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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**RECLAIMING THE SOUL OF JIHAD: SPIRITUALITY AND JUSTICE IN MODERN MUSLIM DISCOURSE****Dr. Muhammad Zakariya**

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zaka336@gmail.com**Abstract**

This paper analyzes the concerted effort by modern Muslim scholars and intellectuals to reclaim the concept of jihad from its violent appropriation by extremist factions. It documents a theological project aimed at re-anchoring jihad in its primary Qur'anic and Prophetic foundations: the spiritual struggle for self-purification (jihad al-nafs) and a perpetual commitment to social justice. Through critical analysis of contemporary exegeses and Islamic literature, the research elucidates the intellectual strategies employed to deconstruct militant interpretations. Scholars are articulating a vision of jihad responsive to modern challenges, framing it as a struggle for moral courage, inner faith, and peaceful resistance to injustice and oppression. Crucially, the study establishes that this reinterpretation is not an innovation but a revival of classical principles, challenging the notion that non-violent interpretations are a modern concession. This reclamation is positioned as a vital counter-narrative to extremism, seeking to divorce legitimate Islamic doctrine from politicized violence. The paper concludes that this scholarly endeavor is essential for constructing a progressive Islamic identity in the 21st century. By reasserting jihad's core ethical and spiritual dimensions, this discourse aims to foster an Islamic ethos that contributes meaningfully to global peace, social justice, and intercultural dialogue, offering a powerful alternative to the polarizing rhetoric of extremists.

Keywords: Jihad al-Nafs, Islamic Modernism, Peaceful Jihad, Social Justice in Islam, Theological Reform, Muslim Intellectuals, Spiritual Struggle.

Introduction

The noticeable and significant increase in the number of extremist movements that have emerged from various interpretations of Islam at the beginning of the twenty-first century raises a multitude of complex and challenging questions. These inquiries are a focal point for an array of thinkers, scholars, orientalist, and international decision-makers, all of whom endeavor to comprehend and engage meaningfully in discussions surrounding this intricate and multifaceted phenomenon (Habib2022). It is crucial, therefore, to elucidate the necessity for a fresh and comprehensive reinterpretation of the concept of jihad. This effort must include a thorough exploration aimed at addressing the varied perspectives on this idea within the much larger context of Islamic knowledge that is currently being disseminated in today's modern landscape of contemporary Islamic discourse. This very discourse is fundamentally characterized by two contrasting and often conflicting approaches: one that seeks to reinforce the traditional understanding of jihad, which is deeply rooted in a military or violent context, and another that promotes a more vacuous, superficial, and peaceful version of jihad that lacks the same depth and critical insight. (Mohamed, 2023) This duality of interpretation continues to flourish and thrive within the framework of contemporary Islamic thought and debate. There is a concerted effort

ongoing to eliminate or reinterpret certain jurisprudential terms that have historically permitted the practice of violence—including specific acts of killing—while simultaneously focusing on amplifying the meanings and principles associated with peace and reconciliation. This significant shift aims to cultivate stability and promote the constructive development of social and political peace as a proactive alternative to the path of violence and discord. By engaging in this vital dialogue, society seeks to navigate the intricate complexities of these interpretations and their wide-ranging implications, striving diligently for a future that prioritizes understanding, coexistence, and harmony over conflict and discord in all its forms. (Hosseini, 2023)

Jihad occupies a prominently significant and multifaceted position in Islamic belief, jurisprudence, and a wide variety of political and social Islamic movements. It refers to the concept commonly recognized as "holy war," which was initially understood as engaging in combat for the sake of one's religion—whether that be fighting against infidels and heretics, defending the state, or striving to spread the teachings of Islam in societies that have not yet embraced it (Hoque et al. 2023). Moreover, jihad can be perceived as an ethical and internal battle that takes place within the soul of an individual. It is imperative to note that jihad is also considered an integral part of classical Islamic legislation. In this discourse, we explore the conflicts that jihad generates, as well as the approaches to its limitations and regulations as stipulated by Islamic jurisprudence. This conflict is deeply rooted in the contrasting desires of extremists who advocate for unrestrained jihad, and the apologists or moderates who seek to downplay its use or influence. Each of these groups staunchly assumes that their particular interpretation is grounded in the specific conditions of the relevant verses or hadiths that would justify their stance. In a similar vein, countless narratives and fictionalized tales highlighting the experiences of women and children who fall victim to or are lured into extremist interpretations of jihad serve to underscore the destructive impact such radical views have on the psychological well-being of Muslims in numerous regions around the globe.

