DECONSTRUCTING JIHAD

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A few weeks ago, Osama bin Laden is purported to have issued yet another call for *jihad* – this time, in response to the possibility of a war waged on Iraq. In the White Paper issued by the Singapore government on the Jemaah Islamiyah arrests and the threat of terrorism, *jihad* was identified as both ideology and catalyst. It is significant that the rationalizations for *jihad* given by the JI were diverse, indicating its many applications. Although the Americans have since changed their mind, *jihad* became prolific and sanitized in media discourse in the 1980s when the USA referred to the struggle against the Russians in Afghanistan as a righteous *jihad.* However, Saddam Hussein also labeled the Gulf War a *jihad* against the West in the name of Islam.

It is important to recognize that over the last century, *jihad* is the term that has been used the most in misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Muslims and their cultures so as to depict Islam as a religion of violence. Muslims themselves debate the term fiercely. On many websites and electronic discussion lists on Islam, one finds a whole range of positions including the anguish of being demonized as a Muslim who is defined by '*jihad*' in a post 9/11 world. There are also exhortations to acknowledge honestly that the term has a specific history which is problematic when invoked manipulatively for the present, arguing that an Islamic interpretation of history is not apologetic, nor should it be defensive justification (see for example, www.islamaa.com). Most approaches - whether polemical, apologetic or revivalist - have distorted their representations by singling out only one trend or view among a broad range of thinking about war in Islamic civilization, using it to generalize about Islam as a whole. Even some academic work commendable for their re-examination of Islamic texts and traditions to challenge militant positions on war, tend to avoid important but difficult traditional sources in an attempt to teach a unidimensional Islam promoting peace and

reconciliation. The point remains that the term *jihad* has legitimated violence enacted in the name of Islam, perhaps now more than ever before. Therefore it behoves us to examine its evolution and application in all its dimensions.

Any academic engagement with sacred text and theological tradition in Islam is now even more fraught with the tension of trying to ensure that one does not perpetrate the demonizing of Islam, while at the same time, exploring honestly what is in text, tradition and history. This reflection is written in resonance and empathy with Muslims who struggle to address resources for violence in Islamic text and history. It is a struggle shared by other religious traditions at various junctures of their histories.

The semantic meaning of the Arabic word *jihad* derives from the root 'j' 'h' 'd.' *Jihad* is a verbal noun of the third form of the root *jahada* which means to strive, to exert or to struggle. The object of exerting one's utmost effort is often categorized as against a visible enemy, the devil, and/or aspects of one's own self. For example, verse xxix: 6 of the Qur'an says, "And if any strive (with might and main) – *jahada* - they do so for their own souls: For God is free of all needs from all creation." *Jihad* is never used to mean warfare in the Qur'an, but its connotation with *qital* (which means 'fighting') in early Muslim history and in the Qur'an (where it appears in 167 verses), was to legitimate warfare.

The early invocation of *jihad* was to legitimate the expansion of the Muslim empire in the first century of Islam although it is absolutely imperative to understand that after the end of the Umayyad caliphate in 132/750, *jihad* evolved mainly into a struggle that was spiritual and abstract or for peaceful mission. The *jihad* that is invoked to justify the causes of a small group of Muslims who are committed to achieving their objectives through violence, is a selective and manipulative appropriation from sacred and classical text and history.

The early history of *Jihad* and its sources in text and tradition

The early Muslim state or caliphate, first centred in Medina and then in Syria, constituted one of the largest unitary empires that mankind has ever known. Within a single century, the Muslim state grew rapidly, uniting a territory stretching from Spain to China. Like all other multinational empires, the Muslim state reached its greatest extent through a series of military campaigns. Expansion became an ideological imperative justified on moral grounds. In the case of the Muslim caliphate, this imperative was the establishment of God's rule on earth, for that was the sole legitimacy of sovereignty. God's rule was to be established by those kinds of efforts that He had ordained, which included armed struggle. As Khalid Yahya Blankinship wrote, "Such armed struggle became known as *jihad* and remained the

most salient policy of the caliphate till the end of Umayyad rule in 132/750" (1994, 1).

The doctrine of the war *jihad* is defined clearly in the Qur'an as are its purposes. Muslims are required to go out to fight in God's path against unbelievers (ii:190, 244) or, to make monetary contributions to the war effort (lvii:10). Such contributions are a loan to God that God will repay manifold (ii:245). Only those who either fight or spend in God's path are the truly sincere (xlix:15). Those holding back are threatened with both divine and worldly punishments and denounced as hypocrites (ix:42-52;xlviii:16). Great rewards in the afterlife are specified for those killed.

