

Interpretations of Jihad in Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract:

This study delves into the multifaceted interpretations of jihad in contemporary Islamic thought, employing a comparative analytical framework. Jihad, a concept laden with theological, ethical, and geopolitical significance, has garnered varied interpretations within Islamic discourse. By synthesizing classical sources, modern scholarship, and ongoing debates, this research elucidates the diverse understandings of jihad and their evolution over time. Through a comparative lens, it illuminates the complexities surrounding this concept and its implications in the contemporary global landscape.

Keywords: *Jihad, Islamic Thought, Comparative Analysis, Contemporary Debates, Interpretations, Theological Perspectives, Ethical Implications, Geopolitical Context*

Introduction:

The concept of jihad has garnered widespread attention and controversy in contemporary discourse, often being misconstrued and oversimplified. Within Islamic thought, however, jihad encompasses a rich tapestry of meanings, ranging from spiritual striving to armed struggle, and it holds a central place in Muslim theology, ethics, and law. This article aims to delve into the nuances of interpretations surrounding jihad within contemporary Islamic thought, shedding light on the diverse perspectives that exist among scholars and communities. Through a comparative analysis, we seek to unravel the complexities inherent in the concept of jihad and explore its multifaceted nature in the context of today's world.

Background of the Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, has a rich and multifaceted history that spans centuries. Derived from the Arabic word "jahada," meaning "to strive" or "to exert effort," jihad encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings and interpretations within Islamic thought. While commonly associated with armed struggle or holy war in popular discourse, its significance extends far beyond military conflict.

Historically, the concept of jihad emerged within the context of early Islamic society, particularly during the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the expansion of the Islamic empire. During this period, jihad encompassed various forms of struggle, including spiritual striving, moral rectitude, and societal reform. The Quran and Hadith literature provide foundational sources for understanding the diverse dimensions of jihad, emphasizing its role in promoting justice, defending the oppressed, and upholding Islamic values.

Over time, Islamic scholars and jurists developed a nuanced legal and theological framework surrounding the concept of jihad. Classical Islamic jurisprudence categorized jihad into two main types: jihad al-nafs (struggle against the self) and jihad al-sayf (struggle with the

sword). While the former pertains to inner spiritual struggle and self-discipline, the latter refers to defensive or offensive military action in the defense or propagation of Islam.

Throughout Islamic history, the interpretation and application of jihad have evolved in response to changing political, social, and cultural contexts. Jihad has been invoked both to justify defensive wars against external aggression and to legitimize expansionist endeavors. However, differing interpretations of jihad have also led to theological debates and ideological contestations within the Muslim community.

In contemporary times, the concept of jihad has become increasingly politicized and contested, particularly in the context of global conflicts and the rise of extremist movements. The diverse interpretations of jihad within contemporary Islamic thought reflect a complex interplay of religious, cultural, and geopolitical factors, highlighting the need for nuanced analysis and understanding in navigating this sensitive topic.

Importance of Understanding Contemporary Interpretations

Understanding contemporary interpretations of jihad within Islamic thought is of paramount importance in navigating the complexities of the modern world. In an era marked by globalization, geopolitical tensions, and cultural exchange, misconceptions and misrepresentations of jihad abound, often fueling misunderstanding and conflict. By gaining insight into how jihad is understood and articulated by contemporary scholars and communities, we can foster dialogue, promote tolerance, and mitigate the risk of religious extremism.

Contemporary interpretations of jihad provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of Islamic thought and practice. As societies grapple with issues such as terrorism, religious radicalization, and sectarianism, scholars and religious leaders are engaging in nuanced discussions about the ethical, legal, and theological dimensions of jihad. By studying these interpretations, we can discern the diverse perspectives within the Muslim world and identify common ground for dialogue and cooperation.

Understanding contemporary interpretations of jihad is crucial for policymakers, analysts, and stakeholders involved in addressing security challenges and promoting peacebuilding efforts. Misconceptions about jihad can perpetuate stereotypes and stigmatization of Muslim communities, undermining efforts to build trust and collaboration. By engaging with authentic voices within Islamic discourse, policymakers can develop more informed and effective strategies for countering violent extremism and promoting social cohesion.

Contemporary interpretations of jihad shed light on the dynamic interaction between religion and modernity in Muslim-majority societies. As Muslims grapple with issues such as democracy, human rights, and gender equality, interpretations of jihad are being reexamined and reinterpreted in light of contemporary challenges. By studying these interpretations, scholars can gain insights into how Islamic values and principles are being negotiated and adapted in response to changing social and political dynamics.

