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Western Rhetoric on Jihad: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract:

Jihad being one of the most significant conceptions in Islamic thought has been a contested concept within western academia and policymakers. It is being observed that Jihad is considered a violent and aggressive doctrine by western countries. Therefore, it is considered a major threat and security risk by the western bloc. This perception has increased incidents of Islamophobia, faith-based hate, and animosity between Muslims and non-Muslim societies. This paper intends to develop a qualitative analysis to critically evaluate the main themes of Jihad believed by the west and their actual interpretation in Islam. The main objective of this paper is to differentiate between the western view about Jihad and its actual placement within the Islamic thought. It is being observed that acts of terrorism in the name of religion and a generic hatred within the west towards the Muslims are the main causes of a misleading western perception of Jihad.

Keywords: Jihad, West, Islam, Violence, Terrorism

Introduction

Religion has been an important source of articulating a set of beliefs, ideas and concepts which are deeply embedded within the thinking patterns of individual, groups and the society. It is being observed that religious notion tends to have a profound influence on societal practices as well. Therefore, divine rules and guiding principles are taken as some uncontested concepts on which people believe and act as they are. In this context, Islam is based on a comprehensive theology that incorporates the Quran, a complete charter, Hadith in which the principles of Quran have further elaborated and the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ which provides an exemplary description and practical manifestation of Quranic doctrines. Consequently, the historical records entail that inclusion of Islamic ideology was a common feature among Muslim rulers in statecraft. Later,

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the concept of political Islam gained popularity particularly in the north African and the Middle Eastern states when Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928¹.

In addition, the formation of Islamic political parties has also been a widespread feature in the Asian and African regions. Besides this, the concept of Jihad is one such concept within the Islamic discourse which gained significance in the Muslim states striving for the right of self-determination against the alleged occupation. The case of Kashmir and Palestine explicates that the call of Jihad has been the main tool against oppressors. On the other hand, From the past few decades, one of the most contested concepts in western literature is Jihad and its associated interpretation of Islam. Jihad is one of the major elements in Islamic theology which is been accepted and interpreted by all Fiqahs as well.

Major Critiques of Jihad:

Anti- Jihadi literature has been extensively produced in the west over the past few decades. Several prominent writers including Samuel Huntington, Christine Fair, Pamela Gellar, Robert Spencer, Daniel Pipes, Steven Emerson, Frank Gaffney, and David Yerushalm have given a precarious, misleading, and politicized explanation of Jihad which is not compatible with the fundamental characterization of Jihad.

The central idea of the clash of civilizations brought a new debate within the academic and policy circles in the post-cold war era. The theory of clash of civilization entails that the fundamental source of conflict would be cultural, unlike the past conflicts which were on an ideological or economic basis. Along with the inter-civilizational conflicts, Huntington emphasized that the western civilization would be in clash with the Islamic and Sinic civilization in which the clash between Islam and the western civilization would be more adverse and bloody. This proposition of Huntington's work has been central in creating anti-Muslim rhetoric within the western political landscape. The incident of 9/11 in September 2001 further strengthened this claim as it was conceived as a clash between the west and Islam by the Bush administration in the United States. Many Republicans in the US used the terms like 'crusade' and 'Islamic fascists'² after September 2001 which was symbolic in understanding their thinking patterns which equate terrorism with Jihad and Islam. Furthermore, the resurgence of right-wing populists and Islamophobia in the USA and Europe support Huntington's paradigm of civilizational clash with Islam. For instance, Donald Trump's remarks during his presidential campaign and criticizing Democrats for supporting

Muslim states and Islam reflect his anti-Muslim posture. One of his famous remarks was, “I think Islam hates us”. Also, Donald Trump in his administration gave top positions to Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, John Bolton as White House National Security Advisor, and Fred Fleitz as National Security Council’s executive secretary and chief of the staff³ who were staunch supporters of Islamophobia and mostly linked Jihad with militancy.