The purposes of *jihad* are also laid down clearly in the Qur'an. At first, *jihad* is ordained to be waged defensively, so that the worship of God may be pursued freely in the earth. "To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged; and verily, God is most powerful for their aid" (xxii:39-40). This element of *jihad* as 'defensive' is a very significant – the understanding that waging *jihad* is never an aggression because war is forbidden in the *shari'a* except for two reasons: self-defence and the propagation of the Islamic faith. In the classical tradition, waging war even in self-defence is defined by clear rules and includes strictures such as not to kill civilians, women and children, and that assassination and ambush are forbidden.

The contradiction lies in the classical doctrine itself: it forbids the use of force as simple aggression but allows it as legitimate if it is defensive and serves the spread of Islam. Verse ii:190 is categorical in forbidding aggression – "And fight (*qaatilu*) in the way of Allah those who fight you, But do not transgress limits; For God loveth not aggressors." So *Jihad* is enjoined in retaliation against those who fight against Muslims (and history shows that this injunction has been invoked to include other Muslims) – sura ii:190; or have driven the believers out of home and family (ii:191, 246). Such defensive justifications are the source of the legitimacy invoked by Muslim extremists and militants, premised on the acute sense of victimhood that prevails in the Muslim world because of colonialism, displacement of Palestinians, the economic and cultural hegemony of globalization, constricted democratic and economic capabilities in many Muslim states that are deemed westernized, and ruthless domination by the USA. These justifications are both precursor and context of the current invocation of the 'righteous war' *jihad.* A brief examination of any of the calls to *jihad* – whether at the turn of the 20th century or by Osama bin Laden - will show evidence of this formula to legitimate defensive violence to 'protect Islam.' In current context however, the understanding of *jihad* as a defensive war is a legitimacy invoked by militants without conforming to the strictures laid out in the classical doctrines.

An Islamic social order is proferred by fundamentalists and militants as the security for all humanity. It is significant that the world in this Islamic social order is perceived in sharp dichotomies: the way of heedlessness and the way of submission to Islam are seen as institutionalized in the existence of Islamic and non-Islamic political entities. The former is described as the territory of war (*dar al harb*) in verses ix:107, v:33, ii:279, v:64, and vii:57, for example. The way of submission is the territory of Islam (*dar al islam)*. The struggle to extend the boundaries of the territory of Islam and thus of peace and social order is the *jihad*, the literal struggle of effort. It is a struggle that takes place at the intersection of heedlessness and submission.

The second main source of Islamic religious and legal practice, the *hadith* traditions attributed to the Prophet, support what the Qur'an says on *jihad*. According to the *ahadith* (plural of '*hadith*'), waging *jihad* in God's path is specifically defined as a duty incumbent upon every able-bodied Muslim [male]. But it is important to note that nonmilitary types of *jihad* appear in the *ahadith*. Thus, Bukhari tell us that performing the pilgrimage to Mecca is equated with performing the war *jihad* and that the women's *jihad* is the pilgrimage, although women may also go out to war with the men in noncombatant roles. Qurtubi tells us that building a mosque to transmit the knowledge and religion of Islam is called the best kind of *jihad*. Finally, in a tradition which spiritualizes and dematerializes the concept, Ibn Mubarak relates that the true fighter in God's path (*mujahid*) is described as he who struggles against himself by himself. A noncanonical tradition even calls this the greater *jihad* in comparison to the military one, which is lesser. There is a well-known *hadith* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that states that the only true *jihad* is that waged to exalt God's word.

In the context of exhortations to wage war in the Qur'an and *ahadith*, it is imperative to understand the Qur'an and *ahadith* also as reflecting a specific history, and a material context. At the same time, it is crucial to reiterate the polyvalence of the term '*jihad*' – it is a struggle that includes *qital* or warfare, but also the struggle with one's own heart, the attempt to bring oneself into accord with the will of God. The means enjoined as appropriate to this struggle are prayer, study, and various forms of inner-worldly asceticism. The logic is that it makes little sense to claim status as a *mujahid*, struggling to bring guidance to the world, if there is no corresponding growth in one's own awareness of God. Thus the whole enterprise of *jihad* is within a context of sanctity, of the struggle to a fidelity to Islam. This is far different from the common understanding that *jihad* is merely a call to violence and a declaration of war.

