

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

10-1-2008

Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence: A Critical Appraisal of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's View of Jihad (Part II)

Irfan A. Omar

Marquette University, irfan.omar@marquette.edu

Published version. *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, Vol. 72, No. 10 (October 2008):
751-758. [Publisher Link](#). © Vidyajyoti College of Theology 2008. Used with permission.

Towards an Islamic Theology of Nonviolence. II

A Critical Appraisal of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's View of Jihad

Irfan A. OMAR, Ph.D.

In the second and last part of his article (see September issue, 671-80) Dr Omar explains the true meaning of *Jihad* in the ancient Islamic sources, which does not stand for violent warfare but for the struggle that every Muslim, indeed every person, should go through to remain obedient to God's Word and to fulfil the will of God on earth. With this we wish to commemorate the UNO declared day dedicated to non-violence, the day known in India as Gandhi Jayanti (Oct. 2).

IV. Jihad: Struggle for the Inner Self

One of the main difficulties today is to agree on the "right" definition of jihad – a popular term associated with Islam not only in the West but also in most parts of the world. This is partly due to the multitude of Muslim groups around the world who have used, or rather *abused*, it for their own vested interests, often in the name of Islam. But it is also the media's sensationalist and hysterical usage of this notion which readily lends itself to be applied to a variety of situations involving Muslims and Islam. Thus from numerous alarmist designations of Muslim life in America as "jihad in America" to hostage crisis in the Philippines by sectarian-minded Muslims, all reflect one form of jihad or another. What is interesting to note here is that any time the term jihad is invoked by the radical extremists to justify their violent behaviour, most of us are willing to take their usage and thus their "definition" of the term at face value: just because they say so. That many scholars of Islam around the globe have been teaching, practicing and advocating the authentic Qur'anic meaning and usage of jihad is regarded as irrelevant or not paid any attention to. In some Islamophobic circles these explanations are even considered suspect. Hence the contestation of the term's meaning is much more complicated than it ought to be, which warrants the following analysis of the Qur'anic meaning of Jihad.

While the idea of jihad is utterly religious and has spiritual roots, its association with physical (armed) struggle emerged from the material success of early Muslims in battles against the giant Sassanid Empire and other political powers.²⁹ As Blankinship points out, these early material success stories were (and in theories about pristine Islam, still are)

²⁹ Khalid Y. BLANKINSHIP, *The End of the Jihad State*. State University of New York Press, 1994, 2.

interpreted as divinely inspired. Hence the perpetuation of the notion of jihad as primarily a means to maintain political status (or at least to engage in political struggle) resulted in the development of the "ideology of jihad," manifesting itself as one of the main features of the Umayyad caliphate.³⁰

In essence then the perception of jihad as "universal war" became dominant in later centuries, even though as early as the eighth century in-depth understandings of jihad prevailed over the militant understandings. Historically speaking, many political authorities have utilized the supposedly "religiously-sanctioned" militant usage, and have invoked *jihad as armed campaign* for their ideological and political undertakings. In the modern period, this meaning of jihad gained more currency due to some historical applications which were justified as religiously necessary by way of connecting them with the Muslim response to the Crusades.

Even as the application and consolidation of the notion of jihad as armed struggle was taking place in the early period of Islam, there were already then voices of dissent which claimed jihad applied primarily to the self – as inner spiritual struggle – on the basis of their readings of the Qur'an and the hadith. Therefore, it is questioned by many scholars today, including many traditionalist religious scholars, whether jihad as 'armed struggle' can be clearly drawn from the Qur'an since there the term always means 'struggle'. There is a wide consensus among them that armed conflict or warfare *while permitted* by the Qur'an is always referred to as *qitāl* ('fighting'), and not by the term jihad.³¹

The earliest verses to be revealed in relation to war are Q. 22:39-40, which are also the ones that allow *qitāl* as a means of defense against oppression.³² These verses do not sanction warfare as a means of political expansion or of religious and cultural hegemony.³³ Nevertheless, jihad

³⁰ Ibid. See especially Chapter One, "*Jihād* and the Caliphate before Hishām."

³¹ Vincent CORNELL, "Jihad: Islam's Struggle for Truth," *Gnosis* 21 (1991) 18-23.

³² The verse reads: "To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged – and verily Allah is Most Powerful for their aid." *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. Abdullah Yusuf ALI. Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1992, 832. See also Mahmoud AYOUB, "Jihad: A Source of Power and Framework of Authority in Islam," *Bulletin of the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies* (Japan) 6 (1992): 208; BLANKINSHIP, *The End of the Jihad State*, 12, also note 17. G.N. JALBANI, *Teachings of Hazrat Shah Waliyullah Muhaddis Dehlavi*. New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1997.

