

SBJT Forum

Ayman S. Ibrahim is Bill and Connie Jenkins Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies, and Senior Fellow at the Jenkins Center for the Christian Understanding of Islam at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He earned his PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary and he is currently working on his second PhD in the Department of Middle Eastern History at the University of Haifa, Mount Carmel. Dr. Ibrahim was born and raised in Egypt. Since 1991, he has taught in various countries in the Muslim world and in the West at undergraduate and graduate levels. His articles on Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations have appeared in a variety of places such as: *The Washington Post*, *Religion News Services*, *Colorado Springs Gazette*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, *First Things*, *Faith Street*, *Charisma News*, *Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue Journal*, and *Ethics Daily*. Dr. Ibrahim has a forthcoming book entitled, *The Stated Motivations for the Early Islamic Expansion* and a forthcoming co-edited volume on the Insider Movements among Muslims, both anticipated in 2017.

SBJT: Today there is a lot of discussion regarding the nature of jihad in Islam. Describe for us what jihad is in the Qur'an and Islam and compare it to the Bible and Christianity.

Ayman S. Ibrahim: The Arabic word “jihad” has become well-known as an English term after its extensive usage by various media outlets to describe militant activities by terrorists. It is commonly used to refer to Islamic holy war waged against non-Muslims. The word jihadi, which is also an Arabic noun, became a common word to identify a person who executes an act of jihad, usually terror attack, under the banner of his religion. With the rise of ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Shabaab, after the Qaeda, words like jihad, jihadi, and jihadist found their way into the English dictionary, and for the most part they appear in connection with militant activities achieved by religious enthusiasts, particularly those self-identified as Muslims.

In Arabic, the noun jihad stems from the verb's root letters j-h-d, which means “to strive, make every effort, struggle, and labor.” The Qur'an treats this term extensively and seems to offer various meanings to it. Surprisingly,

the Arabic Bible, too, particularly the New Testament, uses the term and its derivatives several times in translating the Greek verbs *agōnizomai* and *athleō*. A comparison between the references of the term in both of these Arabic texts, apart from later commentaries and interpretations, offers a compelling contrast as to how jihad is treated, perceived, and portrayed in the two texts, and thus faiths, emphasizing the unique meaning found in Islam's scripture in a way that does not emerge in the New Testament context.

Jihad, as an Arabic term, appears some nine times in the Bible, whether in verbal or nominal forms; all in the New Testament, according to the Van Dyck Standard Translation. It reflects the personal striving (in jihad, Gk. *agōnizomai*) to enter the narrow gate of God's Kingdom (Luke 13:24). In connection with fighting in battles, Jesus affirms that since his Kingdom is not an earthly one his followers would not fight (Ar. Jihad, Gk., *agōnizomai*) for him to keep him from those who oppose him (John 18:36). This is echoed in Ephesians 6:12, where the Apostle Paul affirms that "we are not fighting (or wrestling) against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against ... evil spirits in the heavenly places." Paul actually uses the same term in connection with his personal discipline and self-control in his spiritual training, as he emphasizes that believers need to make every effort (strive in jihad, and *agōnizomai*) at self-control, portraying a picture of a wrestler striking a blow to his body and making it his slave (1 Cor 9:24-27). He also uses a participle of jihad to depict his diligent endeavor (through jihad) to preach God's Good News, to teach and warn every man using the Wisdom of God (Col 1:29).

In the Arabic Bible, Jihad is also used in connection with spending much effort in praying earnestly and fervently. Epaphras, the bondservant of Christ, prays earnestly (in jihad, *agōnizomai*) for the church of the Colossians so that the believers would be strengthened and perfected by God (Col 4:12). Paul, in his last years as a prisoner because of his Gospel preaching and before his martyrdom, declared that he had kept the faith as he strived (in jihad, *agōnizomai*) to finish the spiritual race, remaining faithful in and committed to preaching the Gospel of Christ (2 Tim 4:7). He, thus, instructs Timothy to endure suffering as a good soldier of Christ and as an athlete who strives (in jihad, Gk. *athleō*) to win the heavenly reward (2 Tim 2:5), calling him to strive (through jihad) for the good spiritual fight in keeping the authenticity of the true faith, holding tight to the eternal life, preaching and proclaiming the good confession of faith in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim 6:12).

