

# 'Jihad': idea and history

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- [What is \*jihad\*?](#)
- [Was Islam spread by force?](#)
- [Muslims, morality, and religious warfare](#)
- [Jihad, then and now](#)

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## What is *jihad*?

*Jihad* is a subject that non-Muslims find difficult to understand. In fact, there is nothing particularly outlandish about it. All one has to remember is that holy war is not the opposite of pacifism, but rather of secular war - fighting in pursuit of aims lying outside religion. Whether people are militant or not in its pursuit is another matter.

With that general observation, let me pose the four questions to be addressed in this essay. They are:

- Exactly what is jihad, apart from holy war in a broad sense?
- Is it true that Islam was spread by force?
- Did the pre-modern Muslims ever feel that there was anything wrong about religious warfare?
- What is the relevance of all this to the world today? (I must stress that when I get to this fourth topic, I am no longer speaking as a specialist).

Also by Patricia Crone in openDemocracy:

[“What do we actually know about Mohammed?”](#)

(31 August 2006)

So first, just what is jihad?

Well, actually there are two kinds, depending on whether the Muslims are politically strong or weak. I shall start with the type associated with political strength, because that's the normal type in Islamic history. I shall get to the second in connection with the question of modern relevance.

The normal type of *jihad* is missionary warfare. That's how you'll find it described in the classical law-books, from about 800 to about 1800. What the Quran has to say on the subject is a different question: the rules it presupposes seem to be a good deal more pacifist than those developed by the jurists and exegetes. But it is the work of the latter which came to form the *sharia* - the huge mass of precepts on which the public and private lives of Muslims were based (at least in theory), down to the coming of modernity, which still regulates their devotional lives today, and on which Islamists (or "fundamentalists")

would like once more to base the entire arena of public life.

The scholars said that *jihad* consisted in backing the call to Islam with violence, where necessary. It was "the forcible mission assisted by the unsheathed sword against wrongheaded people who arrogantly refuse to accept the plain truth after it has become clear": thus a scholar who died in 1085. The idea was that God was the only ruler of the universe. Humans who refused to acknowledge this were in the nature of rebels, who had to be brought to heel. At the very least, they had to submit to God politically, by being brought under Muslim government. But ideally, they would submit to him in religious terms as well, by converting.

Holy warriors worked by making regular incursions into the lands of the infidels order to call them to Islam. Normally, they would do so as part of an official expedition launched by the state, but they might also operate on their own. In any case, if the infidels didn't want to convert, they could just surrender politically (at least if they were Christians and Jews). In that case they were placed under Muslim government, but kept their own religion in return for the payment of poll-tax. But if they refused both religious and political surrender, they should be fought until they were defeated. The terms were in that case set by the conquerors, who might kill the men and enslave the women and children (or so at least if they were pagans); or they might treat them as if they had surrendered voluntarily.

Once an infidel community had been subdued politically, one moved on to the next lot of infidels and did the same to them. This had to go on until the whole earth was God's or the world came to an end, whichever would be the sooner.

Missionary warfare was a duty imposed by God on the Muslim community, not on individuals, and it was discharged primarily by the ruler, who'd typically mount one expedition into infidel territory a year, if he had infidel neighbours. But it was highly meritorious for private individuals to go and fight as well, and there were always volunteers on the borders. If you couldn't go yourself, you could earn merit by donating money or giving gifts to the cause, like people in 19th-century Europe would make donations in support of the missionaries working in distant countries.

The way that ordinary Muslims thought of *jihad* in the past can be compared to Christians' attitude towards those of their co-religionists who chose to become missionaries. Nowadays the latter are often regarded as interfering busybodies, but formerly they were admired for their willingness to devote their lives to the salvation of benighted natives. That's the attitude that prevailed in *jihad*: it was an extremely noble enterprise. After all, people risked their own lives for it. It was the height of altruism.