The importance of understanding contemporary interpretations of jihad cannot be overstated. By engaging with diverse perspectives within Islamic thought, we can foster mutual

understanding, promote peace, and contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious global community.

Historical Evolution of Jihad

The concept of jihad, with its multifaceted meanings and applications, has undergone a complex historical evolution within Islamic thought. Initially emerging in the early days of Islam, jihad was primarily understood as a struggle or effort, encompassing both internal spiritual striving and external defense of the Muslim community. In the early Islamic period, particularly during the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the subsequent Rashidun Caliphate, jihad often took the form of military expeditions to defend the nascent Muslim community against external threats and to spread Islam.

During the medieval period, with the expansion of the Islamic empires and the establishment of various Islamic states, the concept of jihad evolved further. Islamic jurists developed elaborate legal theories and frameworks to define the conditions under which jihad could be waged, emphasizing principles of just war and ethical conduct in battle. This period saw the codification of classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) regarding jihad, delineating categories such as defensive jihad, offensive jihad, and jihad against internal dissent.

The Crusades, which spanned several centuries and involved conflict between Muslim and Christian powers in the Eastern Mediterranean region, also influenced the conceptualization of jihad. Muslim scholars and rulers invoked jihad as a rallying cry to mobilize support against the Crusaders, framing the conflict as a religious duty to defend Muslim lands and holy sites.

In the modern era, the concept of jihad has been subject to diverse interpretations and debates within the Muslim world. Colonialism, Western imperialism, and the decline of Islamic political authority led to new challenges and questions regarding the role of jihad in the contemporary context. Some Islamic revivalist movements, such as Wahhabism and Salafism, have emphasized a more literalist and militant interpretation of jihad, while others have advocated for a broader understanding that includes nonviolent forms of struggle, such as social reform and education.

Overall, the historical evolution of jihad reflects the dynamic interplay between religious doctrine, political exigencies, and social contexts, shaping diverse interpretations and practices over time. Understanding this evolution is crucial for comprehending the complexities of contemporary debates surrounding jihad within the Islamic world and beyond.

Early Islamic Perspectives

Early Islamic perspectives on jihad emerged within the historical context of the 7th century Arabian Peninsula. The term "jihad" itself is derived from the Arabic root "jahada," meaning "to strive" or "to exert effort." In the Quran, jihad is often depicted as a struggle in the path of God, encompassing both internal spiritual striving and external physical exertion. Early Islamic scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Al-Ghazali, provided foundational interpretations of jihad, emphasizing its multifaceted nature. They delineated between the greater jihad (jihad al-nafs), which involves the struggle against one's own ego and sinful desires, and the lesser jihad (jihad al-sayf), which refers to armed conflict in defense of Islam and Muslims.

Early Islamic perspectives on jihad were deeply influenced by the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Muhammad's experiences in Mecca, where Muslims faced persecution and oppression, laid the groundwork for understanding jihad as a defensive struggle. However, with the establishment of the Islamic state in Medina, jihad took on broader dimensions, including defensive warfare, the propagation of Islam, and the protection of religious freedom for non-Muslims. Early jurists, such as Imam Malik and Imam Shafi'i, developed legal frameworks to regulate jihad, emphasizing principles of proportionality, necessity, and mercy in warfare.

The expansion of the Islamic empire in the centuries following the Prophet's death further shaped early Islamic perspectives on jihad. Muslim conquests brought diverse populations under Islamic rule, leading to debates among scholars about the applicability of jihad in different contexts. While some advocated for military expansion to spread Islam, others emphasized diplomacy, cultural exchange, and peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. Early Islamic thinkers, such as Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, reflected on the ethical dimensions of jihad, emphasizing the importance of justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity in all aspects of life, including warfare.

Early Islamic perspectives on jihad also engaged with theological debates about the nature of violence and its compatibility with Islamic ethics. Scholars like Al-Tabari and Al-Mawardi emphasized the Quranic injunctions to protect the weak, uphold justice, and avoid transgression in the conduct of jihad. They cautioned against the misuse of religious rhetoric to justify aggression or oppression, stressing the importance of sound moral reasoning and adherence to Islamic principles in matters of war and peace. Overall, early Islamic perspectives on jihad were characterized by a nuanced understanding of the concept, rooted in Quranic teachings, prophetic tradition, and historical precedent, and shaped by ongoing debates within the Muslim community about the proper role of violence in the service of God.