Thus, jihad in the New Testament signifies a personal effort to practice self-control, struggling and fighting against one's own desires—it is a call to fight to overcome oneself. It also denotes striving to bring the Good News of Christ to everyone near and far, proclaiming and keeping the authenticity and purity of faith. Jihad is encouraged in prayer, as believers intercede fervently for the work of God in the life of His Church. It is never used in a direct reference to violence or physical warfare against enemies. Since Jesus Christ's kingdom is not an earthly one, His followers do not need to resort to violence or physical fight as a form of jihad for Him.

In the Qur'an, jihad occurs in different derivatives. Its imperative form, *jāhidū* (plural) or *jāhid* (singular), occurs more than twenty-eight times. This Quranic command instructs Muslims to strive in jihad. It does not necessarily mean to call them to fight others. It is different from the other Quranic term *qitāl*, of the root q-t-l, which refers explicitly to physical fighting in battles against non-Muslims. Jihad seems to be used in a variety of meanings in Islam's scripture.

According to the Qur'an, the Believers should struggle (in jihad) patiently to enter Paradise (Q3:142). They should make every effort (in jihad) in the path of Allah and for his cause (Q29:69). These verses, among others (such as Q5:53; 6:109; 16:38; 22:78; and 24:53), use jihad to denote an effort by the faithful believer to strive to remain in Allah's path with no explicit reference to violence or fighting in battles. They, unlike what media outlets may suggest, do not seem to instruct any notion of a holy war against non-Muslims.

Other Quranic verses, however, appear to use jihad in connection with both struggling in wars and striving to fight against various groups of non-Muslims—groups such as *al-kāfirūn* (infidels) and *al-munāfiqūn* (hypocrites). In Q9:73, Allah appears to instruct Muhammad to struggle (through jihad) with the unbelievers and hypocrites, and “be thou harsh with them.” In another verse, Muhammad is commanded not to obey the unbelievers, but rather to wage against them a great jihad (Q25:52).

In Quranic terms, the believers are those who believe in Allah and his messenger with no doubts, and who have struggled (in jihad) with their possessions and “their selves,” by giving their lives, for the sake of Allah or in his path (Q49:15). Striving by giving one's own life seems to exhort seeking martyrdom for the sake of Allah. The Quran distinguishes between two kinds of believers: those who practice jihad in Allah's path striving with

their lives, and those sitting at home avoiding battles, stating that Allah prefers the former (Q 4:95) granting them a higher rank and reward (Q 9:20).

The passage (Q 9:10-17) links jihad with fighting (hence, the term *qitāl*) in battles for the sake of Allah. In verse 14, the Quran instructs fighting (not jihad, but *qitāl*) the enemies while Allah chastises and degrades them at the believers' hands. In verse 16, those believers who have fought are acknowledged and identified by Allah to have struggled in jihad. This is most likely one of the reasons why jihad is linked, at least in one of its meanings, to fighting in battles for Allah's cause, or offered as a reason for those who want to give away their lives for Allah's cause. While jihad in the Quran is not always linked with fighting in battles, there are some occurrences in which jihad and fighting are linked together. For instance, the Qur'an uses both of the phrases "fighting in Allah's path" and "jihad in Allah's path" interchangeable. It commands the believers to fight in Allah's path (Q 2:190, 244, 246)—a command that matches the one of the jihad in Allah's path with possessions and selves in (Q 8:72; 9:88; 49:15).

Thus, to portray jihad as only a holy war against non-Muslims would be simplistic, but to deny any connection between jihad and fighting non-Muslims for Allah's cause would also be inaccurate. Quranic jihad, it appears, is a term or concept used in Islam's scripture not only to stir the hearts of the believers to struggle patiently in the path of Allah to enter Paradise, but also to denote fighting military battles in Allah's path and for his cause. While the emphasis in this analysis is on the Qur'an alone, it should be noted that, centuries after Muhammad's death, later Muslim exegetes and jurists developed various creative notions on passive jihad, armed jihad, individual obligatory jihad, state obligatory jihad, lesser jihad, greater jihad, and so forth.

Therefore, while the Arabic Bible uses jihad in connection with self-control, endure suffering, praying fervently for others, and serving God by proclaiming the Good News and witnessing for the faith, the Qur'an uses the term to reflect the efforts one ought to make to enter paradise, as well as stirring the believers to go to physical battle against non-Muslims for the sake of Allah and for his cause.