The Christian missionaries did not themselves fight; they merely followed in the wake of soldiers. But a holy warrior was a missionary and a soldier all in one. He was engaged in something that modern observers would call religious imperialism.

That's an institution with very long roots in the middle east. Ancient near-eastern historians call it warfare at the command of a god, and the star example is the Assyrians. Their god Ashshur endlessly told them to go and conquer. The god of the Israelites was of the same type. "I have given into your hands Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his land. Begin to possess it and fight him in battle", he says to Moses in *Deuteronomy*, where Moses reports that "We took all his cities and utterly destroyed the men, the women and the little ones".

In the same vein a Moabite king says in an inscription that "Kamosh (the deity) spoke to me and said, Go and take Nebo from Israel. So I went and fought it...and took it and killed everybody, 7,000 men, boys, women, girls and slave girls". The Muslim God also told his people to conquer, but with one big difference in classical thought, namely that he wanted the victims to convert.

The Assyrians, the Israelites and the Moabites didn't pretend to be doing anything for the good of the victims. They fought for the greater glory of their own god, and their own community, not to save anyone else. The same seems to have been true of the early Arab conquerors. But in classical Islam, the divine command to go and fight is no longer addressed to an ethnic group, only to believers, whoever they may be; and it is now linked to a religious *mission civilisatrice*: the believers conquer in order to save souls, not (or not just) to glorify their own community.

It is this fusion of religious and political imperialism that makes classical *jihad* distinctive, for the two don't usually go together. The great universalist religions were apolitical and spread by peaceful proselytisation: thus Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism, and also Bahai'ism. And universalist conquerors are not usually out to save people's souls: think of Alexander the Great, the Romans, or the Mongols. But in Islam, religious mission and world conquest have married up.

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[Back to top](#)

### **Was Islam spread by force?**

The second question posed at the start of this essay was: is it true that Islam was spread by force?

The answer is, in one sense, yes, but even this needs careful qualification. Warfare did play a major role both in the rise of Islam and its later diffusion. But some places were Islamised without any war at all, notably Malaysia and Indonesia. Above all, even where Islam was spread by *jihad*, it was not usually done the way people imagine. People usually think of holy warriors as engaging in something like Charlemagne's forced conversion of the Saxons, war for the extirpation of wrong beliefs throughout an entire community. But that model is very rare in Islamic history. The effect of war was usually more indirect.

The scholars said that all infidels had to be brought under Muslim sovereignty, but that Jews and Christians acknowledged the true God and had a revelation from him, so they could be allowed to exist under Muslim protection in return for paying poll-tax. All *other* infidels were pagans, so how were they to be treated? There is general agreement that the Arabs of Mohammed's Arabia got the choice between Islam and the sword, and that they did so because they had no religion, as one early scholar put it. (Paganism didn't count as one.) That's the best example there is on the Muslim side of the Charlemagne model, if I may call it that, and it is a juristic schematisation of history rather than historical reporting.

Some jurists insisted that this was how all pagans should be treated: people who did not acknowledge the sole sovereignty of God had no right to exist. Others said that for one reason or another, the Arabs were exceptional: all *other* pagans could be granted protection in return for paying poll-tax in the same way as the Jews and the Christians. This disagreement was enshrined in Muslim law, and modern Islamists typically go for the first view, equating pagans with modern secularists and atheists (among them is an associate of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, lionised in Europe by some of the very secularists whom his associate would force to convert). In pre-modern practice, tolerance usually prevailed as far as conquered communities were concerned. The only infidels who could not be allowed to exist in either theory or practice were apostates - who have become a highly sensitive issue today.

But if people were allowed to keep their religion under Muslim rule, how could the jurists define *jihad* as missionary warfare? How was it different from other forms of imperialism, such as the Crusades (which were fought for the recovery of the holy land, not the conversion of the Muslims) or secular expansionism?

