

## The Islamic “Jihad” and The Baha’i Faith

There is much confusion about the exact nature of the Islamic concept of “jihad”, or “holy war” as it is sometimes called<sup>1</sup>, and its correct meaning in the light of the Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, the Founder of Islam. This confusion has existed for centuries, but has been greatly compounded by the contemporary incidence of terror tactics and other acts of violence carried out in the name of Islam. The confusion is not just among outside observers of Islam. There are different schools of interpretation within Islam itself on this topic. Different commentators have relied on different passages of Muslim Scripture to justify their respective points of view. The matter has come to assume vital importance in the light of current world events.

This short paper attempts to summarise some of these different points of view as to “jihad” in its Islamic setting, including by reference to some of the main scriptural provisions of relevance.

Of more importance for present purposes is the Baha’i view that the religion of the one supreme God is revealed progressively to humanity, according to its capacity from time to time, through a series of Divine “Manifestations” in human form, and that the Manifestation for this age is the Founder/Prophet of the Baha’i Faith, Baha’u’llah<sup>2</sup>. This belief carries with it the view that in order to ascertain the Divine Will for this age, we must turn to the Manifestation for this age and to the teachings of that Manifestation. Once this fundamental Baha’i view is accepted, it places a Baha’i in the unique position of having the authentic Word of the latest

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<sup>1</sup> The English term “holy war” is said by some to be a European invention and represents only one interpretation of “jihad”. A closer meaning may be to use utmost endeavours in dealing with a negative or evil – Holy Quran, Surah 25:52. This comes from the Arabic word “jahada”, to strive, to toil, whether by word or deed. But it may also relate to the Arabic word “qatala”, literally to kill, wage war, etc. Its meaning as war undertaken for the propagation of religion is said by some to be unknown to the Arabic language and Islam, although this is not necessarily reflected in past jurisprudence and practice.

<sup>2</sup> Most Muslims believe in a similar concept of a succession of Divine Messengers, except that they take the view, based largely on a passage in the Holy Quran as to Muhammad being the “Seal of the Prophets” – Surah 33:40, that Muhammad is the last ever of the Divine Prophets to humanity and that the past cycles of Divine revelations have therefore come to a complete end. This interpretation is not shared by some other religionists, including the Baha’is. The Baha’i view is that this is a misinterpretation of the Holy Quran, and that the cycle of Divine Manifestations will continue indefinitely into the future, as the benevolent Deity would never leave His human creation without guidance. See Momen, Islam and the Baha’i Faith, 34-59.

Manifestation to assist both in understanding the historical Islamic meaning of “jihad”, and also its current relevance and application.

Contemporary Islamic approaches to jihad are said to be categorized under three basic groups. The most extreme of these, the “offensive” approach, sees Islam as still the only true path to God, requiring that it expand its influence worldwide, including by the use of offensive wars, violence and terror. The ends are seen to justify the means. The second of these approaches is more “defensive” in orientation, allowing the use of defensive force to establish justice and to prevent oppression and persecution. One version of this approach allows the use of violence and terror even if civilians are adversely affected. The other version requires a distinction to be made between combatants and non-combatants in this regard. Finally there is the “non-violent” approach, Islam being seen as a religion of peace. Non-violent resistance is seen as the preferred way. There is no unanimity in Islam as to which is the correct approach. Different approaches have commanded more support than others at different times among different Islamic scholars.

There are references to both war and peace in the Holy Quran. The Prophet Muhammad himself engaged in violent conflicts<sup>3</sup>, although most argue that this was only when absolutely necessary to protect the Cause of Allah (God) or its followers. The Quran even contemplated the possibility that non-believers might be killed where the Muslim was not the aggressor<sup>4</sup>, including in some cases by way of retaliation<sup>5</sup> or self-defence<sup>6</sup>. But this seems to relate to extreme situations; arguably it is clear that peace, tolerance and harmony were preferred by Muhammad<sup>7</sup>, providing it was peace with justice<sup>8</sup>. Treaties of peace were to be sacred<sup>9</sup>. There was to be no compulsion in religion<sup>10</sup>.

There is Hadith that states that the greater jihad<sup>11</sup> was the inner struggle to purify the self, as compared to the lesser jihad, or outer struggle.

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus Christ also used violence on occasions – see Gospel of St John, Chapter 2: 14 and note Gospel of St Matthew, Chapter 10: 34.

<sup>4</sup> Surahs 2: 190-193, 216-217, 4: 91, 7:55, 9:12-14, 29, 36, 47:4.

<sup>5</sup> Surahs 2: 178-179, 5: 45.

<sup>6</sup> Surahs 22: 39, 42: 39-41.

<sup>7</sup> Surahs 4: 90, 5: 32, 8: 61, 10: 10, 25, 13: 24, 14: 23, 19: 62, 36: 58, 49: 9, 56: 26, 59: 23.