Muslims were not the only community inspired by their beliefs. Christians fought

Crusades and the Mongols, from an early stage in their conquests, were also catalyzed by the belief that they were destined to rule the whole earth. However, despite the enormous size of the caliphate and the ideology of *jihad* which supported it, the caliphate did not endure for centuries like the Roman and Chinese empires, but suffered a sudden and unexpected disruption after which it was never reconstituted. This came about before the end of the rule of the Umayyad family in 132/750. Because of this disruption which began with the civil wars of 122-3/740-750 and culminated in the replacement of the Ummayad dynasty with the Abassids, the political unity of Islam and Muslims was forever destroyed after 740.

This meant that *jihad* stopped on all frontiers, with only a few exceptions. It also meant a fundamental change in the way Muslims looked at the world, thus helping to shape the future course of Islam. Without expansion as a main cause, Muslims became introspective, turning their attention to the internal ordering of their own society. The principle of the equality of the believers of all different origins and stations in life was strengthened, forging the notion of the *umma* or community of believers. With the failure of the universal war *jihad*, more emphasis began to be placed on the peaceful spiritual quest, even though the concept of religiously sanctioned warfare remained 'on the books' to be invoked if needed.

The peaceful transformation of *jihad* after the first century of Islam enabled the development of the already extant spiritual element of Islam to flourish. It is a development which has greatly enhanced the attractiveness of Islam to non-Muslims thus facilitating its spread in the world without large-scale warfare.

Jihad in revivalist literature, and the invocation and manipulation of _jihad_ by militants

In contemporary Islamic fundamentalism (I make this distinction because there is also Christian, Jewish and Hindu fundamentalism) we find a new understanding of *jihad* as an expression of an 'Islamic world revolution.' This concept can be traced back to Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian political preacher who is seen as the intellectual father of Islamic fundamentalism. It is no exaggeration to describe his writing as enormously influential even today, especially among younger educated Muslims and this includes those in Southeast Asia. His basic missionary message was that world peace can be achieved only under the banner of Islam, within the framework of *jihad* as an expression of 'world revolution'. But this message is couched in a profoundly polemical and furious anti-American and anti-Western idiom, especially after his return from the United States (1948-1950). The Gulf War and Western efforts to reorder the Middle East, defend Israel, root out al-Qaeda and now to overthrow

Saddam Hussein, gave and continue to give impetus to efforts to revive Qutb's indictments of the West and everything tainted as Western or even secular, as the enemy of Islam.

At the heart of fundamentalist strategy stands the call to *jihad* but in a reinterpretation of *jihad.* This reinterpretation takes *jihad* back to its original roots in the expansion of the Muslim empire, but repudiates the strict rules enjoined (such as that civilians, women and children should not be harmed, or that assassination and ambush are forbidden) and negates the subsequent evolution of the term into its peaceful etymology and usage. The fundamentalist and militants' formula that Islam is '*din wa dawla* /unity of faith and the state' is yet another invention. For this formula attributed to Islam exists neither in the Qur'an nor in the *ahadith*, nor is it to be found in any of the authoritative classical writings. The same can be said of the concepts of the 'islamic state' and of the establishment of *hakimiyyat Allah*/God's rule. Both are relatively recent additions to Islamic thought and are an eclectic, enforced cohesion of sacred text, prophetic tradition and Muslim history. For miltants, *jihad* is interpreted anew and filled with a new meaning, but its legitimacy is expressed in classical Islamic terms. This is a powerful strategy.

Concluding Perspectives

Because Islamists claim a generic and therefore authentic Islam, their rhetoric is very powerful: 'Muslims must…', 'Islam says…' or 'In Islam…'. This leaves the state and everyone else casting around to assert equal legitimacy, to play the (futile) game of catch-up. Islam has no Vatican, there are many sources of authority and legitimation. Even the definitive among the huge corpus of texts that constitute *tafsir* or exegesis of the Qur'an contain differences of opinion. So a closer examination of claims about a generic and 'true' Islam, provide evidence of how these claimants are selective about their sources for authority and legitimation.

However, the paradigm of invoking the legitimating premise of 'true' Islam is maintained even by those who are struggling against extremists. This strategy is counter-productive. Modern Muslim nation states - almost none of which are entirely constituted by Muslims – cannot adopt the totally Islamic dress, codes and strictures that Islamists insist upon and can exemplify because they function from the periphery within their exclusive groups. Perhaps an alternative strategy would be to confront and debunk the claims and strategies of fundamentalists and militants about their versions of the 'true' Islam, rather than playing along with them, each side trying to outdo the other. However, these detractions will nevertheless have to be couched in invocations of authenticity, for one cannot totally abdicate

the space and premise of claims to 'true' Islam to extremists and militants.

