



BOOK REVIEW

The Varied Interpretations of “Jihad”

Author: *Maher Al-Sharif*

The Evolution of *Jihadi* Concept in Islamic Thoughts

343pp. *Al-Mada* House, Damascus, paperback – 2008 - Arabic

A new book by *Maher Al-Sharif* takes a rare look at the concept of Jihad and the changing perception of it since the second century *Hijri*. In doing so, the author examines three important issues confronting Muslims: should Islam only be spread peacefully or violently if necessary; under Islam should people be allowed to choose their own religion without recrimination; and finally, should God be the sole judge of religious conduct.



The Early Evolution of the Jihadi Doctrine

Hussein Abel Aziz begins his review of the book by observing that the author distinguishes between the subject of “religion”, which is considered constant and sacred, and “religious thoughts”, which are human and are frequently changing.¹ In the latter context, *Al-Sharif* discusses the different views of scholars – those who consider Jihad either a duty restricted only to those capable of undertaking it [*fard kifayah*] versus those who consider it the responsibility of every Muslim [*fard 'Ayn*]. Early scholars were also divided over what conditions and circumstances required Jihadi activities, e.g., propagating Islam, fighting polytheism or in response to an attack on Muslims. The earliest writings on the rules governing the conduct of Muslims during wartime date back to the eighth century AD and are based primarily on the Quran, the Sunnah and the conquests undertaken by the prophet Muhammad. The emergence of the formal Jihadi doctrine is attributed primarily to *Al-Imam Al-Shafe'i*.² It was not, however, until almost five hundred years later, that the quintessential embodiment of Jihad was established by *Ibn Taymiyyah*,³ who was a strong critic of Sufism and considered the *Shi'a* heretical. He elevated Jihad to a position within Islam that was more important than praying, fasting or performing the pilgrimage of *Haj*. In fact, *Ibn Taymiyyah* is regarded as having had the greatest influence on the evolution of Jihad among contemporary *Salafi Sunnis* in the twentieth century and on the rise of political Islam. For him philosophy is evil and religious text always takes precedent even when logic would dictate a contrary result. He is credited (or blamed) for having promoted and legitimized armed conflict against all those who do not agree with the Islamic *Shari'a*.

¹ [PI Online](#) notes that this distinction is often used by moderate writers on Islam to avoid accusations from fundamentalists of religious blasphemy.

² *Muhammad bin-Idris al-Shafe'i* [766-820 AD] was the founder of one of the sects in Islam which carries his name. He authored the first book on Islamic jurisprudence, “The book of the Message.”

³ *Ahmad Taqiy Al-Din Abu Al-Abbas* [1263-1328 AD], known as *Ibn Taymiyyah* (after his mother’s name), was a follower of the Hanbali sect and was considered by many Salafis as the most important authority on Islamic doctrine.

The Religious Reformers Views on Jihad

During the nineteenth century, a few reformers like *Al-Afghani*⁴ and *Muhammad 'Abduh* insisted that Jihad is by nature solely for defense against foreign occupation of Muslim lands. Both philosophers have fought against fanaticism and extremism and rejected many *Salafi* interpretations calling more generally for Jihad against the unbelievers. *Abduh* also advocated for a harmonious relationship between monotheistic religions and stated that Islam guarantees freedom of thought and belief. He also attributed the early wars in the history of Islam to politics and power struggles rather than religious differences. *Abduh* also insisted that the propagation of Islam must be undertaken through peaceful means and without resorting to force.

The Ideological Revolution of *Muhammad Rashid Reda*⁵

In this segment of the book, *Al-Sharif* discusses *Reda's* ideological transformation towards the end of his life. In his earlier writings on Jihad, *Reda*, like his mentor *Muhammad Abduh*, emphasized its defensive nature. He contributed further to the analysis with his observation that the term "*Jihad*" was first used by Muslim scholars as a substitute for the word "war" and its violent connotation. The term *Jihad* was used to project the more moderate concept of "resistance". *Reda* therefore rejected the idea of equating Jihad with "religious wars", which he considered a heretical interpretation borrowed from the crusades.

What *al-Sharif* brings to the reader's attention, however, is the transformation of *Reda's* ideology in reaction to the expansion of colonialist rule. *Reda* was apparently alarmed by the wave of secularist ideas that flowed from the west into the Muslim world, particularly Egypt and Turkey. It was then, *Al-Sharif* explains, that *Reda* launched his campaign against what he called "these Westernized secularists", and accused intellectuals of apostasy and heresy. At that point, *Reda* parted ways with his mentor *Abduh* by insisting that faith is a matter of submission to the interpretations of Islamic authorities rather than the product of logical reasoning.