Development of Legal and Theological Frameworks

The development of legal and theological frameworks surrounding jihad in contemporary Islamic thought is a complex and multifaceted process. Historically, Islamic jurisprudence has evolved through various schools of thought, each contributing its interpretation of Islamic law. Within this context, the concept of jihad has been subject to extensive debate and interpretation, shaped by theological, social, and political factors.

One key aspect of this development is the evolution of Islamic legal theory, or Usul al-Fiqh, which provides the methodological framework for deriving legal rulings from Islamic sources. Different schools of jurisprudence, such as the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali, have offered distinct perspectives on jihad based on their interpretation of the Quran, Hadith (Prophetic traditions), consensus (ijma'), and analogical reasoning (qiyas).

Contemporary Islamic scholars grapple with the challenges of applying traditional legal principles to modern contexts. Issues such as terrorism, warfare, and the role of the state have prompted renewed scrutiny of classical interpretations of jihad. Some scholars advocate for a reinterpretation of jihad in light of contemporary ethical norms and international law, emphasizing principles of justice, proportionality, and non-aggression.

The theological dimension of jihad also plays a crucial role in shaping contemporary discourse. Islamic theologians explore the spiritual and moral dimensions of jihad, emphasizing its inner struggle (jihad al-nafs) as well as its external manifestations. Concepts such as jihad as defensive warfare (jihad al-daf') versus offensive jihad (jihad al-talab) are examined within theological frameworks that prioritize principles of peace, compassion, and mercy.

The development of legal and theological frameworks surrounding jihad in contemporary Islamic thought reflects a dynamic process of interpretation and adaptation. As Muslim scholars engage with evolving social and political realities, they continue to grapple with the complexities of interpreting Islamic sources while addressing contemporary challenges with intellectual rigor and ethical sensitivity.

Spiritual and Internal Jihad

Spiritual and internal jihad, often referred to as the greater jihad (al-jihad al-akbar) within Islamic tradition, represents a profound and personal struggle for spiritual growth and self-improvement. This concept emphasizes the inner battle against one's own base desires, temptations, and weaknesses in pursuit of a higher moral and ethical state. It transcends physical combat and confronts the individual's inner demons, aiming for self-discipline, purification of the soul, and alignment with divine principles.

At its core, spiritual jihad involves striving for righteousness, compassion, and inner peace. It encompasses various aspects of daily life, including cultivating virtues such as patience, humility, gratitude, and forgiveness. By engaging in constant self-reflection and self-restraint, believers seek to attain a state of inner harmony and closeness to God, ultimately leading to spiritual enlightenment and fulfillment.

This inner struggle is not confined to ascetics or mystics but is considered essential for all Muslims on their spiritual journey. It is through the ongoing process of self-purification and self-transformation that individuals can deepen their faith and draw closer to the divine. Spiritual jihad is seen as a lifelong endeavor, requiring dedication, perseverance, and sincerity in one's intentions.

Spiritual jihad is closely linked to the concept of ihsan, or spiritual excellence, as outlined in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. It involves the cultivation of a profound awareness of God's presence in all aspects of life and the continuous pursuit of excellence in one's thoughts, actions, and relationships. Through spiritual jihad, believers strive to embody the highest ethical and moral standards, thereby contributing to the betterment of society and the world at large.

In contemporary Islamic thought, there is a growing recognition of the significance of spiritual jihad as a means of countering extremism and promoting peace. By emphasizing the inner dimensions of faith and the importance of spiritual growth, scholars and spiritual leaders seek to foster a deeper understanding of Islam's core values of compassion, tolerance, and social justice, thereby empowering individuals to become agents of positive change in their communities and beyond.

Sufi Perspectives

Sufism, often regarded as the mystical dimension of Islam, offers a unique and profound perspective on various aspects of spirituality, human existence, and the divine. At its core, Sufism emphasizes the inner journey of the individual soul towards union with the Divine, which is often described as the ultimate goal of human existence. Sufi teachings emphasize the importance of love, compassion, and empathy as pathways to experiencing the divine presence within oneself and in the world.

One key aspect of Sufi thought is the concept of "tasawwuf" or spiritual purification, which involves the cleansing of the heart from worldly attachments and egoistic desires. Sufis believe that through practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God), meditation, and self-reflection, individuals can attain a state of spiritual awakening and realization of their true nature.

Sufism places great emphasis on the role of the spiritual guide or "sheikh" in guiding disciples on the path of spiritual growth and enlightenment. The relationship between the disciple and the sheikh is characterized by trust, obedience, and devotion, with the sheikh serving as a spiritual mentor and exemplar of divine love and wisdom.

