Jihad Revisited*,” 102. Perhaps it is true, as Heck says, that “religious martyrdom . . . requires the addition of an eschatological climate.” However, the mature Islamic doctrine of martyrdom (see chapter 5, below) seems to have washed out this “eschatological climate” rather thoroughly.

<sup>19</sup> See Cook, “Muslim Apocalyptic and Jihad,” and below, p. 131–132.

system of values but also because it comprehended so much. Jihad, at least as it emerged in its full articulation toward the end of the eighth century of the Common Era, included exhortations to the believers to attain religious merit through striving and warfare. It also gave an account of the will of God, as this had become known to mankind through God's Word and through the Example of His Prophet, and as it had then become realized, over and over again, through the martial activities of the community of believers. At the same time, the jihad included a large body of precise instructions regarding the conduct of warfare, very much in the here and now, answering to the technical requirements of recruitment, tactics, and strategy. This does not mean, however, that the jihad—as expressed in the first instance by jurists—was preeminently practical in nature: in fact it often tended to be backward-looking, seeking models of conduct in an idealized past. Now we may consider how these Islamic jurists, and others, have construed the jihad and how they have argued about it.

### *Fields of Debate*

Over the centuries, as Muslim jurists reiterated and refined the criteria for jihad, they referred constantly to several underlying questions. We may begin by singling out two of these.

#### *Who Is the Enemy?*

If we think of jihad first of all as a kind of organized warfare against external opponents, then who precisely are those opponents? How and under what conditions must war be waged against them? What is to be done with them once they have been defeated? Questions of this kind predominated in many of the juridical debates about the jihad, especially during the early, formative centuries of Islam.

Once some sort of consensus has been achieved regarding these enemies from outside, then what about internal adversaries? All agree that war may be waged, at least as a last resort, against Muslims who rebel against a constituted Muslim authority. Is such war then a kind of jihad? And must these internal Muslim rebels be treated in the same way as the external non-Muslim opponents just mentioned? Here we find that in actual historical experience,

the contending parties in intra-Muslim conflicts did often have recourse to the doctrine and above all, the rhetoric of jihad. In juridical discourse, however, the matter is somewhat complicated. Organized armed action against the Muslim political rebel (*baghi*), as well as against two other types of malfesor, the apostate (*mur-tadd*) who renounces his own religion of Islam, and the brigand (*muharib*) who threatens the established order while seeking only his own personal gain, is indeed often described as a form of jihad. Loyal Muslims who die in combat against these rebels, apostates, and brigands achieve the status of martyr (see chapter 5). On the other hand, the status of the adversaries in these conflicts is considered to be different from that of the non-Muslim adversaries in the “external” jihad. Here we see differences in approach between Sunni and Shi’i jurists.<sup>20</sup> For the most part, however, we find that these matters are actually dealt with under headings of Islamic law other than jihad. In fact, it is possible to provide a nuanced, theoretical discussion of political rebels and rebellion in Islam while referring to jihad only intermittently or even minimally.<sup>21</sup> Thus, while the discussion of rebels is part of the juridical discourse on jihad, it is not, at least in a consistent way, at the heart of that discourse. Here, as elsewhere, we encounter the temptation of allowing the notion of jihad to apply to almost everything—a temptation that is best for us to avoid.<sup>22</sup>

The Quran and Tradition often speak of oppressors. What happens if oppressors arise within the Muslim community itself? Must we carry out jihad against them? Here, of course, we are looking at the problem of rebellion from the point of view of the ruled, instead of the rulers: is there a right to resistance against an unjust ruler? From very early on in the history of Islam, some Muslims have deployed the ideology and vocabulary of jihad against what

<sup>20</sup> Kraemer, “Apostates, Rebels and Brigands,” esp. 58–59: “Whereas Sunnīs seldom characterized warfare against rebels as *ġibād*, although one killed fighting them was considered a martyr, the Šī’īs regarded suppression of rebellion as *ġibād* and the *buġāt* [rebels] as infidels.”

<sup>21</sup> As in Abou El Fadl, “Ahkām al-Buġhāt”; idem, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law*.

<sup>22</sup> We see this in Alfred Morabia’s masterful *Le Ġibād dans l’Islam médiéval* (hereafter *Le Ġibād*), which tends to make jihad into an all-embracing principle governing almost everything: so the discussion of “internal, coercive” jihad (against rebels, etc.), 298–309.

they have seen as oppressive and tyrannous (though Muslim) rulers. From a later perspective, these oppressors might be described as political rebels or religious heretics—though here we run the risk of using the terminology and conceptual patterns of Christianity. The point for now is simply that jihad has a long history as an ideology of internal resistance (discussed in chapter 8 below).

Finally, many have claimed that the authentic jihad, the “greater jihad,” is not warfare waged in the world against external adversaries but is rather an internal spiritualized war waged against the self and its base impulses. What does it mean to have such an adversary and to make war against it? This question will be taken up again very shortly.

### *Who Is in Charge?*

Early Muslim jurisprudence provided an answer to this question: the imam, which then meant much the same thing as the caliph, the supreme ruler and head (after God Himself) over the entire Muslim community and polity. The imam has ultimate responsibility for military operations, both offensive and defensive; in particular, offensive campaigns outside the Islamic lands, against external foes, require his permission and supervision. However, since the imam or caliph could not be everywhere at once, it was always necessary for him to delegate his authority in these matters. Meanwhile, over time, his power and authority diminished in the world, and rivals emerged. Furthermore, jihad was acknowledged to be not only a collective activity: it was also a matter of concern and choice for the individual, of great consequence for his or her personal salvation. Thus the jihad became the site of an argument over authority, and it has remained one right down to the present day.

We have already mentioned the insistence, in many writings of our own day on jihad and Islam, on continuity. First of all, continuity in time: today’s historical actors are often seen to be repeating or reenacting things that happened long ago. Second, continuity between doctrine and practice: so for instance, calls to warfare and martyrdom in Quran and Tradition are thought to provide explanations for today’s violent behavior. This claim to continuity requires critical examination. However, there is no doubt that Muslims have often expressed a strong desire for continuity with their own past. In this case, does performing jihad establish continuity with the Prophet Muhammad, through literal imitation of