The answer is that in effect *jihad* just *was* ordinary imperialism, but it was undertaken, or at least justified,

on the grounds that it would result in conversion, if not straightaway, then sooner or later - and it usually did so too, in a number of ways. For a start, the Muslims routinely took a lot of captives. Male captives were often given the choice between Islam and death, or they might recite the Muslim profession of faith of their own accord to avoid execution. More importantly, captives were usually sold off as slaves, and slaves almost always ended up by converting because most slavery was domestic.

And above all, back in the conquered area, Muslim rulers would move in along with judges and religious scholars to build mosques, apply Islamic law, place restrictions on the building of non-Muslim houses of worship and introduce other discriminatory measures so that the original inhabitants were reduced to tributaries in their own land. They were not necessarily persecuted. The Muslim record of tolerance is generally good. (Obviously, there are plenty of examples of persecution of one kind or another; that religious minorities generally speaking did better under Muslim than under Christian rule under pre-modern conditions nonetheless remains true, however hackneyed the claim has become.) But the non-Muslims would soon have a sense that history was passing them by, that all the action was elsewhere, and this would translate into a feeling that their own beliefs were outmoded. So they would convert too, and that's the method that really mattered.

In sum, *jihad* typically spread Islam in much the same way that 19th-century European imperialism spread western culture (and/or Christianity): nobody was directly forced to accept western modernity, or Christianity, but by moving in as the politically dominant elite, the imperialists gave their own beliefs and institutions a persuasiveness that made them difficult to resist. Medieval Muslim scholars were well aware of this effect, and unlike their modern successors, they never tried to deny the role of war in the expansion of Islam.

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[Back to top](#)

### **Muslims, morality, and religious warfare**

That brings me to the third question: did the pre-modern Muslims ever worry about the moral status of religious warfare?

The answer is mostly no, but sometimes yes. The scholars insisted that the warriors had to fight with the right intentions, for God, not for booty. They also debated whether it was right to conduct holy war under a wrongful ruler (the *Sunni* answer was yes). But if everything was in order on the side of the warriors, the jurists were satisfied that the enterprise was in the best interests of the victims. The conquered peoples were being dragged to Paradise in chains, as a famous saying went. Far from feeling ashamed about their use of war, Muslims often stressed that holy war was something that only they would engage in, meaning that they were willing to do much more for their religion than other people. They were willing to sacrifice their own lives so that others might live, as they put it. To them, it proved that only Islam was a truly universalist religion.

But the conquered peoples, above all the Christians, always held the Muslim use of war to be wrong, and this did eventually affect the Muslims. As early as 634 CE, a Greek tract declared that the so-called prophet must be an impostor because prophets don't come armed with the sword. Fifty years later a Christian patriarch supposedly told the caliph that Islam was a religion spread by the sword, meaning that therefore it could not be true. The Christians were to harp on this theme for ever after. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the Muslims began to mention this claim, clearly because they were upset by it.

For example, al-Amiri, an Iranian philosopher who died in 996, takes issue with unidentified people who

say that "if Islam were a religion of truth, it would be a religion of mercy, and the one who calls to it would *not* in that case attack people with the sword to take their property and capture and enslave their families; rather, he would proselytise with words and guide to it by the force of his explanations". In other words, true religion is spread by peaceful mission; holy war is just a religious cover for rapaciousness, whatever people might say about the purity of their intentions.

It isn't always clear in these texts whether the charges were made by Muslims or non-Muslims, but there were certainly Muslims now who felt the association of warfare and religion to be wrong. A 10th-century religious leader by the name of Ibn Karram, for example, was said by his followers to have been worthier of prophethood than Mohammed, because he lived an ascetic life and did not conduct war. And some Muslims (or ex-Muslims) rejected *all* established religions, not just Islam, on the grounds that *all* prophets, not just Mohammed, were tricksters who used religion to start wars and accumulate worldly power. So now the concept of holy war had to be defended.