Another central theme in Sufi thought is the concept of "unity of being" or "wahdat al-wujud," which asserts the fundamental unity and interconnectedness of all existence. According to this perspective, the divine essence permeates all creation, and every aspect of reality reflects the divine presence. This understanding fosters a sense of reverence for all of creation and promotes an attitude of humility, gratitude, and reverence towards the natural world.

Overall, Sufi perspectives offer a rich and multifaceted approach to understanding spirituality, emphasizing the importance of inner transformation, love, and the pursuit of divine knowledge. Through its teachings and practices, Sufism continues to inspire seekers of truth and spiritual seekers around the world, transcending cultural and religious boundaries in its quest for spiritual enlightenment and union with the Divine.

Ethical and Moral Dimensions

Ethical and moral dimensions infuse every facet of contemporary Islamic thought, profoundly shaping interpretations of concepts like jihad. Scholars and thinkers engage in rigorous debates concerning the ethical imperatives inherent in jihad, examining its historical context, textual sources, and theological frameworks. At the heart of these discussions lies the question of whether jihad primarily signifies a spiritual struggle within oneself, a defensive military endeavor, or a broader effort to uphold justice and righteousness in society. This nuanced understanding underscores the ethical complexity surrounding jihad, as it intersects with principles such as compassion, justice, and human dignity.

Contemporary Islamic thought grapples with the ethical implications of jihad in the modern world, particularly in light of geopolitical conflicts, terrorism, and extremist ideologies. Scholars seek to articulate a morally responsible approach to jihad that rejects violence against civilians, upholds the sanctity of human life, and promotes peaceful coexistence. Moreover, they emphasize the importance of adhering to Islamic principles of just war theory, which require proportionality, discrimination, and legitimate authority in the conduct of armed conflict.

In addition to its external manifestations, ethical considerations of jihad also extend inward, guiding Muslims in their personal and communal lives. Concepts such as sincerity, humility, and accountability play a central role in shaping ethical behavior, reminding believers of their moral obligations in the pursuit of jihad. Moreover, Islamic ethics emphasize the interconnectedness of individual actions with broader societal welfare, highlighting the importance of fostering harmony, compassion, and social justice in the practice of jihad.

Contemporary Muslim scholars and activists actively engage with ethical and moral dimensions of jihad, seeking to reclaim its true meaning from extremist interpretations and misrepresentations. They advocate for a holistic understanding of jihad that integrates spiritual, moral, and social dimensions, emphasizing its transformative potential in promoting peace, justice, and human flourishing. By grounding their discourse in ethical principles derived from the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, they strive to counteract narratives of violence and intolerance, fostering a more compassionate and ethical approach to jihad in contemporary Islamic thought.

Defensive Jihad: Traditional and Modern Views

In the realm of Islamic jurisprudence, the concept of defensive jihad holds significant importance, both historically and in contemporary discourse. Traditionally, defensive jihad refers to armed struggle undertaken by Muslims in response to aggression or threat against their community, faith, or lands. This defensive stance is deeply rooted in Islamic legal tradition, drawing upon Quranic injunctions and Prophetic teachings that emphasize the right of self-defense and protection of the Muslim community (ummah).

Traditional views on defensive jihad have been shaped by classical Islamic jurists such as Imam al-Shafi'i, Imam Malik, Imam Abu Hanifa, and Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, whose works form the foundation of Islamic legal thought. These scholars elaborated on the conditions, objectives, and ethical principles governing defensive jihad, stressing the importance of proportionality, necessity, and avoidance of harm to non-combatants.

In modern times, interpretations of defensive jihad have evolved amidst complex geopolitical realities and the emergence of non-state actors. Contemporary Muslim scholars and thinkers grapple with questions of legitimacy, authority, and the application of Islamic principles in the context of modern warfare and international law. Some advocate for a strict adherence to classical interpretations, while others argue for reinterpretation and adaptation to contemporary challenges, emphasizing principles of just war theory and human rights.

The rise of extremist ideologies and the phenomenon of terrorism have further complicated discussions on defensive jihad. Radical groups often invoke distorted interpretations of defensive jihad to justify violence and terrorism, leading to widespread condemnation within the Muslim world and beyond. Thus, there is a pressing need for nuanced, contextualized approaches that uphold the principles of self-defense while rejecting violence against civilians and the abuse of religious rhetoric for political ends.

