

Jihad

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition

The term **Jihad**, an Arabic word rooted in the triliteral verb *jahada*, fundamentally translates to "struggling" or "striving." This etymological foundation underscores its broad and multifaceted nature within Islamic theology and practice, moving beyond a simplistic, singular interpretation. At its most basic linguistic level, it encapsulates any earnest endeavor or exertion of effort towards a particular goal, reflecting a commitment to overcoming obstacles through diligent application. This inherent flexibility in meaning allows for a wide spectrum of applications, from personal introspection and ethical development to communal action and, in certain historical and contemporary contexts, military engagement.

More broadly, **Jihad** functions as a foundational Islamic concept encompassing a diverse array of struggles that adherents are called upon to undertake. These struggles are not limited to external conflicts but profoundly extend into the inner life of the believer and the collective welfare of society. This expansive understanding is crucial for appreciating the depth and complexity of the term, as it touches upon spiritual, moral, social, and even physical dimensions of human existence. The concept encourages Muslims to constantly strive for improvement, both individually and communally, against forces perceived as detrimental to faith, righteousness, or justice.

Historically and textually, the application of **Jihad** has seen varied interpretations, a fluidity that is evident in the Qur'an itself. The sacred text utilizes the word in numerous contexts, sometimes implying a peaceful, non-militaristic struggle, and at other times carrying more direct connotations of armed conflict. This textual versatility has historically led to a rich interpretative tradition within Islamic jurisprudence and theology, where scholars have deliberated on the appropriate contexts and methods for engaging in various forms of **Jihad**. Understanding this textual nuance is essential to deconstruct the concept's evolution and the diverse ways it has been understood and enacted across different eras and communities.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The etymological roots of **Jihad** in Arabic signify an act of "exerting oneself" or "to strive," originating from the root *j-h-d*, which conveys notions of effort, toil, and struggle. This linguistic basis highlights that the core meaning is one of intense personal or collective endeavor, rather than an inherently violent or martial undertaking. Throughout early Islamic history, the term's application was largely shaped by the socio-political realities of the nascent Muslim community, where the Prophet Muhammad's teachings emphasized both internal moral purification and the

defense and expansion of the nascent Islamic state. The term thus emerged as a comprehensive guide for believers navigating both their spiritual lives and their communal responsibilities.

The historical development of **Jihad** reveals a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation, adapting to changing circumstances while remaining grounded in foundational Islamic texts. Early Islamic scholars and jurists meticulously categorized and defined different types of **Jihad**, distinguishing between the spiritual, moral, social, and military dimensions. This intellectual endeavor sought to provide a framework for ethical conduct and strategic action, ensuring that any form of struggle undertaken by Muslims adhered to Islamic principles of justice, proportionality, and necessity. The extensive body of Islamic jurisprudence on **Jihad** reflects a concerted effort to regulate and contextualize its practice, preventing its indiscriminate or unethical application.

The Qur'an, as the primary source of Islamic law and ethics, employs the word **Jihad** in approximately 40 verses, presenting it with varying degrees of emphasis and implication. In some instances, it clearly denotes a spiritual or moral struggle, such as striving for good deeds or resisting personal temptation. In others, it is used in the context of defending the Muslim community or spreading the message of Islam. This textual diversity underscores that the concept was never intended to be monolithic but rather a dynamic principle guiding believers in their holistic engagement with the world. The historical evolution of Islamic empires and communities further influenced how these textual references were interpreted and applied, with periods of expansion often emphasizing its military aspects, while periods of introspection highlighted its spiritual dimensions.

3. Key Characteristics

One of the most profound and universally recognized characteristics of **Jihad** is the "struggle within oneself against sin." This aspect, often referred to as Greater Jihad (*al-Jihad al-Akbar*), emphasizes the internal, spiritual battle that every Muslim must wage against their own lower desires, temptations, and negative character traits. It is a continuous effort towards moral purification, self-improvement, and adherence to God's commandments. This internal striving involves cultivating virtues such as patience, honesty, humility, and compassion, while actively resisting vices like arrogance, greed, and envy. It is considered the most significant form of **Jihad** because it targets the root causes of wrongdoing within the individual, laying the groundwork for righteous external actions.

Another significant characteristic of **Jihad** involves "attempts to convert others to Islam," commonly known as Da'wah. This form of striving centers on the peaceful dissemination of the Islamic message through preaching, teaching, and exemplary conduct. It involves inviting people to the understanding and acceptance of Islam, not through coercion or force, but through reasoned

argumentation, compassionate dialogue, and the compelling example of a virtuous life. The Qur'an explicitly states that "there is no compulsion in religion" (Qur'an 2:256), thereby establishing the ethical boundaries for proselytization within Islam. This aspect of **Jihad** is a call to intellectual and spiritual engagement, fostering understanding and inviting spiritual reflection among those who are not Muslim.

