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Definition of *Jihad*: Legitimate?

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Recent social and political events have prompted a new understanding of the concept of *Jihad*. Such events include World War II, in which Nazi Germany sought to cleanse the European continent of various other races, most specifically the Jewish population, and the attacks against America on September 11, 2001.[1] Some Muslims who believe in the *jihad* do not support the current militant *jihad* against America and the European countries. Al-Qaeda has helped redefine the concept of *jihad* in addition to raising debate about its legitimacy in waging *jihad*.

The term *jihad* has a vast history in which the meaning has changed, built upon itself, and been reinterpreted again so that previous meanings are no longer accepted. In 2002, Harvard University in Cambridge "selected a graduating senior named Zayed Yasin to deliver a speech at the university's commencement" who decided his speech would be on a controversial topic: "My American Jihad."[2] In his speech, Yasin defined *jihad* as the following:

> *Jihad* in its truest and purest form, the form to which all Muslims aspire, is the determination to do right, to do justice even against your own interests. It is an individual struggle for personal moral behavior. Especially today, it is a struggle that exists on many levels: self-purification and awareness, public service and social justice. On a global scale, it is a struggle involving people of all ages, colors, and creeds, for control of the Big Decisions: not only who controls what piece of land, but more importantly who gets medicine, who can eat.[3]

Barbara Metcalf defines *jihad* in *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* as "the inner struggle of moral discipline and commitment to Islam and political action."[4] And, yet again,

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jihad is often interpreted to mean "holy war."[5] While *jihad* has multiple meanings, al-Qaeda, a

"fundamentalist Islamic hegemony," does not understand the *jihad* as "an exclusively spiritual

notion."[6] According to the Qu'ran, "the word's literal meaning is "striving" or "exerting

oneself"... "with regard to one's religion."[7] While these are all sufficient definitions of the term

jihad, there are additional interpretations. *Jihad* exists on two levels: lesser and greater. Daniel

Pipes quotes the religious department head at Wake Forest University, Charles Kimball, as

saying that "[t]he great jihad for most is a struggle against oneself. The lesser jihad is the

outward, defensive jihad."[8] Many Muslims link warfare to *jihad*. However, al-Qaeda warfare

has extended beyond the general Muslims' understanding of the meaning of the term.

These fundamentalists have not followed the meaning most agreed upon by today's

Muslim community and Islam's religious leaders. The Muslim community views the *jihad* as:

> warfare authorized by a legitimate representative of the Muslim community for
>
> the sake of an issue that is universally, or nearly universally, acknowledged to be
>
> of critical importance for the entire community against an admitted enemy of
>
> Islam.[9]

Rather than focusing on the teachings and directions of religious figures, Muslim extremists have

listened to individuals such as Osama bin Laden and Mullah Muhammad Omar, leaders of al-

Qaeda and the Taliban.[10] However, as stated above, only prominent religious figures or heads

of state have the right to formally announce a *jihad*; Osama bin Laden and Mullah Muhammad

Omar are not "legitimate representative[s] of the Muslim community."[11] This divergence from

the Qur'an's teachings has brought about the question of

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al-Qaida's legitimacy as God's chosen defender of Islam, which is called into

question due to the tension between al-Qaida's military tactics and the concepts of

honorable combat held within Islamic tradition.[12]

The ideologies of al-Qaeda and its various networks portray them as over zealous,

fundamentalist thinkers.

The ideologies of bin Laden's al-Qaeda and its networks bring about the questioning of

its legitimacy in waging war. The following views make up the group's ideology:

[I]t is antidemocratic and totalitarian, utopian, opposes universal human rights and

the emancipation of women, anti-Western and anti-Semitic, and in favor of a

continuous violent struggle toward the establishment of universal fundamentalist

Muslim rule.[13]

After viewing this list, one can understand the reasons for trying to combat this terrorist group.

As David Cook writes in his book, *Understanding Jihad*, the *jihad*, as carried out by al-Qaeda, is

used by politicians "to conjure up terrifying images of irrational foreigners coming to destroy

American freedoms."[14] These images, sometimes verbal but mostly visual, help legitimize

America's involvement in the War in Iraq. He also writes that "*Jihad* has even entered our

everyday vocabulary, associated (by most non-Muslims) with unrestrained, unreasoning, total

warfare."[15] Is al-Qaeda's *jihad* legitimate? From the perspective of the outsider, al-Qaeda is

merely a bully with little reasoning other than to show his or her strength. Just as Saul

Smilansky writes, "There is, in terms of just war theory, simply no just cause."[16]

A simple explanation of *The Just War Theory* will help explain why Smilansky states that

there is no just cause. Understandably, there are two parts to *The Just War Theory*; however,

only one part will be considered to understand Smilansky's meaning. *The Just War Theory* sets

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"principles that would have to be satisfied for a nation to be justified in using military force, or initiating a war."[17] Barbara MacKinnon, author of *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues*, writes that "righting a wrong may be insufficient cause" as well as "preventing the spread of communism, ridding another country of a despotic and possibly dangerous leader, preventing a nation from obtaining and using nuclear weapons, and protecting the world's oil supply."[18] Consider the previous definition above that states issues "of critical importance" are reasoning enough for waging a *jihad*.[19] Can one find these types of issues in Muslim culture? Smilansky writes the following in response to this question:

> There is ample potential for Islamic self-expression, the development of Muslim culture, and the practice of Islam, the religion of over one billion people. There are many problems within Muslim societies, as well as vast wealth derived from oil that could help deal with them, but nothing here can justify a terror campaign.[20]

Still, the debate takes yet another turn.

