The Meaning of Jihad: Textual and Contextual Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

Belief in Jihad (holy war) is key for a believer of Islam in the social theological sphere, where faith and jihad are not separated. Discussions among theologians and religious experts on the meaning of jihad and the thoughts they put forth have undergone changes and have developed over time. Concrete political situations have also affected views and opinions toward jihad and have, eventually, led to pragmatism and realism among ulamas and Islamic thinkers in their understanding of jihad. This paper attempts to explore the meaning and concept of jihad in Islam via textual and contextual interpretations. The writer’s own research has yielded that jihad has wide meaning and is not limited to war alone because Allah had ordained Muslims not only to take up arms, but also to believe in holy war in terms of its existential meaning (which refers to the fight against lust) in the quest to defend Islam. This paper discusses the objectives of jihad in Islam as a way to glorify the name of Allah and to fight against cruelty and unfairness on God’s earth.

Keywords: Contextual interpretation, faith, jihad, Qur’an, textual interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to deliberate both on the textual and on the contextual meaning of the term jihad. Textually, the term jihad discusses in order to better understand the arguments about it. Contextually, the paper focuses on an understanding of the reasons behind jihad and the role it plays in a particular context.
The principal objective of this paper is to explore the true meaning of *jihad* (holy war), which actually evokes many interpretations. *Jihad* has also been subject to so many misinterpretations. Some people have understood the meaning of *jihad* as merely launching a holy war, although in the *Qur’an*, the term has various meanings. This misinterpretation has often caused some people to use only a certain and narrow understanding of *jihad* and at the same time try to legitimize their limited understanding of the term. In Indonesia, some religious leaders are aware of the political situation in the nation and give a more positive meaning to *jihad* rather than restricting its interpretation to merely a holy war.

According to the *Qur’an*, the aims of *jihad* are to spread the word of God and to abolish injustice. The *Qur’an* reiterates that all able-bodied Muslims should be willing to take up *jihad* at any point in time. It mentions that if Muslims know and understand the many rewards that God has prepared for those who perform *jihad* and are obedient to Him, they would most definitely be willing to carry out the commandment (Shihab, 2007).

Together with these aims, there are various types of *jihad* in terms of opponents to Islam and the purposes of *jihad*. There is *jihad* against the unbelievers, the hypocrites, evil and lust. These interpretations of *jihad* are for different purposes and resolutions. A scientist, for example, can take up *jihad* by using his knowledge for the good of mankind; employees can launch *jihad* by being productive; a teacher can practice *jihad* by teaching the younger generation with utmost honesty; leaders can govern with justice; entrepreneurs can realize *jihad* by being honest in their trade; while the army’s loyalty to the country and ruler is yet another form of *jihad*. *Jihad* in any form and against any opponent must be for Allah and must never end. This is *haqqa jihadih*, the true *jihad* (Shihab, 2007). This phrase *haqqa jihadih* is clearly mentioned in Surah al-Hajj (*Qur’an* 22:78).

Shihab (2007) explained that *jihad* was a way to achieve a goal using available resources. *Jihad* does not recognize despair, surrender and lethargy. A *mujahid* (a word derived from *jahada*) is a person who devotes all his abilities and sacrifices with his soul and energy, thoughts, emotions and anything related to the human self (Shihab, 2007). This was evident during the Meccan Period when Muslims were not in a position to take up arms or fight physically, as stated in Surah al-Furqan (verse 52). A *mujahid* therefore devotes his soul and energy to *jihad*.

This verse is very relevant to the understanding of *jihad* because devotion can be a powerful tool and instrument to bring down enemies. The wrongful accusations against Islam can be countered with well-informed arguments and devotion to the religion. The use of the *Qur’an* to counter misinformation and wrongful accusations can be a stronger mental weapon compared to *jihad* with physical weapons.

**Textual Meaning**

Etymologically, the Arabic word *jihad* is
derived from the verb *jahada*, which means struggle and hard work. *Jahada* also means working very hard to achieve maximum results (Manzur, 2000). It could also be interpreted to mean effort, seriousness, fatigue, difficulty, illness, and anxiety. The *Qur’an* mentions the word *jihad* and its derivations as many as 40 times. Other derivational meanings of *jihad* include devoting all abilities and enduring sacrifices. *Jihad* can also mean optimizing efforts by devoting all potential and abilities both in words and actions, or anything that can be done to achieve a certain goal.