One of the most interesting defences is by this philosopher al-Amiri. He responded by identifying *jihad* as defensive warfare. That's what many modern apologetes do, too, sometimes writing off offensive *jihad* - missionary warfare - as an Orientalist invention. (Orientalism often gets used as a grand trash-can in which modern Muslims dump all the aspects of pre-modern Islam that they have come to dislike.) Modern Muslims will even go so far as to cast the prophet's wars and the Arab conquests as defensive, or pre-emptive, but this was more than al-Amiri could bring himself to do.

When it came to the prophet, he fell back on the altruism argument: Mohammed was *not* in it for material wealth or power. This is clear from the fact that he suffered for ten years in Mecca before setting up a state in Medina; he conquered people for their own good, not for his own sake, and the Iranians ought to be grateful to the Arabs for having destroyed the Persian empire; not only did the Arabs bring the truth, they also freed them from the oppressive tyranny and rigid social hierarchy that prevailed in that empire. The Muslims came as liberators on all fronts. Of course, al-Amiri says, Mohammed would have preferred not to use the sword at all, but since the infidels so stubbornly resisted him, he had no choice.

Al-Amiri's tone here is rather like that of the 19th-century British imperialists who felt resentment against all those uncooperative peoples whose recalcitrance had forced Britain to take them over more or less against its will, as they felt it. They didn't like war either, but what could one do when the natives refused to see the light. One had to fight them for their own sake, and the noble purpose *elevated* the war to a high moral status. That was al-Amiri's response in a nutshell. But what his opponents argued was precisely that on the contrary, the use of war *discredited* the alleged purpose and proved the religion it was meant to spread to be false. So the more the Muslims defended *jihad* by yoking it to the service of religion, the more their non-Muslim opponents reacted by thinking that the religion must be bad. That's how Christians and Muslims have been talking past each other for 1,400 years.

Meanwhile, other people defended *jihad* by observing that religion had two different functions: it organised collective life, and it also offered individual salvation. At the collective level it was a prescription for socio-political order, with its do's and don'ts, its morality, its law and its war. At this level, coercion was indispensable, and holy war was just one form in which it was practiced. At the individual level it was pure spirituality, and at that level coercion was impossible. The only *jihad* you could fight here was the so-called greater *jihad* against your own evil inclinations.

So for example, the scholars will say that a man who has been converted by force becomes a full member of the Muslim community and must live as a Muslim in public, even though he is not a believer in his inner self. He had been coerced at the level of social and political affiliation, but one couldn't force him to believe. In fact, they said, one could never know what was going on in people's inner selves, and it wasn't anyone's business either: it was between the individuals and God alone. But what people did *externally* affected others and so had to be regulated. Having been forced into the Muslim community, the captive

would have to live as a Muslim - the rest was up to him. Eventually, they said, the chances were that he or his children would see the light, become sincere believers of their own accord, and grateful for having been forced.

In this formulation the claim was that *jihad* was better than secular conquest. Unlike Alexander the Great, Mohammed incorporated people in a polity in which they had the *option* of being saved, in which they had the *ability* to see for themselves, in which they could *choose* to become true believers. But it left inner conviction as something over which the individual had full control.

This argument ought to be easy for modern people to understand, or at least Americans, for they also tend to think that war can be legitimated by a high moral purpose - as long as that purpose hasn't got anything to do with individual faith. The moral purposes they have in mind are wholly secular, not the lower level of religion, and the salvation they talk about is in this world. But they too tend to be eager to rescue other people by enabling them to become more like themselves: richer, freer, more democratic. What do you do when your fingers are itching to intervene, when you have the power to do it, when you are sure you are right and you are convinced that the victims will be grateful - quite apart from all the advantages that may redound to yourself from intervening? Aren't you allowed to use force? Indeed, aren't you *obliged* to use it? Is it right to save people against their will? Should you force them to be free? If you say yes to these questions, you are in effect a believer in *jihad*.