The Concept of Jihad in Islamic Tradition

The concept of jihad in the Islamic tradition has its roots in multiple meanings that encompass 'effort', 'struggle', and 'exhaustion'. When we delve into terminological studies, we find that the word jihad first emerged during the active life of the Holy Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. It derived from the same Arabic root words 'jayada', 'juhd', and 'mujahada', all of which convey notions of striving and exertion. (Afsaruddin, 2022) However, the idea of jihad did not become a significant and widely recognized element of Islamic thought and practice until the Meccan period of the Prophetic message, which was marked by challenges and the need for resilience among the early Muslim community. Various modern and historical writers have frequently translated the word jihad into English as 'holy war', a term that carries a multitude of connotations. Despite this, the most accurate translation would be the word 'conflict' or 'fight', as it encompasses a broader spectrum of meaning. Nonetheless, jihad consistently implies a form of physical struggle or effort. Unfortunately, it has often been equated both generally and historically with the Western notion of 'war', failing to capture the multifaceted and often spiritual nature of jihad, even when it pertains to actions motivated by divine cause.

The Islamic tradition encompasses a multifaceted understanding of spiritual struggle as well as military involvement, specifically delineating four recognized meanings of jihad: the personal struggle for self-improvement, the abrogating jihad, the persuasive jihad, and the permissible and illegal jihad. Each of these forms plays a significant role in contextualizing the principles and

practices of Islam. It is of utmost importance to accurately determine and grasp the specific context in which the term jihad is employed, as well as the various ethical and doctrinal dilemmas that it presents. (Aziz et al., 2024) These concerns are rooted in the classical interpretations derived from the Qur'an and Hadith. Historically, throughout the evolution of Islamic thought, the traditional definitions of these various types of jihad underwent careful examination by recognized and authoritative interpreters of the Qur'an. These scholars provided insights that revealed the complexities and nuances of armed conflict as articulated in Islamic texts, often citing the Koranic verses and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad to support ideas such as the necessity of self-defense and the struggle for a just Muslim nation amidst challenges (Karimullah, 2023). With these authoritative pre-modern readings as a backdrop, it becomes feasible to argue that contemporary interpretations of jihad often do not genuinely reflect or accurately represent Islamic origins. In many instances, they may misinterpret the warlike traits of Islam, leading to confusion and misunderstanding regarding the true spiritual and military implications of the concept of jihad within the faith.

Historical Evolution of Jihad Interpretations

At the very beginnings of religion, each is considered as civilized or referred to as a 'true religion,' and during those early days, every faith went through a significant period that is often viewed as a foundational stage in which its many rituals and established precepts were practiced quite easily and without great complexity (Fernández & González-González, 2022). Some scholars are currently looking into the time of the Prophet Muhammad as being such an influential period where the precepts of Islam were easy for the believers' understanding, acceptance, and practice. Indeed, in such an early, simple, and closely-knit society of Medina, many mutual guarantees and cooperative agreements were necessary to face the threats posed by the pagans, especially those from Mecca and the local Jewish tribes; therefore, all Muslims had to be fully united in supporting the Prophet in all his movements and consistently stand against the oppressive policies formulated by the Meccans, who were actively enslaving people and mercilessly exploiting individuals' properties and assets after killing their relatives. Economic and military conquests that carried no motive of revenge or hatred, while presumably targeting the unity and solidarity of the community of Muslims, were predominantly directed against the Meccans, who allegedly supported all wars and hostilities that were being plotted against Muhammad and his followers. (Akhtar et al., 2022) A notable number of military expeditions conducted against some Jewish Arabian settlements serve as evidence of the conflicts and concerns that underscore the tumultuous period in question. Historically, in various distinct stages of Islamic societies throughout the ages, periods of hegemony and political power decadence have emerged, leading to a complex interpretation of jihad, which is recognized widely as 'the holy war.' Over time, it became not only a tool of defense but also an expedient form of domestic refusal and resistance within the framework of Islamic interpretation. This retrogressive defense tool, regrettably, has contributed to the intellectual stagnation of many Islamic nations, resulting in a backward state that often struggles to engage with logically sound arguments and contemporary thoughts (Sayyid, 2022). Consequently, it becomes imperative to understand the legitimate capacity to interpret jihad, and this responsibility falls upon different experts, jurists, and religious authorities who possess the knowledge and understanding required. To grasp this intricate issue, we need to familiarize ourselves with the historical evolution of attitudes toward this very important Islamic precept, which is thoroughly discussed in the Qur'ān and reflects the reasons for its significance during the

time of Muhammad. Such a comprehensive historical study is expected to aid us in better understanding how jihad has been construed and debated, and, crucially, to explore the specific cultural and social contexts in which these interpretations have evolved and changed over time, especially in modern assemblies and discussions.