A stereotypical view of the West is that *jihad fi sabi’llah* is simply a holy war to spread Islam (Gibb, 1978). This narrow understanding of the term stigmatizes Islam as a religion of violence (Fadhlullah, 1995). Some followers of the Khawarij interpret *jihad* as fighting with the use of weapons or dying of martyrdom (Rahman, 1979). For these people, using weapons is major part of *jihad*. They do not consider other struggles as *jihad*. This has led to the counterargument, *jihad akbar* (struggle against desires), that holds struggles in matters related to economics, social, politics and military are not a priority (Fahmi, 1992). Textually, it can be seen that there are many meanings to *jihad* and each meaning is related to the function and purpose for which the term is used.

**Contextual Meaning**

Al-Isfahani (n.d.), an eleventh-century Muslim scholar of *Qur’anic* exegesis and Arabic language, explained that *jihad* meant to exert every ability to defend oneself from the enemy. He divided *jihad* into three types: *jihad* against visible enemies, *jihad* against demons, and *jihad* against oneself (Al-Isfahani, n.d.). These are related to the context of *jihad*.

*Jihad* can only be pursued by those who truly believe in the holy book and understand it well. Facing opponents who are bent on distorting facts, or those who have no knowledge or misunderstand the teachings of the *Qur’an*, is definitely much more difficult than fighting battles with weapons. Therefore, *jihad* by using the firm understanding of the *Qur’an* is far greater and stronger than any holy war (Shihab, 2007).

*Jihad* is not always concerned with taking up arms. This was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when he was still in Mecca. At the time, the Muslims were weak and defenseless. The prophet was commanded to perform *jihad* by devoting all efforts to face the polytheists with words that touched the mind and heart and without weapons. The meaning of *jihad* was contextualized for the Prophet.

There is also *jihad fi sabi’llah*, a phrase which means the struggle to realize the religious message in the way of Allah. In Surah al-,*Ma’idah* (verse 35), we read: “*O ye who believe, fear Allah and seek the way that is near to Him, and strive in His Way, that ye may be fortunate*”. This is Allah’s motivation for Muslims to achieve what is promised on the Day of Judgment for those who perform *jihad* for His sake. The reward is a great, eternal and lasting fortune and
happiness in the chambers of paradise where 
the faithful resides forever (al-Rifa‘i, n.d.).

Verse 5:35 above actually explains that 
jihad in the way of Allah is to manifest 
the welfare of life in this world and in the 
Hereafter. Jihad is a duty for those who 
believe and should be done on the basis 
of devotion to Allah. Jihad in Allah’s way 
is also an effort or endeavour on the part 
of the believer as a vicegerent of Allah on 
Earth to achieve something better and to 
reach al-falah (luck, victory, prosperity, 
wellfare in this world and in the Hereafter).
The verse also explains that jihad in the 
way of Allah begins with the command to 
be pious towards Him and to find a way 
towards righteousness. In short, it can 
be said that faith, piety, efforts and jihad 
are contextualized as a series of attitudes 
and activities of a Muslim person’s life to 
achieve inner and outer happiness, in this 
world and the Hereafter.

Fi Sabilillah also means in the way of 
Allah, that is the path that takes someone 
towards God, both through belief and deeds. 
Specifically fi sabillah means fighting 
against the enemy of religion. In general, 
the meaning of fi sabillah includes all 
deeds or sincere charity which is used to 
taqarrub to God, to carry out all the tasks 
that are both compulsory and optional such 
as the propagation (da’wah) of Islam, the 
eradication of illiteracy (especially that 
related to the Qur’an), translation of the 
Qur’an into different languages, building 
hospitals, financing the activities of Islamic 
organizations, building of public wells and 
toilets, establishing orphanages and schools.

Allah informs that in performing jihad, 
one should perform it fully as commanded 
in Surah al-Hajj (verse 78). He uses the 
words haqqa jihadih which means the true 
jihad, and only those who perform true jihad 
sincerely will receive God’s Grace.

Meanwhile, in Surah al-Anfal (verse 72) 
we read of those who believe in Him and His 
Messenger and emigrated by leaving their 
homes because of their displeasure towards 
the unbelievers. They strived with their 
wealth, among others, by giving assistance 
for jihad efforts and the defense of religious 
values. These Muslims who defended the 
messenger and the muhajirin (immigrants) 
were in a very high position in the sight of 
Allah. This is a clear action of jihad.