³³ As argued by Abdulaziz SACHEDINA, *The Just Ruler (al-sultān al-752 ādil) in Shi'ite Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 106.

was used to signify a total struggle which often, at least in the minds of Muslims, included the option to use arms.³⁴

One of the most important reasons for jihad was to aid so called "moral revolution" or to establish justice on earth by liberating human beings from their supposed oppressors. Additionally, "jihad by the sword" was meant to defend the freedom of belief and worship. In this regard Maulana Khan and many other scholars contend that since we are living in an "age of freedom of belief and worship," there can be no Qur'anic justification for the use of violence in general. Today most people have the freedom to believe and propagate their religion as well as to practice it in whatever way they wish so long as it remains within the limits of the law and does not violate the rights of others. This would mean that all forms of violence based on any justification, religious or otherwise, must now be rejected.

Muhammad Hamidullah explains the truth about war in Islam: "The life of the Prophet [i.e. Muhammad] provides reference to only three kinds of wars: defensive, punitive and preventive. In his celebrated correspondence with the Emperor Heraclius of Byzantium, in connection with the assassination of a Muslim ambassador in the Byzantine territory, the Prophet proposed three alternatives." Essentially through this letter Muhammad invites the Emperor to "embrace Islam." If he does not wish to do that then he may accept Muhammad and his Muslim subjects as a credible political entity and neighbouring political power. Even if that is not acceptable, the least that was asked of Heraclius in this letter was to allow his subjects the freedom to practice the religion of Islam if they "desire to embrace Islam."³⁵

In other words, the main aim of even the armed "jihad" in the earliest times was to establish "liberty of conscience in the world."³⁶ Many scholars including Maulana Wahiduddin Khan have argued that Islam's main objective was to free humankind from the constraints of "unbelief"

³⁴ Rudolph PETERS, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History*. The Hague: Mouton, 1979, 118 and 132-3. Cf. Bruce LAWRENCE, "Holy War (Jihad) in Islamic Religion and Nation-State Ideologies," in *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions*, eds. John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991, and James Turner JOHNSON, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

³⁵ Muhammad HAMIDULLAH, *Introduction to Islam*. Paris: Centre Culturel Islamique, 1969, 156. Cf. AYOUB, "Jihad: A Source of Power," 227-8.

³⁶ Ibid. See also, Muhammad HAMIDULLAH, *The Muslim Conduct of State*. Hyderabad: Government Press, 1942.

and "idolatry." Islamic thought freed the human mind from being obsessed by the deification of the phenomenal world and thus allowed advancement in scientific thinking and development. The same was true in the religious sense as well. The Qur'an, Khan insists, is "imbued with the spirit of tolerance," and yet the Muslim mind today reflects utter intolerance, invoking the very same Qur'an to wage war against its supposed enemies. He echoes many other scholars when stating: "The word 'jihad' has nowhere been used in the Qur'an to mean war in the sense of launching an offensive. It is used rather to mean 'struggle'." Thus there is a gross misappropriation of the principle of jihad by employing it in practice to mean something that in principle it did not imply. The principle as presented in the Qur'an views jihad as struggle, mainly the inner struggle of the *nafs* or self (*jihād al-akbar*, "greater jihad"), but the practice as proposed by some Muslims today is in terms of war or armed struggle, *jihād al-asghar* or "lesser jihad," which was at best understood to be provisional and therefore termed as such due to specific historical circumstances of early Muslim communities who were surrounded by hostile forces.³⁷

Mahmoud Ayoub, through an elaborate analysis of the notion of jihad, also distinguishes between the greater and lesser jihads. While the former (understood to be "striving in God") is more difficult and is a deeply spiritual notion, the latter ("striving in the way of God") is understood to be a social, political and military 'struggle'.³⁸ To Ayoub it is a "source of power and framework of authority," but to Khan the emphasis must be placed on its spiritual significance. He views jihad as a symbol of humility and piety. If Ayoub's emphasis lies on striving *in the way of God*, Khan chooses to interpret it primarily as striving *in God*, or as he prefers to call it, jihad with the self (*jihād bin nafs*).³⁹ Khan, arguing from a traditional perspective, calls for a purely spiritual understanding of the notion of jihad. The political (military) context is secondary and at best should be seen as limited to pre-modern times. In the religious sense its significance is eternal and it is in that sense that jihad must be understood and practiced today.⁴⁰ While jihad as armed struggle was necessary in the early years of Islam for a strategy of defense

³⁷ Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, "On Islam and Jihad," *Al-Risāla* (English), July-August 1999, 22.

³⁸ AYOUB, "Jihad: A Source of Power," 211-12.