Dynamic Political Islam

The transformation of *Reda's* ideology dissolved the distinction between the offensive and defensive nature of *Jihad* resulting in the emergence of the dynamic political Islam of *Hassan Al-Banna* and *Sayyid Qutb*. While earlier reformists had seen in Western civilization an inspiration for justice, freedom and rationality, *Al-Banna* saw nothing in the West but atheism, doubt about the existence of God and sexual liberty. According to *Al-Sharif*, *Al-Banna* saw Islam as the preeminent religion that must inspire the West, rather than the other way around. For that process to take place, he believed it necessary to eliminate all internal institutions which adopted western beliefs, particularly in the fields of education and law. To pursue that goal, *Al-Banna* returned to the belief that Jihad, in the form of physical combat,

⁴ *Gamal Aldin Al-Afghani* [1838-1897] was a traveling Muslim philosopher who left his mark on the Arab world, Iran and Turkey. He was a champion of logic, philosophy and the sciences and transformed his household into an educational institution. In 1879, he fell into disgrace with the royal court and was exiled to India. Later, after a short stay in London in 1883, he moved to Paris and became known for the newspaper he published there, *Al-'urwah al-wuthqa* [The strongest (unbreakable) link]. After a stay in Iran, he returned to London where he became one of the strongest opponents of the Shah.

⁵ *Muhammad Rashid Reda* [1865-1935] was born in Lebanon and became a student of *Muhammad 'Abduh* when he immigrated to Egypt in 1898. He started the newspaper *Al-Manar* [The lighthouse] in 1899, which he continued to publish until his death in 1935.

is an integral part of every Muslim's duty. According to the author, however, *Al-Banna* was inconsistent in how he applied this belief, at times restricting it to fighting only those who attack Muslims, while at other times, considering it a legitimate action against all those who refuse to convert to Islam. *Al-Sharif* also expands his analysis to analyze the non-Arab movement of *Abu Al-A'la Al-Mawdudi* in Pakistan who advocated a constant, violent transformation of society. *Al-Mawdudi* considers Islam a revolutionary movement that must first destroy the world order to replace it with a new one. For him, there is no distinction between offensive and defensive Jihad as they are both necessary to erect a new Islamic world.

The New Reformers

The review of *Majid Kiyali*, writing in *Dar-AlHayat*, deals in more detail with the final chapter of *Al-Sharif's* book in which the author discusses how, in response to the violent actions by some Islamic movements in the name of Jihad, some contemporary Muslim scholars have advocated the "no-violence" principle. For example, the book covers the Shiite Imam *Muhammad Mahdi Shams Al-Din* who believed that violence in the name of religion can only harm Islam and that no one should be forced into a religion. It also mentions the Syrian thinker *Jawdat Sa'id* who believes that violence is inconsistent with "al-da'wah" (the call to join Islam). For another of the scholars, *Khalil AbdelKarim*, all these radical movements are simply political in nature and have no relation to the divine. Their intentions are worldly as they try to improve their position in society. The book also discusses the philosopher *Muhammad Shahrur* who believes that religion should not divide the world between believers and unbelievers or advocate hatred and annihilation of the latter. *Shahrur* also considers religious militias and their suicidal missions a calamity on Islam. His most serious disagreement with the *Salafis* came when he declared that all religious interpretations are subject to revision.

Interestingly, *Al-Sharif's* concludes in his book that neither the Quran nor the Sunnah touch upon the Jihadi ideology and he advocates a review of the religious dogma. *Al-Sharif* also sees several factors engulfing the Muslim world, such as the lack of freedom of expression and research, political and economic crises, the problems encountered in the peace process and American and Israeli politics, as elements leading to isolation and hatred. The author makes the important point that the *takfir* ideology, which condemns unbelievers, did not exist in early Islam and only came about with *Ibn Taymiyyah*. He explains the erroneous religious justification for internal violence among Muslims, which led the reviewer *Majid Kiyali* to note that there were more Muslim Palestinians killed (around 500) during the Hamas takeover of Gaza in 2007 than by Israel in the same year.

Source: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/766501BA-20B3-4F54-A5B4-FB7FF063517D.htm> -

Reviewer: *Hussein AbelAziz* - Al-Jazeera - 3/13/2008 and

<http://www.alhayat.com/classics/01-2008/Item-20080111-6a0d83fa-c0a8-10ed-01ae-81ab520ba2d0/story.html> -

Reviewer: *Majid Kiyali* - DarAlhayat - 1/12/2008

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