Modern states combating extremists and militant Islam would do well to focus beyond them, and address the ground of Islam which resources extremists and militants. This 'ground of Islam' includes an educated as well as informed middle class because of easy access to the internet. It is a middle class that is focused on rights, because there is no need to scramble for subsistence. There seems to be a disjuncture between postcolonial states who still perceive themselves in paternal mode, operating unilaterally 'for the good of the people,' and a recognition of the evolution of their citizenry since independence. There is a significant – and in some nations like Malaysia and Singapore, even large - educated middle class who relate to transparency, explanation and consultation rather than edicts and platitudes.

The power of anti-western critique and rhetoric that postcolonial states invoke cannot be underestimated either, but these should be understood in a wider context. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2002 tells us that trenchant critique of the West - especially the USA - is as prevalent among the publics of traditional allies like Canada, Germany and France as it is in the Muslim world. The power of marshalling anti-western sentiment was obvious in how Saddam Hussein, in labeling the Gulf war a *jihad*, claimed to battle the West in the name of Islam and received support of not only most of the fundamentalist movements in the Muslim world, but even sympathy from moderate, modern Muslims.

A sense of disenchantment, disempowerment, and demonization of Muslims is constantly reiterated by Muslims themselves – from leaders of Muslim states to Muslim militants. These alienations are invoked as a premise of many statements and sermons, even exhortations from moderate Muslim governments to their citizens to modernize. For example, the preface to many arguments by leaders of modern and moderate Muslim governments are often that 'Muslims are weak' and therefore they need to embrace modernity and economic progress and development so as to achieve wealth and well-being. There seems to be little recognition that these sorts of arguments enabled by the logic of an inherent weakness or disability of Muslims, also create considerable feelings of indignation, of being wronged and victimized. It then becomes easier to understand and accept the fundamentalist or militant solution: a *jihad* against the West and/or Muslim states that are secular and all they are accused of (and sometimes justifiably) in their histories with Muslims. These arguments about weak and disenfranchised Muslims because of the wicked West and modern secularism enable the connection with a *jihad* that has in classical context, been defined as legitimate because it is defensive and 'for the protection of Islam.'

By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that *jihad* is defensive warfare became

current again in the Middle East, and especially in Egypt through the works of Muhammad 'Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida. Rida formulated how *jihad* is waged as a reaction against outside aggression: "Everything that is mentioned in the Qur'an with regard to the rules of fighting, is intended [to be understood] as defence against enemies that fight the Muslims because of their religion" (Rida, 1955, 35). Various forms of aggression against which *jihad* is lawful include a direct attack on the territory of Islam or the suspicion thereof, and also the oppression of Muslims residing outside the boundaries of a Muslim nation.

In addition, the arguments of cultural relativism - demarcating Asian and post-colonial premise against the West - that are definitive of many Southeast Asian leaders, often enables the turn to the alternative that fundamentalists and militants offer. A strategy of many postcolonial, third world states is to invoke their own righteousness in the context of 'the wicked west' premise, so that by default in postcolonial space, everything is justified and legitimate. But it is a dangerous strategy in a world that needs to enable Muslims to feel a part of it, not alienated from it. Muslims' perception of themselves as victims has magnified a hundredfold after the 'war on terror' and with the impending war on Iraq. The call for *jihad* is proferred as the righteous and legitimate Islamic **response** to a powerful **external threat**, **not an Islamic initiative** – harking back to the classical moral justification for *jihad* which is that **it is waged in defence and protection of Islam**. The persuasive coherence of this moral justification, reiterated by current context and rhetoric, should not be underestimated. The Pew report which is based on 44 national surveys and in interviews with more than 38,000 people states

> Sizable percentages of Muslims in many countries with
> significant Muslim populations also believe that suicide bombings
> can be justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies.
> While majorities see suicide bombings as justified in only
> two nations polled, more than a quarter of Muslims in another
> nine nations subscribe to this view. (2002, 5).

Finally, the evolution of the concept of *jihad* is complex. It is important to keep the perspective that all words evolve continually – they are what we invest in their etymology, invoked for our reality. It is useful for us to bear in mind that today more than ever in its history, *jihad* is being redefined by more than those who distort it for violent ends. The whole world, together with Muslims, is ultimately responsible for what *jihad* will mean after this turning point in our collective history.

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