Verse 72 of Surah al-Anfal states that 
when war is declared, everyone in the 
Muslim community should support jihad, 
except those whose circumstances do not 
permit it. In Surah al-Fath (48: 17) we 
read: No blame on those who are blind and 
crippled over and above those who were sick 
(if they do not go to war).

It should be noted from this verse that 
although a person is not physically capable 
of taking up jihad, he could perform other 
duties within his abilities. In this context, 
Imam al-Zuhri narrated that the great 
 scholar Sa’id ibn al-Musayyib participated 
in a war even though he was blind in one 
eye. When someone said “Don’t you have 
a reason for not participating?” He replied: 
“Allah commands us to go to jihad under 
any situation. If I cannot go to war, then at 
least I can rally others to join the troops and 
I can take good care of goods and supplies” 
(Shihab, 2007).
This was also the case with Abu Talha who was one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad. Upon reading Surah al-Fath (verse 17), he said, “I understand that my Lord asks me to pursue jihad when young and old.” He then ordered his sons to prepare his instruments of war. They said, “Look, you have performed jihad during the time of the Prophet until his death, as well as during the time of Abu Bakr and Umar, so now you do not need to go to war any longer, let us do the fighting.” However, Abu Talha insisted on performing jihad which sadly eventually led him to his death. Interestingly, his body was only found and buried after a week but it was still intact and odorless.

The word wealth is put prior to soul (self) in another understanding of jihad. This understanding emphasizes the need for giving donations and helping others in need. This was especially seen during the Battle of Tabuk where the Muslims greatly needed funds for the war. The war was nicknamed Hour al-’usrah (the time of crisis) because the enemy was large in number, the distance was far and the situation was difficult. However, there were Muslims who were reluctant to go to war. Uthman ibn ‘Affan, a holy companion of the Holy Prophet who later became Islam’s third caliph, contributed a thousand dirhams, a very large amount at that time, to the cause of war. This led the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) to pray: “O Allah (may Allah be pleased with him, Uthman,) for I am indeed happy for him.” This was narrated by Ibn Hisham in his Sirah. Another narration states that Uthman donated two hundred camels and equipment and a large sum of money.

Most importantly, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced jihad in its broadest sense with a general and encompassing meaning toward the faith of Islam. Some Qur’anic experts have debated the concept of jihad and proposed changes and developments to the context and environment of each of them. Political situations have led scholars and Muslim thinkers to be pragmatic and realistic in their assessment of jihad (al-Qadiri, 1985). The Khawarij, for example, set jihad as the sixth pillar of Iman, or faith (Rahman, 1979).

Jihad constitutes a fundamental identity of a believer in social praxis theology where the concepts of faith and jihad are inseparable (Anees & Sardar, 1992). Surah Al-Hujurat (49: 15) and hadith reflect this: “Indeed, those who believe that only those who believe (have faith) in Allah and His Messenger, then they do not hesitate and they struggle (jihad) with their wealth and their lives in Allah’s way, those people are the right ones.”

Another writer who discussed jihad was al-Qadiri (1985). He agreed with the notion of jihad presented by Ibn Taimiyyah, which highlighted the ability to achieve what is loved by Allah and to reject what is hated by Him. To him, jihad is working very hard in order to achieve what is loved by God, faith and good deeds, and reject what God hates, disbelief, wickedness and disobedience (al-Qadiri, 1985). Although he included war as a jihad, he also included spending money and making efforts to support the religion of
Allah and the struggle against lust and the devil as *jihad* (Ad-Daqs, 1972).

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is clear that the concept of *jihad* in Islam is very wide, and has many meanings and interpretations. There appears to be two extreme views of *jihad*; the belief that *jihad* is a war to physically confront the enemies of Islam and the belief that *jihad* is a war against lust or sins. The understanding of the term therefore does not refer to war only. God commands Muslims to defend themselves, their religion and homeland and to this end Muslims can exercise *jihad* physically or mentally. The purpose of *jihad* in Islam is to elevate the word of God and to eliminate injustices committed by those who are hostile to Islam. Eradicating ignorance, poverty and diseases are *jihad* which are no less important than the taking up of arms. A scientist strives to take advantage of his knowledge, employees work hard, teachers teach with the best of their abilities, leaders lead justly, entrepreneurs trade honesty, and so on. All these efforts can be viewed as *jihad*.

**REFERENCES**