But *will* the victims be grateful? In the Muslim case, the answer was normally yes. The scholars mention it time and again, as something everyone knew. People felt grateful that they had become Muslims, in whatever manner it had happened, voluntarily or by force. This made it difficult to entertain serious doubts about the legitimacy of *jihad*. In the last resort, most people liked the result. And this is one of the most striking differences between Muslim and European imperialism, which are otherwise so comparable. The one led to Islamisation, the other to westernisation; the one dragged you to Paradise in chains, the other to secular modernity. But people aren't grateful for having been westernised. In line with this, westerners no longer take any pride in their imperial past. Today, westerners often hold imperialism to have invalidated the very civilisation it spread. They have been persuaded by their own arguments against *jihad* in a way the Muslims never were. Why this difference? It would call for another lecture.

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[Back to top](#)

## **Jihad, then and now**

This leads to the fourth question: what is the relevance of all this to the modern world? The Muslims have not practised missionary *jihad* since the decline of the Ottoman empire, at least not under the sponsorship of states, and to my knowledge there are no serious calls for its return. What the tradition has left is a strong activist streak, a sense that it is right to fight for your convictions. "Look at you, you Christians, with your passivity you have turned religion into something that doesn't exist", as demonstrators against Salman Rushdie said in Paris in March 1989. But to understand the fundamentalists we need to go to the other kind of *jihad*, the one practised when the Muslims are politically weak.

What happens when Muslim territory falls under infidel sovereignty? Can Muslims stay on and live under non-Muslim rule? Some jurists said yes, others denied it on the grounds that Islamic law could only be applied in full under Muslim sovereignty. If infidels conquered Muslim land, the Muslims had to emigrate, they had to make a *hijra* to a place where they could practice Islamic law - either an existing Muslim state or a new one set up by themselves - and then they should start holy war in order to reconquer their

homeland. Not all scholars subscribed to this view, but it was upheld by many in response to the loss of Muslim territory in Spain and it also inspired anti-colonial movements in British India, French Algeria and elsewhere.

Imagine an even worse scenario: what happens when not a single Islamic state exists any more, when all political power has turned infidel? The answer is the same with greater urgency (and probably less disagreement too). You must emigrate to a place where you can establish a Muslim state and then you must wage holy war to get it going. In both cases, the model is Mohammed: first he lived in pagan Mecca, under infidel sovereignty, then he emigrated to Medina where he established a Muslim polity and started *jihad* and conquered Mecca, which he cleansed and purified; thereafter his followers began the conquest of the rest of the world, in what eventually turned into missionary warfare.

*Jihad* for the recovery or actual creation of Muslim sovereignty (as opposed to its expansion): that's the type that is practised today. Modern fundamentalists (or Islamists) call it defensive *jihad*, though it is not what the classical Muslims understood by that term. It makes sense to them, partly because they *feel* on the defensive; partly because everyone recognises the legitimacy of defensive war; and not least, because participation in defensive *jihad* is an *individual* obligation, like fasting and prayer, not a communal duty like the missionary type, which you don't have to undertake as long as others are doing it. So calling your *jihad* defensive is good for mobilisation.

Whatever you call it, the missionary element is greatly reduced in this type of warfare. Of course, you have to convert people to your own beliefs in order to get them together for state formation and conquest, but the emphasis is not so much on saving people as on saving Islam, especially in the more extreme version when no Islamic state is deemed to exist at all. For Islam can't exist without political embodiment, according to this view. There has to be a place on earth where God rules. Without it, collective (and individual?) life ceases to have any moral foundations.

In the past, *jihad* for the actual creation of Muslim sovereignty was only practised by heretics, for it was only heretics who would deny that existing states were Islamic. The very first to do so were the Kharijites, who are almost as old as Islam itself. There were also *Shi'ites* who did. But the *Sunnis* always accepted their own states as Islamic in some (sometimes minimalist) sense, at least until the 18th century, and most still do, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas. Their *jihad* is concentrated on the recovery of Muslim territory, such as Palestine, and the defence of Muslims in places such as Chechnya. They don't attack infidels elsewhere, nor don't they believe in fighting Muslim rulers, or not any more.