Furthermore, **Jihad** encompasses the "general improvement in society," reflecting a commitment to social justice, ethical governance, and the well-being of the broader community. This characteristic mandates active participation in establishing and maintaining a just and equitable social order, which includes advocating for the poor, fighting oppression, promoting education, and ensuring humanitarian aid. It extends to all efforts aimed at fostering a society that embodies Islamic values of compassion, fairness, and human dignity. This form of **Jihad** is a continuous and collective endeavor to create a flourishing society where rights are upheld, and responsibilities are fulfilled, working towards an environment conducive to spiritual growth and material prosperity for all.

Finally, **Jihad** can also refer to "behaviors against non-believers of Islam," which, in specific contexts, has been interpreted as defensive or, historically, offensive warfare. This aspect, often termed Lesser Jihad (*al-Jihad al-Asghar*), is the most controversial and frequently misunderstood. Islamic jurisprudence carefully delineates the conditions under which military action is permissible, primarily for self-defense, to protect the oppressed, or to remove tyranny that prevents the free practice of religion. It is subject to strict ethical guidelines, including prohibitions against targeting civilians, destroying infrastructure, or violating treaties. The Qur'an and prophetic tradition emphasize that warfare must be a last resort, conducted with justice, and aimed at establishing peace, not merely conquest or aggression.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of **Jihad** within Islamic thought and practice is profound, serving as a dynamic principle that shapes individual spiritual journeys and collective communal endeavors. It instills in believers a sense of purpose and responsibility, encouraging continuous effort in the pursuit of righteousness and the betterment of the world. By encompassing both the inward struggle against personal shortcomings and the outward striving for justice and peace, **Jihad** defines a holistic path for adherence to Islamic tenets. It serves as a moral imperative, inspiring Muslims to actively contribute to the welfare of their families, communities, and humanity at large, ensuring that their faith is translated into tangible actions that benefit society.

Historically, the impact of **Jihad** has been monumental, influencing the expansion of Islamic civilization, the defense of Muslim lands, and the development of Islamic law. From the early conquests that established the Islamic empire to later defensive wars against external aggressors,

military forms of **Jihad** played a role in shaping geopolitical landscapes. Concurrently, the spiritual and social dimensions of **Jihad** fostered intellectual flourishing, ethical reforms, and societal advancements in various Muslim societies. It catalyzed the establishment of educational institutions, charitable organizations, and systems of justice that left an indelible mark on global history, showcasing its role as a force for both military and socio-cultural transformation.

In contemporary discourse, however, the concept of **Jihad** has been severely distorted and politicized. As the source content highlights, "typically in modern parlance it is used to refer to making war on all 'enemies of Islam' and is used by terrorist groups to justify their violent actions." This misrepresentation, propagated by extremist organizations, selectively extracts the military aspect of **Jihad**, divorces it from its ethical and jurisprudential safeguards, and reinterprets it as a mandate for indiscriminate violence against anyone deemed an "enemy." This narrow and violent interpretation stands in stark contrast to the broader, more nuanced understanding prevalent among mainstream Muslims and classical Islamic scholarship. The global impact of this extremist appropriation has been far-reaching, fostering Islamophobia and fueling international conflicts, thereby obscuring the concept's original comprehensive and primarily spiritual meaning.

5. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of **Jihad** has been the subject of extensive debates and criticisms, both within and outside the Islamic world. A primary point of contention revolves around the interpretation of its various forms, particularly the emphasis placed on its military versus its spiritual dimensions. Mainstream Islamic scholarship consistently highlights the primacy of the Greater Jihad--the internal struggle for moral and spiritual purification--as the most significant and demanding form. However, critics often point to historical instances of military expansion justified by **Jihad** and question whether the distinction between offensive and defensive warfare has always been maintained according to ethical guidelines. These debates often scrutinize the historical application of **Jihad** and its implications for interfaith relations and international law.

A significant area of criticism arises from the modern misappropriation of **Jihad** by extremist and terrorist groups. As stated in the source, these groups "use it to justify their violent actions," selectively interpreting religious texts to sanction acts of terrorism against civilians, including Muslims who do not adhere to their specific ideology. This extremist narrative fundamentally distorts the classical Islamic understanding of **Jihad**, which prohibits the targeting of non-combatants, the destruction of property, and the initiation of aggression. Mainstream Islamic scholars vehemently condemn these interpretations, emphasizing that such acts violate core Islamic principles of justice, compassion, and the sanctity of life. The challenge lies in distinguishing between the legitimate Islamic concept and its radicalized perversions.

Furthermore, external criticisms often stem from a lack of understanding of the concept's

multifaceted nature, frequently reducing it solely to its military connotation. This reductionist view, sometimes fueled by historical narratives of conflict, overlooks the profound spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions of **Jihad**. Consequently, the term becomes synonymous with holy war, generating fear and misunderstanding, particularly in non-Muslim contexts. Bridging this gap requires extensive education and dialogue that clarifies the diverse meanings of **Jihad**, emphasizing its primary spiritual and constructive aspects, and vigorously challenging the erroneous and violent interpretations propagated by extremist ideologies.

Further Reading

[Jihad - Wikipedia](#)

[Quran - Wikipedia](#)

[Islamic concept - Wikipedia](#)

[Greater Jihad - Wikipedia](#)

[Lesser Jihad - Wikipedia](#)

[Da'wah - Wikipedia](#)

[Terrorism - Wikipedia](#)