Extremist Interpretations of Jihad

In recent decades, there has been a remarkable and notable rise in various extremist interpretations of jihad, which are often framed as an inherently violent struggle against perceived enemies. These interpretations have managed to embed themselves deeply into various regions of the global umma, leading to an alarming increase in violence and terrorism that significantly affects many societies and communities worldwide (Askhatuly et al.2024). The struggle itself, along with the specific conditions surrounding it, which previously resided within the highly specialized terminological domain of only a select group of experts, has now permeated and infiltrated mainstream discourse. It has become the buzzwords of today's media landscape, generating much discussion and debate. This evolution has significantly transformed the very meaning of jihad, expanding it to encompass not only genuine struggles for justice but also unjust wars of aggression, as well as heinous crimes that are committed against innocent noncombatants who bear no direct responsibility for the ongoing conflict. A thorough and critical examination of the interpretative techniques that extremist groups utilize reveals a fundamental flaw in their often distorted interpretations when viewed through the lens of classical Islam. Often, key statements and important verses are taken out of context, which distorts their original meanings, leading to significant misunderstandings. Additionally, these interpretations frequently involve the deliberate and selective introduction of supplementary sources that align conveniently with their extremist agendas, while simultaneously engaging in critical processes of academic selection and ideological exclusion. Such practices play an essential and crucial role in shaping a narrative that not only misrepresents the true essence of jihad but also skews and distorts the foundational principles of Islam itself, thus misleading many followers and observers around the world (Umar). Extremist organizations frequently engage in the construction of elaborate scenarios that are designed to distort classical teachings in a manner that aligns with their extreme and often radical views. In addition to these distortions, personal motives play a significant role in shaping their teachings and the rationale they provide (Kazmi, 2022). Political goals are particularly dominant in their explanations of why believers should be motivated to engage in combat, imparting a sense of urgency to their messaging that may compel individuals to act if necessary. While the topic of jihad is not inherently considered dangerous in principle, the distorted interpretations of jihadi ideologies related to Islam have the potential to destabilize societies on various levels. These distorted narratives create an existential threat to Muslim communities and contribute to an environment that promotes their Islamization. Regardless of whether they have succeeded in their ultimate goals, it is clear that everyone is impacted by the high public profile and visibility they have given to jihad in contemporary discourse (Safi, 2022). Through the effective use of modern communication technologies, these organizations have been able to articulate a coherent jihadi narrative and broadcast provocative imagery beyond the confines of traditional audiences and platforms. Although the broader umma, or global Muslim community, may unequivocally reject their extremist views and the strategies they employ, the fact remains that these organizations continue to be the public face of jihad in the current socio-political landscape, influencing perceptions and narratives worldwide.

Peaceful and Moderate Interpretations of Jihad

In stark opposition to various interpretations that advocate for aggressiveness and violence in the name of Islam, a significant number of respected Islamic scholars, theologians, and dedicated activists have passionately proposed new, more nuanced, or less widely recognized interpretations of jihad. (Hasanzadeh & Renani, 2023) These interpretations are deeply reconciled with a rich Islamic tradition that emphasizes strong principles of community, mutual respect, and hospitality. These scholars assert a renewed interpretation of jihad grounded in genuine Islamic teachings and values, even though it has been stated that only modern Muslims are required to embrace and enact this understanding. Numerous initiatives and movements emerging from these perspectives seek to educate others about the true essence of Islam and actively fight against the widespread misconceptions and misinterpretations surrounding the concept of jihad. They aim to clarify and correct the narrative by addressing the abuse and misunderstanding that often surround this incredibly complex and multifaceted concept. Progressive interpretations of jihad frequently take on a deliberate purpose to serve as a critical counter-argument against extremist ideologies that misrepresent Islam. In response to the continuous references made in various media outlets that tend to associate militarism, terrorism, and violence with jihad and Islam, other thoughtful initiatives, movements, and scholarly contributions are striving to propose more moderate and peaceful interpretations of jihad. (Mirza, 2022) Their efforts are designed to neutralize the extremist or aggressive understandings of this vital concept, advocating instead for a vision of Islam that resonates with peace, compassion, and understanding.