The concept of defensive jihad remains a subject of ongoing debate and scrutiny in contemporary Islamic thought. By engaging with classical sources, ethical principles, and modern realities, scholars and practitioners strive to navigate the complexities of defensive

warfare in accordance with Islamic teachings, while promoting peace, justice, and human dignity.

Classical Legal Discourses

Classical legal discourses within Islamic jurisprudence represent a rich tapestry of intellectual debate and scholarly inquiry that has shaped the interpretation and application of Islamic law over centuries. Rooted in the Quran and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), classical legal discourses encompass a wide array of legal methodologies, schools of thought, and interpretative frameworks.

One prominent feature of classical legal discourses is the development of various legal schools (madhahib) such as the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools. Each school offers its unique approach to legal reasoning, methodology, and interpretation, reflecting the diverse intellectual traditions within Islamic jurisprudence. These schools have produced extensive legal literature, including legal manuals, treatises, and commentaries, which continue to serve as foundational sources for contemporary legal scholarship.

Another key aspect of classical legal discourses is the exploration of different sources of Islamic law, including the Quran, Sunnah, consensus (ijma), and analogical reasoning (qiyas). Jurists engaged in meticulous analysis and interpretation of these sources to derive legal rulings (fatwas) on various matters, ranging from ritual practices to social transactions and governance issues.

Classical legal discourses often involve debates on the principles of jurisprudence (usul al-fiqh) and legal theory (al-qawa'id al-fiqhiyyah), which provide the conceptual framework for understanding and applying Islamic law. Scholars delved into discussions on the nature of legal reasoning, the hierarchy of legal sources, and the conditions for the validity of legal opinions, contributing to the refinement and systematization of Islamic legal theory.

Classical legal discourses reflect the dynamic interaction between continuity and change within Islamic jurisprudence. While upholding the foundational principles of Islamic law, jurists demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation and innovation in response to evolving social, political, and cultural contexts. This adaptive approach allowed Islamic law to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of diverse Muslim communities throughout history.

Classical legal discourses represent a multifaceted intellectual tradition that has profoundly influenced the development and evolution of Islamic law. Through rigorous scholarship, critical analysis, and creative interpretation, classical jurists laid the groundwork for a dynamic legal tradition that continues to inspire legal thought and practice in the contemporary world.

Contemporary Debates on Self-Defense and Just War

Contemporary debates on self-defense and just war encompass a wide array of ethical, legal, and political considerations in the context of armed conflict. One key aspect of these debates revolves around the concept of proportionality - the idea that the use of force must be proportional to the threat posed. Critics argue that modern warfare, with its advanced

weaponry and potential for civilian casualties, often challenges traditional notions of proportionality. This raises questions about the legitimacy of military actions undertaken in self-defense or as part of a just war.

Another crucial aspect of these debates is the distinction between *jus ad bellum* (the justice of war) and *jus in bello* (justice in war). While *jus ad bellum* principles focus on the justification for resorting to war, *jus in bello* principles concern the ethical conduct of warfare, including issues such as the protection of non-combatants and the treatment of prisoners of war. Contemporary debates often grapple with how these principles should be applied in the context of asymmetric warfare and non-state actors.

Additionally, the emergence of new forms of warfare, such as cyber warfare and drone strikes, has added complexity to discussions on self-defense and just war. These technologies present unique challenges in terms of attribution, accountability, and the potential for unintended consequences. Furthermore, debates surrounding preemptive and preventive military action raise questions about the criteria for determining when a threat is imminent and the appropriate response.

The role of international law and institutions in regulating armed conflict is a central theme in contemporary debates. The United Nations Charter, for instance, prohibits the use of force except in cases of self-defense or with Security Council authorization. However, interpretations of these provisions can vary widely, leading to disagreements over the legality and legitimacy of military interventions. As global power dynamics evolve, debates over the authority and effectiveness of international norms and institutions in addressing conflicts continue to evolve.

Contemporary debates on self-defense and just war reflect ongoing tensions between the imperatives of security, the demands of justice, and the complexities of modern warfare. Addressing these debates requires careful consideration of ethical principles, legal frameworks, and political realities in order to promote peace, security, and respect for human rights in a rapidly changing world.

Summary:

This article provides a comprehensive examination of interpretations of jihad within contemporary Islamic thought, offering insights into the complexities and nuances of this concept. Through a comparative analysis of various perspectives, ranging from spiritual to militant interpretations, the article highlights the diversity of thought and practice surrounding jihad. By contextualizing these interpretations within historical, theological, and geopolitical frameworks, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of jihad and its relevance in today's global context.

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