³⁹ Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, "The Concept of Jihad," *Al-Risāla* (English), July-August 1997, 8-9; it also appeared in *The Pioneer*, Sunday, August 17, 1997.

⁴⁰ Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Islām: ek ta ārruf* ["Islam: an introduction"]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla Books, 1998, 54.

and survival,⁴¹ there is very little need for it in our present-day world where violent conflicts, mainly due to the nature of arms involved, have a far greater chance of resulting in the destruction of all sides and even the annihilation of the planet itself.⁴²

The era in which the Prophet of Islam lived, militancy was the order of the day and was perhaps the only means to obtain justice.⁴³ Further, this militant attitude, manifested in what are known as *ghazwat* (warfare), “was a sport, a source of fame and material wealth, and a way of life.”⁴⁴ It was more of an end in itself than a means to an end. Here one may begin to see two distinct understandings of the notion of jihad: conceptual/original and historical. For Khan, it is unfortunate that what historically transpired overshadowed what was originally intended. The notion of jihad, from his perspective, pertains entirely to an inner striving, a part of which also included in history defending one’s faith and livelihood. But the ‘part’ came to be understood as a whole and the central feature of the notion of jihad (*jihād bin nafs*) became hostage to its historical usage. Khan laments the fact that the biographers of the Prophet of Islam have grouped events in his life under the heading of battles (*ghazwāt* or *maghāzī*) and have failed to deal with how he “managed to avert the cataclysms of war.”⁴⁵ Further he says:

The Prophet’s biographies were called ‘*maghāzī*’, that is ‘The Battles Fought by the Prophet’, yet the Prophet Muhammad in fact did battle only three times in his entire life, and the period of his involvement in these battles did not total more than one and a half days. He fought, let it be said, in self-defence, when hemmed in by aggressors, where he simply had no option.⁴⁶

There are approximately eighty-three incidents of jihad in the sense of *qitāl* in early Islamic history; only three of those which happened in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, were armed jihads. There were many more

⁴¹ Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *Islām: ck ta ārruf* [“Islam: an introduction”]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla Books, 1998, 54.

⁴² Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, *The Ideology of Peace: Towards a Culture of Peace*. New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2003. See also his “Aman kī tāqat” [“the power of peace”], in *Mutāllia-i sirat* [“Study of Prophet’s Life”]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla, 1999, 183, and “Islāmi jihād kiyā hai” [“What is Islamic jihad”], in *Mazāmin-i Islām* [“Essays on Islam”]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla, 1998, 123.

⁴³ KHAN, “On Islam and Jihad,” 23.

⁴⁴ AYOUB, “Jihad: A Source of Power,” 206-7.

⁴⁵ KHAN, “On Islam and Jihad,” 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

situations where violence could have broken out between Muslims and other groups but was avoided by resorting to other means of settlement such as negotiation. The Prophet himself spent a total of only "a day and a half" in actual combat in his entire life. And it was during these three jihads, involving armed struggle that Muhammad fought to defend the life and property of Muslims. This becomes a strong basis on which Khan argues that Prophet Muhammad's policy was always to avoid violence and not to insist on it.⁴⁷ A hadith of the prophet often cited in this context says, "Do not wish confrontation with your enemy but always ask peace from Allah." This approach was considered radical at the time because the Arabs of Hejaz knew only one way to settle their disputes – through warfare. No difference of opinion could be resolved without conflict and the use of arms. Even against such odds, Prophet Muhammad introduced peaceful means, including diplomacy and dialogue.⁴⁸

V. Conclusion

Wahiduddin Khan contends that Islam is a nonviolent religion; violence or armed struggle is *only an exception* to this rule. Islamic activism for justice is a movement of and for peace; it is not a movement of protest and reactionary ideas, though Muslims have recently turned it into such in the name of jihad.⁴⁹ The Qur'an says, *al-sulhu khayrun* ("reconciliation is best"). There is no verse in the Qur'an, which says "fighting is the best way!" Thus it is clear to him that by jihad the Qur'an simply means "to strive" and has no relation to the notion of *qitāl* (fighting).⁵⁰ Again the Qur'an says, *wa jāhidhum bihi jihādan kabīrah* ("...engage in the greater jihad with [the Qur'an]").⁵¹ This is the Qur'anic jihad (*jihād al-akbar*), which is a form of peaceful struggle. Since the Qur'an is not a gun or a

⁴⁷ Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, "Jihad in Islam," Talk delivered in Urdu at Mt. Holly Islamic Center, Mt. Holly, NJ, September 15, 1996.

⁴⁸ KHAN, "Jihad in Islam." See also, KHAN, *Mutāli'a-i sirat*, 183ff. Similarly, Khan points out that the character of Islam at the time of the Prophet was for seeing a positive aspect in everything, even in humiliation. He gives many examples of the *sahāba* (companions of the Prophet) who in traditional Islam are regarded as models of behaviour for later generations.

