

## The true meaning of jihad

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Article

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If someone still insists on framing jihad in the language of war, then it is the war with oneself — as a greater spiritual struggle in pure faith for the good of all humankind.

THE international community might not have realised that for three weeks now a jihad has been waged involving the largest number of Muslims worldwide.

And if this unique phenomenon has gone unnoticed, it is because there was not a single drop of blood spilled during this period, discounting those instigated by the "war of terrorism" linked to the so-called "jihadists".

The question then is, despite the involvement of billions of jihadists — to borrow the violent-laden insinuation — how is it that the month-long jihad has remained quiet and peaceful?

The answer is simply because thus far, the version of jihad made popular has been vulgarised.

So much so most would find it difficult to imagine a jihad without any form of bloody violence, more so when virtually all Muslims are active participants in the process.

Basically, jihad has nothing to do with any form of violence.

Jihad literally means to strive and it has everything to do with "the struggle" within oneself as a sign of obedience in seeking the pleasure of God alone.

The Prophet of Islam when asked what reward there would be for a person who desires fame and compensation for having performed jihad, said: "There is no reward for him."

When asked the same question three times over, the Prophet gave the same reply each time.

Then he said: "God accepts those deeds which were performed purely for His sake and which were meant to seek His pleasure" (as narrated by Abu Dawud and an-Nasa'i).

In this context, there is no better illustration as to the true meaning of jihad than as exemplified by fasting in the holy month of Ramadan.

After all, fasting is exclusively for God when He states: "Fasting is for Me and I shall give its reward. And good is rewarded with 10 times its like" (al-Bukhari).

Furthermore, to fast for the entire month of Ramadan is a commandment from God as evident in the Quranic verse:

"O, you who believe! Prescribed for you is the Fast, as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may deserve God's protection against the temptations of your carnal soul and attain piety" (al-Baqara 2:183).

Clearly, to strive or struggle against the temptations of one's own carnal soul in order to attain piety is jihad, pure and simple.

That it is deserving of God's protection is an indication that the struggle involved is not only marked with numerous challenges, but also an act of the highest order.

The Prophet referred to this as the "greater" jihad; the lesser being a "defensive" struggle when one is transgressed, as emphasised in al-Baqara 2:294: "Whoever transgresses against you, respond in kind."

Understood from the earlier verse is that "greater" jihad is not new since it has been "prescribed before".

After all, temptations of the flesh, much as the capacity to attain piety, have always been part of being human.

The struggle thus is necessarily directed towards the latter, while diminishing the former, under the protection of God. And the act of fasting is no doubt one such avenue for jihad par excellence.

This goes beyond mere temporal abstinence such as eating, drinking, useless utterances and deeds, or having sexual intimacy, be it in public or privately.

It also encompasses the more strenuous spiritual abstinence against one's ego, greed, selfishness and even the slightest negative intentions towards others, what is more if it leads to harm and injuries, spiritually or otherwise.

In another verse of the Quran, this is made clear.

"Ramadan is the month in which the Quran (began to be) revealed, providing guidance for human beings, with clear verses to guide and to distinguish right from wrong; therefore whoever witnesses that month shall fast it, and whoever is sick or on a journey, the same number of days which one did not observe fast must be made up from other days.

"God desires ease and does not desire difficulty for you, that you may complete the total number of fasting days: Glorify Him in that He has guided you and that you may give thanks" (al-Baqara 2: 185).

From this verse, the gravity of fasting as an act of struggle is beyond doubt. While there are exceptions, these are temporary measures of promoting ease where hardship prevails.

Still it must be undertaken at a later time — true to the notion of a struggle that distinguishes right from wrong. In so doing, one gives thanks to God the Almighty, as one's religious fervour strengthens as a result.

Understood this way, the undue emphasis on jihad as a violent act of war per se, is most unjust.

It only serves to amply demonstrate that the oft-misunderstood notion of jihad is a display of ignorance, coloured by the excess baggage of the crusading years.

That jihad seeks to threaten nothing, let alone anyone, has been entirely missed.

Surely, it is time to reinstate the deeper universal value and appeal of jihad as a struggle against all forms of injustice, transgression and oppression beginning with the self.

That includes to put right the perpetual global misconception of what jihad is, culminating perhaps with the Pope himself recently referring to a 14th century quotation to imply jihad is all evil and inhumane.

Such a terribly wrong perception must be buried once and for all through no less than a jihad on all parties, albeit an intellectual one.

If someone still insists on framing jihad in the language of war, then it is the war with oneself — as a greater spiritual struggle in pure faith for the good of all humankind.

Still, that it is a non-violent process of weaning oneself towards Truth as innately experienced by all human beings can no longer be totally ignored.

Indeed, in essence, it is not just an Islamic experience, but extends into the entire human community as a peaceful act of true struggle, a purifying way of achieving oneness with God, the self and the fellow humankind — especially for the needy, destitute and distressed.

This at once dispels the vulgarised notion of what jihad has falsely been made out to be all this while.

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