But other fundamentalists deem all Muslim states, or even all Muslim people apart from themselves, to be infidels. Al-Qaida is among them. They direct their efforts against America rather than fellow Muslims because America is deemed to be behind everything wrong in the Muslim world - you can't correct the shadow cast by a crooked stick, as Osama bin Laden is said to have put it. But when America, the crooked stick, has been removed, it will be the turn of the Muslim world in general, and by that they mean all countries with a Muslim population, which is in effect the whole earth by now. So as far as al-Qaida is concerned, the old distinction between the abode of Islam and the abode of war has disappeared.

The extreme fundamentalists can't see any difference between living in Egypt, for example, and living under non-Muslim rule, thanks to the all-pervasive influence of the modern state. In the old days the political domain was also worldly and corrupt, but the social domain was still shaped by Islam. Nowadays, however, it is the state that regulates marriage, divorce, inheritance, trade, finance, work, health, childcare, schooling, higher education, and so on, often with attention to what the *sharia* says, but freely reshaping it to fit modern, secular aims which originate in the infidel and politically dominant west.

So one way or the other, Muslims are ruled by the west wherever they live, not just politically but also socially and culturally. Wherever they are look, they are being invaded by so-called western values - in the

form of giant billboards advertising self-indulgence, semi-pornographic films, liquor, pop music, fat tourists in indecent clothes and funny hats, and politicians lecturing people about the virtues of democracy. Religion does not actually *shape* the social realm any more, except rhetorically. All that religion shapes in modern Muslim societies is *voluntary* associations such as Sufi orders, Muslim brotherhoods, and fundamentalist cells, which fall short of being whole societies, let alone states, and which you can set up in non-Muslim countries too. So in effect, as the fundamentalists see it, all Muslims have become diaspora Muslims.

Some Muslims are happy with this. They *want* the socio-political order to be secularised; they *want* religious affiliation to be voluntary. They are the secularists, the people we have no trouble understanding. But to the fundamentalists, or rather to the extremists among them, all Muslims are now living in a new age of ignorance (*jahiliyya*) such as that which prevailed in pagan Arabia before the rise of Islam. This is why one must get together to reenact Mohammed's career and save Islam.

Establishment religious scholars often compare such fundamentalists to the Kharijites of the early Islamic period, and with good reason. They are amazingly similar. There is the same declaration of other Muslims to be infidels, the same sense of fighting for God rather than for people - God has to rule even if the whole world is going to perish in the attempt - the same utter ruthlessness too. The Kharijites allowed assassinations, indiscriminate slaughter, the killing of men, women and children alike, much like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Their missions were often suicidal, too, not in the sense that they'd set out on individual missions bound to result in death, but rather in the sense that tiny numbers would take on huge forces bound to exterminate them, inspired by a quest for martyrdom. They had sold their souls to God, as they put it, and got a good price for them, too, namely Paradise; they went into battle intending to collect the price. And then as today, women would fight along with the men.

There is of course no direct link whatever between the Kharijites and modern fundamentalists. People like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri don't even seem to know their own tradition all that well. Rather, they have stripped Islam of practically everything that most Muslims consider to be their religion.

What's left is an archetypal monotheist of the confrontational type: a separatist and militant zealot. In the view of such zealots, God's people can't live together with infidels, they must have their own political space. Right and wrong must be embodied in separate communities, and every Muslim must fight to bring this about.

The history of Islam starts with a great separation of God's people from the rest of mankind by force of arms, and Islamic history thereafter is punctuated by regular attempts to restore the separation, to get rid of all the complexity that obscured the simplicity of the original vision. Those who engaged in such attempts tended to come from the more peripheral areas of the middle east, often from a tribal background, and they were always minorities. The fundamentalists, too, are only a small minority today. But you don't need an awful lot of people of this kind for an awful lot of trouble.

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[Back to top](#)