Christine Fair is another critic of Jihad and associates madaris and militant groups as its main tributaries. Most of the writings of Christine Fair are on militancy, madrasa education, and Islamic militancy in Pakistan. The author has associated Jihad with Islamic militancy and mujahedeen with Islamic insurgents. Most of the descriptions embrace the terrorist groups in Pakistan as Jihadi groups who according to the writer have been supported by the state. Likewise, Steven Emerson and Frank Gaffney have extensively written on Jihad as a threat to the national security of the USA⁴. In addition, Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer are staunch critics of Islam within western literature. They also head a group named, American Freedom Defense Initiative founded in 2010. In most of Spencer’s talks and writings, he has linked violence and Jihad⁵. He operates a blog, Jihad Watch, which is mostly termed as an anti-Muslim conspiracy blog. It is serving as a bedrock for disseminating hate literature against Islam and particularly Jihad and linking it with global armed conflicts⁶. Moreover, his book, published in 2018, *The History of Jihad: From Muhammad to ISIS*, is a complete piece of distorted history and revulsion towards Islam. Likewise, most of Daniel Pipes’s writings in the post 9/11 period were based on a threat analysis which the United States according to him was facing from the subversive nature of Islam and Jihad⁷. It is pertinent to highlight that most of the anti-Muslim commentators and academicians have been either part of US policymaking and their Think Tanks who have a profound influence on shaping up the public opinion and in the decision-making circles. In this context, Jihad is one such concept that has been construed within the west in a very acute way. Therefore, through a contextual analysis following trends have been identified which are most cited in the western literature.

Contextual Analysis:

- **Jihad perceived as a “holy war” led by militant groups**

In the aftermath of the 9/11 incident in September 2001, extensive literature was produced on Islam and Jihad. For instance, Bruce Hoffman, James Turner Johnson, and David Rapport has used the term holy war and

a holy terror to explain the relationship between religion, terrorism, and Jihad⁸. It is pertinent to highlight that a dominant theme connecting Jihad with holy war persisted mainly due to the fatwa of Al Qaeda led by Osama bin Laden in 1996, 1998, and in post 9/11 years in which he described Jihad as an individual activity against the US and the other western states⁹. In contemporary times, the call of Jihad by the terrorist groups was conceived as the only meaning of Jihad within the western literature which contradicts the meaning and practice of Jihad in Islam.

Unlike Islam, the term holy war is used in Biblical and Deuteronomy scripts¹⁰. Emperor Constantine was the first converted Roman Emperor to Christianity who extended the use of force to expand its territorial domain against a number of Roman factions. Later, Augustine also used the term just war. In addition, Ambrose of Milan, Hugo Grotius supported the idea that Christians can take up arms in certain situations. Furthermore, the concept of holy war was consolidated with the declaration of Crusades by the papal states¹¹.

The concept of Jihad has been mentioned forty-one times in the Holy Quran¹². It has been practically manifested by the Holy Prophet ﷺ and his companions. In this context, it is important to understand the context in which Jihad was seen as an obligatory strategy against the enemy. Consequently, the following questions must be addressed to develop a comprehensive understanding of Jihad and the associated requirement to practice it. Firstly, whether Jihad was announced by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as the head of the state of Medina? Moreover, who has the authority within the Islamic jurisprudence to give Fatwa? Keeping in view this perspective, war and the use of force against the enemy is one of the aspects of Jihad which is been prescribed with certain limitations. Therefore, the contextual and textual interpretation is required to understand the spirit of Jihad along with the socio-political realities of Arabia which was subject to internal tribal threats and external threats from, Byzantine and Persian empires.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ received the revelations on Jihad in both Makkah and Medina but the nature of Jihad was different. During his stay in Makkah, most of the revelations on Jihad were based on the concept of Jihād- al-Nafs (the internal struggle) whereas from 622 onwards during his stay in Medina, most of the revelations called for Jihād-al-Sayf (self-defense through sword). In this context, Surat Hajj is significant to understand this transformation keeping in view the internal dissent and threat the Muslims were facing from Makkah and elsewhere¹³. Therefore,

though the verses on Jihad came in Makkah as well as in Medina, their nature and context differed from each other¹⁴. For instance, most of the scholars think that the first part of Surat Hajj was revealed in Makkah and the later part was revealed in Medina in which the new dimension of Jihad was prescribed in the Quran. The following Ayats of Surat Hajj from 39-40 states that,

“Permission (to fight) is given to those against whom fighting is launched, because they have been wronged, and Allah is powerful to give them victory.” (39)¹⁵