Fundamentalist Muslims find fault with the United States and justify their *jihad* in response to American society. After 9/11 occurred, the United States moved to combat in Afghanistan and eventually in Iraq. Al-Qaeda spokesman, Abu Ghayth published "an article entitled 'In the Shadow of the Lances' on the internet" that suggested arguments for the initial attack on America.[21] For instance, Kelsay summarizes Ghayth's article when he writes, "The United States, then, is a prime example of an unjust state, since it is not governed by divine law."[22] Ghayth furthers his reasoning by criticizing America's efforts to impose conversion to democracy on other nations. Al-Qaeda's attack on the U.S. is a retaliation against military force used on other nations such as "Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia,…and others."[23] According

to Ghayth, "Qur'anic citations, as interpreted by recognized religious scholars" allow for this retaliation against America.[24]   However, the most compelling argument has to be the reciprocation of damages as denoted by Ghayth. Ghayth's claim is very straightforward. In his eyes, as well as in the eyes of other Islamic extremists, America has done more damage than they have. As far as Muslims are concerned, they

> have not reached parity with them. We have the right to kill 4 million Americans,
> 2 million of them children, and to exile twice as many and wound and cripple
> hundreds of thousands.[25]

This approach seems as cliché as the phrase "an eye for an eye," but it acts as a reasonable justification for warfare.

Can peace exist with an understanding of *jihad* in today's terms? Karima Alavi writes the following in her article entitled "Turning to the Islamic Faith":

> The word *islam* means 'submission,' but its three-letter root-slm-is the same as
> the linguistic root of the word 'peace.' The inference here is that one finds peace
> through submission to the will of God. The Koran tells us: 'The true servants of
> the All-Merciful are only those who walk humbly on the earth and who, when the
> ignorant address them, reply with words of peace' (Ch, 25, verse 63).[26]

One can only hope that this interpretation will become the newly accepted meaning in the future.

The redefining of the term *jihad* as well as debate over the legitimacy of al-Qaeda's current *jihad* has been prevalent in recent years and will remain, so it seems, well into the future. While the definition is constantly being revamped, the general concept of *jihad* remains constant in culture and religion alike. The arguments presented above are compelling, but do they really make al-Qaeda's modern *jihad* legitimate in the eyes of the outsider or that of other Muslims?

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As different interpretations of the term *jihad* remain for the various branches of Islam, the debate

over its meaning continues.

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1. Cook, David. *Understanding Jihad.* London: University of California Press, 2005, 1.

2. Pipes, Daniel. "Jihad and the Professors." *Commentary* 114, no. 4 (Nov. 2002): 17-22.

EBSCO Host, (18 April 2006). 17.

3. Pipes, 17-18

4.Rashid, Ahmed. *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia.* London: Yale University

Press, 2002, 2.

5. Cook, 1.

6. Smilansky, Saul. "Terrorism, justification, and illusion*. (Symposium On Terrorism, War,

And Justice)," *Ethics* 114, no. 4 (July 2004): 790-806. *Expanded Academic ASAP*, InfoTrac (15

February 2006), 796.

7. Cook, 1.

8. Pipes, 18

9. Cook, 3.

10. Rashid, 3.

11. Cook, 3.

12. Kelsay, John. "DEMOCRATIC VIRTUE, COMPARATIVE ETHICS, AND

CONTEMPORARY ISLAM." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33, no.4 (2005): 697-707. *Expanded*

Academic ASAP, InfoTrac (15 February 2006), 697.

13. Smilansky, 796.

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14. Cook, 1.

15. Cook, 1.

16. Smilansky, 796.

17. MacKinnon, Barbara. "Violence, Terrorism, and War." *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues*. 4th ed. Canada: Thomson Wadsworth, 2004. 434-435.

18. MacKinnon, 434-435.

19. Cook, 3.

20. Smilansky, 796.

21. Kelsay, 699-700.

22. Kelsay, 700.

23. Kelsay, 700.

24. Kelsay, 701.

25. Kelsay, 701.

26. Alavi, Karima Diane. "Turning to the Islamic Faith." *America*. 186, no. 7 (2002): 18-21. ECSCO Host, (18 April 2006). 20.

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