<sup>8</sup> Surah 6: 151-152.

<sup>9</sup> Surah 8: 56.

<sup>10</sup> Surahs 2: 256, 4: 128. But note other provision in the Quran granting a special place to Islam.

<sup>11</sup> *Jihad al Akbar*.

The Teachings of Muhammad came at a time when the globe was divided into many contending and often warlike tribes and groups. The concept of world peace and unity was not then capable of implementation, even if it could have been comprehended. It is not really surprising that Muhammad contemplated the permissible use of force in certain limited circumstances.

But the worldwide Islamic community now suffers from these very wide differences in interpretation as to when the use of force is permissible, with no way of conclusively determining through Islamic sources which view accurately reflects the Divine Will. In a religion that has always been dedicated not only to individual spiritual advancement but also to the spiritual renewal of society as a whole, and which in large measure now rejects the secular, materialistic ideology of the west, this raises some perplexing contemporary questions of vital importance<sup>12</sup>. World peace and security are directly affected.

In the time of the Bab<sup>13</sup>, the Founder/Prophet of the Babi Faith and Forerunner of Baha'i Faith, there were several instances of the use of defensive violence by groups of His followers in Persia in response to provocations. The Bab did not abrogate the law of jihad<sup>14</sup>, but neither did He advocate a holy war in furtherance of His Cause. Eventually the Babi community chose peace and good works rather than the sword<sup>15</sup>.

But it was Baha'u'llah Who, from the very inception of the Proclamation of His Cause in 1863 in Baghdad, Iraq, instructed His followers to abandon the sword<sup>16</sup> as a means of propagating the new Cause. He specifically abolished the concept of a violent jihad altogether<sup>17</sup>, and forbade His followers from engaging in contention and conflict<sup>18</sup>. Baha'is are not to carry arms unless essential in a dangerous environment<sup>19</sup>, relying instead on whatever

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<sup>12</sup> Not the least of which is the conflict between the aggressive interpretive approach to jihad and universal principles of fundamental human rights.

<sup>13</sup> 1819 – 1850.

<sup>14</sup> It is said, however, that the Bab made holy war contingent upon impossible conditions. The writer does not have access to the Bab's writings on this point. The Bab arose at a time when there was an expectation among many Shi'i Muslims of the return of the promised Qa'im or hidden Iman, who would, they thought, employ the sword to rid the world of the forces of evil, thereby making it difficult in practical terms for the Bab to immediately and totally abrogate the concept of jihad.

<sup>15</sup> Tablets of Baha'u'llah, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Logos and Civilization, 242; The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, Vol 1, 277-279; Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, 303.

<sup>17</sup> Tablets, op. cit., 21, 28; Epistle to the Son of Wolf, 25; The Summons to the Lord of Hosts, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Epistle, op. cit., 24.

<sup>19</sup> Kitab-i-Aqdas, 76.

organized legal force is available for their defence. However where no such legal force is at hand, individual Baha'is can justifiably defend their lives and that of their fellows<sup>20</sup>. But Baha'is are not as a group to organize any forceful defence<sup>21</sup>. Shedding of blood is not acceptable<sup>22</sup>, it being said that it is better to be slain than to slay. Teaching the Baha'i Faith is to be by utterance and not by resort to violence<sup>23</sup>.

The Baha'i Teachings contemplate a future world order based on a system of collective security, whereby the international community as a whole has the obligation to put down any aggressor or tyrant, if necessary by the use of force. Subject thereto, international disputes are to be resolved peacefully through appropriate international institutions with compulsory jurisdiction. Police forces should continue to exist to keep the peace, but armaments should be significantly reduced across the globe to only those essential for purposes of supporting the system of collective security and for peace keeping. A comprehensive and permanent world peace is the goal.

It is clear that if these Teachings were to be widely accepted and observed, most of the turmoil and violence in the world would cease. Whereas in previous religious dispensations it was not yet time for the implementation of a global society that was violence-free, the dictates of this present age increasingly point to the urgent need for such a world. But the world cannot progress in this direction while there continues to be the widespread practice of calling in aid concepts such as jihad, or for that matter any other justifications, religious or secular, for the use of war, violence and terror as a legitimate means of conducting human affairs. The call of Baha'u'llah is for a non-violent global future for all humanity as one race and one human family under the one, supreme God. All humanity now desperately needs this. Baha'is believe that this is the Divine Will for this age.

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<sup>20</sup> Kitab-i-Aqdas, 241.

<sup>21</sup> Baha'u'llah and the New Era, 157-158.

<sup>22</sup> Summons, op. cit., 23.

<sup>23</sup> Gleanings, op. cit., 178, 303, 329-330; Summons, op. cit., 23, 109.