(They are) the ones who were expelled from their homes without any just reason, except that they say “Our Lord is Allah.” Had Allah not been repelling some people by means of some others, the monasteries, the churches, the synagogues, and the mosques where Allah’s Name is abundantly recited would have been demolished. Allah will definitely help those help Him (by defending the religion prescribed by Him). Surely Allah is truly Powerful, Mighty”. (40)¹⁶

In this context, the battle of Abwa is said to be the first military expedition led by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in 623 to resolve the issue of disrupted trade routes between Makkah and Syria. Eventually, a successful peace treaty was signed between Muslims and Bani Dumrah (a tribe in Waddan)¹⁷. Consequently, it is evident that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ headed the state of Medina in 622 and started the series of expeditions against the enemies. Major expeditions in which Prophet Muhammad ﷺ participated started after Hijra. Therefore, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ announced Jihad and a series of expeditions as a statesman and as a person whose honesty, fair-play, knowledge, prestige, wisdom, and esteem was acknowledged even by his worst enemies.

Another important aspect is the Fatwa which is mostly been used in recent times by different non-state actors to announce Jihad. Fatwa is a legal opinion within Islamic theology that can be taken by an individual, group, and the state on any social, personal, political, economic, and religious practice. Fatwa¹⁸ is mostly given by an authorized person known as Mufti, who is a knowledgeable person and has authority on the Islamic principles. Fatwa itself illustrates that how Islam has accommodated the resolution of emerging issues within the community at all times. This illustration gives an insight that any individual or terrorist group do not have any technical, legal, and Sharia-based grounds to give Fatwa. Rather, either Fatwa is given by any authorized statutory body by the state or it is

being given by that specific person (mostly a Mufti) who full fills the credentials of Sharia and the law of the land.

- **Interpretation of Dār -al-Ḥarb and Dār -al-Islām in the West**

A popular narrative within the west related to the Islamic concept of territorial jurisdiction is that the world is divided into two main zones, i.e., dar-al-Harb (territory of war) and dar-al-Islam (territory of Islam). Western literature comprehends that there is a constant state of war and conflict between these two domains till dar-al-Harb is transformed into dar-al-Islam¹⁹. Most of the terrorist groups including Al Qaeda and Tehrik Taliban Pakistan have used these terms in their stated objectives which further reinforced this narrative. But it is interesting to highlight that both of these terms are not used in Quran and Hadith. Rather these terms were later used by Muslim jurists, particularly by Imam Hanafi. This narrative of Imam Hanafi needs to be understood keeping in view the socio-political and regional environment that existed between the Abbassids and Umayyads from the late 7th to 8th century onwards. There was a combination of armed confrontation as well as armistice between these groups²⁰. This territorial division incorporates the political and strategic compulsions of that time in the same way as contemporary debates of politics and international relations explicates the fault lines of the world into either communist or capitalist bloc, North-South gap, developed and less developed countries, or in the shape of a civilizational difference. Consequently, the notion of dar al Harb doesn't mean that Muslims will use force, aggression, and violent armed struggle as a means to expand their terrain or political order.

- **Linking Jihad, Terrorism and Violence by the West**

A strong perception within the policy circles and western literature about Jihad is its alleged association with terrorism and violence which in principle contradicts with the actual meaning and practice of Jihad. Unfortunately, most of the national and transnational terrorist groups are formed on the lines of religious identities. Traditional religious text is being used by the terrorist groups without any context to the verses mentioned in the Holy Quran, Therefore, Jihad has been used as a political strategy by the terrorist to seek legitimacy within their recruits and supporters. Al Qaeda, Islamic State, Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Tehrik Taliban Pakistan and other local terrorist organizations have used violence, targeted killings, suicide bombing, mutilation of bodies, beheading, kidnapping, and extortion in the name of religion. For instance, in 2012, TTP beheaded seven Pakistani soldiers in the tribal belt of