⁴⁹ KHAN, *Fikr-i Islāmī*, 140ff. Cf. Asghar Ali ENGINEER, "Nonviolence in Islam," *Gandhi Marg* 14, 1 (April-June 1992) 98-106. In the same issue, see Syed Sikandar MEHDI, "Islam and Nonviolence," 116-40.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152. See also, Asghar Ali ENGINEER, "Islam and Doctrines of Peace and Non-violence," *Islam and the Modern Age*, 32, 1 (February 2001). Engineer lists several Qur'anic references to the term 'jihad' or its derivatives, all meaning 'to strive'. These are 9:19, 9:24, 22:78, 25:52, 29:6, 49:15 and 60:1. Similarly the term "qitāl" appears in 2:190, 4:75, 9:12-3, 9:29 and 22:39.

sword, he asks, how could one take it to mean armed struggle?⁵² This is a clear indication that Islamic activism is entirely peaceful.

Against the Qur'anic calls for a peaceful struggle in the path of self-reform, some radical Muslim groups today take a confrontational view of others and portray the "West" as anti-Islamic, trying their best to vindicate, sadly, the infamous notion of the "clash of civilizations." These groups justify a need to be in conflict with the so-called enemies of Islam which include nations such as the United States and Britain, even though many of these individuals live and work in these western countries to find those comforts of life which they may not be able to enjoy in their countries of origin. They have opportunities to be successful both in material as well as in spiritual domains; yet they choose to take the path of confrontation.

On the positive side of this debate it seems that despite the claims of increasing militancy among Muslims worldwide, a vast majority of Muslims regard the notion of jihad as a peaceful struggle. In a recent report by Richard Burkholder of the Gallup Poll he writes of a survey that was conducted on the meaning of "jihad" in several Muslim majority countries. He found that a majority of people surveyed (over 10,000) understood it to mean trying to fulfill "duty toward God" in their personal daily lives without any reference to war or armed conflict.⁵³ This clearly suggests that despite the volatile and violent world we live in since September 11, 2001, Muslims in general regard jihad as a personal struggle and they certainly reject jihad's equation with "holy war."

We may conclude from the above that Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's views on jihad and his justification of nonviolence in Islam – although viewed as problematic by some – brings hope of a continued theological discussion among Muslims towards establishing peace. In the eyes of many Muslims, Maulana Khan's views remain controversial, and thus their dissemination has made Maulana Khan, and those who associate with him, somewhat unpopular.⁵⁴ While at the same time, he is greatly admired by many others. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's efforts of the past

⁵¹ Qur'an, 25:52. Maulana WAHIDUDDIN KHAN, "Jihād-i kabīr," *Da'wat-i haq* ["Call towards truth"]. New Delhi: Al-Risāla Books, 1998, 8-9.

⁵² KHAN, "Non-Violence in Islam," unpublished paper, 2.

⁵³ See The Gallup Poll <http://www.galluppoll.com/content/?ci=7333&pg=1> accessed June 19, 2007.

⁵⁴ In particular there has been much resentment in some Muslim circles against Khan's refusal to grant legitimacy to violent Muslim anti-establishment movements

three decades and his theological reasoning regarding the need for a nonviolent understanding of jihad have generated some positive results; they have enabled a civil discussion among Muslim scholars on the subject of violence. This in itself is a positive development and Maulana Khan must be credited for being among one of the few *'ulama* to have taken up this challenge and to have argued for such a position at a time when it was extremely unpopular to do so. In addition his position has not changed in changing political circumstances or any outside pressure. At the same time, a consensus is emerging among traditional Muslim scholars worldwide regarding the need to liberate the notion of jihad from the bondage of mistranslation as well as misappropriation.⁵⁵ Increasingly it is becoming clear to many Muslims that on the basis of the Qur'an, which clearly distinguishes jihad or 'struggle' (in the way of God) from warfare (*qitāl*), one must be critical of the eccentric, politically motivated and violent interpretations of jihad – better known as "jihadist" or "jihadism" – and without confusing them with the spiritual value of all that the word originally signified.

in Kashmir and Chechnya as "jihads." Khan also categorically rejects anti-American and anti-western movements as having anything to do with jihad.

⁵⁵ Among the well-known *'ulama* who are sympathetic to Khan's views on nonviolent activism, are Abdurrahman Wahid, former president of the Republic of Indonesia and until recently chairman of the Nahdatul Ulama, the largest religious leaders' organization in Indonesia, and the noted Syrian scholar, Jawdat Sa'id. Both have written extensively on the need to reject senseless violence in the name of Islam carried out by a host of vigilante groups around the world.