Pakistan²¹. Then in 2014, videos of beheading people by ISIS from different countries were reported²². Recently, a militant groups linked with Islamic State beheaded fifty people in Mozambique²³. Besides, since 2002, Pakistan has witnessed the worst acts of suicide bombing across the country. This manipulation by terrorist groups has distorted the actual meaning and practice of Jihad which is a struggle against the aggressor through combatant as well as non-combatant means with certain limitations. Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-AsShaikh stated that "The ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism do not belong to Islam in any way, but are the first enemy of Islam, and Muslims are their first victims, as seen in the crimes of the so-called Daesh (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda and their affiliated groups"²⁴. Similarly, the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Abdul Rahman al Sudais stated that "These brutal acts in the name of Islam is why Islam is linked with terrorism in the minds of those who do not know Islam,"²⁵. Likewise, Imam e Kabba, Sheikh Saleh bin Abdullah bin Humaid on his visit to Pakistan in 2017 in an interview reportedly said that "the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda have no links or concerns with Islam". He further said that "only the state was responsible for declaring jihad, not an organization or a group of people."²⁶ Furthermore, Dr. Saleh in his visit to Pakistan in 2018 endorsed the fatwa of 1800 Pakistani clerics against extremism and declaring suicide bombing as un-Islamic²⁷.

Consequently, self-defense, struggle, responding to breach of the treaty, and any offensive act are important features in practicing Jihad. The Quran and the Hadith have strictly negated acts of aggression and disrespect to humans. Allah in surah Maida states that "For this reason, we decreed for the children of Isrā'īl that whoever kills a person not in retaliation for a person killed, nor (as a punishment) for spreading disorder on the earth, is as if he has killed the whole of humankind, and whoever saves the life of a person is as if he has saved the life of the whole of humankind. Certainly, Our messengers have come to them with clear signs. Then, after all that, many of them are there to commit excesses on the earth" (Quran 5:32)²⁸. This revelation explains that Islam negates violence and blood-shed.

Furthermore, The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said that "Set out for Jihad in the name of Allah and for the sake of Allah. Do not lay hands on the old verging on death, on women, children, and babes. Do not steal anything from the booty and collect together all that falls to your lot in the battlefield and do good, for Allah loves the virtuous and the pious."²⁹

Moreover, the first Caliph Hazrat Abu Bakar (R.A) explained the permitted rules of combat to his army. He stated that “Stop, O people, that I may give you ten rules for your guidance in the battlefield. Do not commit treachery or deviate from the right path. You must not mutilate dead bodies. Neither kill a child, nor a woman, nor an aged man. Bring no harm to the trees, nor burn them with fire, especially those which are fruitful. Slay not any of the enemy's flock, save for your food. You are likely to pass by people who have devoted their lives to monastic services; leave them alone”³⁰. Along with this, there are several Hadith in which peace and harmony is been preached by Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. For instance, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said that “A true believer (momin) is he from whom people’s lives and wealth are safe.”³¹

- **Jihad and War**

The literal meaning of Jihad is struggle and war is defined as an armed conflict between states or different political groups. Here, it is significant to make a distinction between violent, forcible activities and self-defense. Even in contemporary international relations, the use of force in self-defense has been authorized in chapter VII of the UN Charter³². Therefore, from a political perspective, states use force as a last resort in a conflict or crisis either in self-defense, protection of their civilian population, and for the perseverance of their territorial integrity. The western perception that Jihad is a continuous war against non-believers is incorrect as Muslims have not been in a continuous state of armed conflict against the enemies. Rather, historical record entails that military, political and legal options including negotiations, mediation, arbitration, truce, conflict management and resolution have been used for dispute settlement. In addition, it is evident that all forms of Jihad do not adhere to the use of force, rather it is practiced under specific circumstances and threats. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said that “The best struggle (jihad) is to speak the truth before a tyrannical ruler”³³. On another occasion, Hazrat Muhammad ﷺ stated that “The best struggle is to struggle against your soul and your passions in the way of God Most High”³⁴. Therefore, the practice of Jihad in Islam is not only linked to the use of force rather it supports a consistent struggle to attain a righteous and peaceful path for the state and the society.

Conclusion:

The western view of Jihad is not in accordance with the actual meaning of Jihad in Islam. The opinion of western academics and policymakers is mainly based on the meaning of Jihad that is being

illustrated mostly by terrorist organizations or the perception of western writers, who do not have command on the Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic history. In addition, it is observed that western opinion on Jihad is mostly biased and based on their hatred and animosity towards Islam instead of any factual argument. As a result, a general tendency of intolerance, hatred, and incidents of coercion towards Muslims within the west has increased. The philosophy of Jihad is misconceived by the west mainly because of the lack of actual information and the biased political will and agenda within the western countries.

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