Precisely such approaches are the focal point of scholarly and activist attention, which will purposefully highlight the beneficial and constructive dimensions of jihad, often promoting various community-serving activities as an integral part of the extensive tradition of Islamic activism, sometimes even replacing the concept of jihad with alternative forms of worship that resonate with the core values of compassion and service (Kazmi, 2022). Specifically, this discourse seeks to significantly emphasize the importance of interpreting jihad in a manner that accurately contextualizes its diverse applications: as an activist ideology that describes a specific and concrete historical and social reality that has evolved over centuries. Jihad, it will be argued, is indeed part of a long-standing and rich tradition of peace activism that has emerged in different forms throughout history. This noble tradition, however, does more than simply propose peace or non-violence as mere alternatives; it earnestly seeks to fundamentally change the entrenched political status quo and thus perform a genuine and transformative jihad. Instead of merely offering an apologetic defense of jihad or engaging in discussions about the theological justifications or condemnations of extreme or aggressive interpretations, as most traditional scholars have tended to do, we propose to overcome this reductive binary approach and focus keenly on what productive and truly constructive elements can be authentically retrieved from a concept that is so deeply intertwined with violence. By doing so, we aim to amplify a narrative that celebrates the potential for jihad as a vehicle for positive change and as a means of achieving social justice within the framework of Islamic principles.

Challenges and Opportunities for Reinterpreting Jihad

Reinterpreting jihad, particularly in the context of modern Islamic discourse, presents a multitude of challenges, yet it also opens up new avenues of opportunity for understanding. First and foremost, one is required to confront and overcome the often stereotyped image of any new understanding and treatment of the concept of jihad (Shahzadi, 2021). This involves addressing

accusations of betraying the religion itself, promoting the weakening of faith among believers, and dealing with the broader concerns surrounding the secularization of faith that have surfaced in recent discussions. The notion that any form of unofficial recognition of jihad, and in particular, military activity related to it, has increasingly become a motivating factor for acts of terrorism has gained a dominant foothold in the public consciousness in recent years. This prevailing belief fosters a destructive cycle of stereotypical ideas and misunderstandings that significantly contribute to the radicalization of opposing views, both within the Muslim community and in its interactions with the broader global community affected by these issues. As a result, it is nearly impossible to achieve a clear and objective discussion regarding the essence and intrinsic value of jihad, as such discussions are irrevocably entangled with the biases that perpetuate around it (Zainiddinov2023). Furthermore, secondly, within the contemporary Islamic landscape, there exists a relentless resistance from various traditional and radical forces that vehemently reject any reinterpretation of jihad. They resist this reinterpretation mainly because it threatens to dilute its longstanding association with warfare. In doing so, they continue to perpetuate the problematic idea of extremism as a means of confronting what they perceive as the extraordinary particularity of 'real' Islam, a perception that is defined by their own experiences with violence and intolerance. This dynamic only serves to complicate the discourse on jihad further, keeping the cycle of misunderstanding and extremism alive.

Conversely, the contemporary global tension surrounding religion and the collective mobilization of religious efforts for the purposes of promoting peace has opened up a wide array of new opportunities that were not readily available before. Businessmen today are increasingly engaging in robust inter-religious dialogues, which have significantly reinforced the Islamic-Christian dialogue in many contexts (Ghazali & Kamal, 2023). A new generation of passionate activists fervently seeks to promote peace or constructive dialogue between the rich Islamic traditions and the often contrasting Western world, as well as between various alternative religious and philosophical traditions that exist in diverse eastern encounters worldwide. Against this dynamic backdrop, the teachings and principles inherent in such theories can be communicated in numerous ways, and they are more vigorous and relevant at present than during the secular tendencies that predominantly characterized the Cold War era.

Some scholars and activists operating within the Islamic field passionately claim that globalization embodies a peaceful concept, which seeks to create a global village characterized by meditative compassion and understanding for one another. Many scholars, along with politicians, have developed a keen interest in promoting international relations that are based on the notion of settlement. This is understood as the resolution of a long-lasting conflict that affects generations, which can indeed arise from a mutual spiritual understanding and a deep-rooted harmony that is anchored in social relations and fostered by mutual trust. More importantly, globalization presents various programs and opportunities that engage with Islamic values and promote a better understanding of the rich and diverse cultural values of the secular West and the East. This ultimately leads to an increase in collaboration and cooperation among scholars and religious leaders from different background (Rahmawati et al.2022).

Moreover, the roles of media, the Internet, and educational systems, especially prevalent in the poorest societies around the globe, possess the substantial capacity to decrease or multiply stereotypes. They play a crucial role in promoting dialogue and fostering harmony among various communities (Randell-Moon2023). This potential can manifest both in interfaith dialogue

initiatives and in the dedicated efforts aimed at developing and appreciating intercultural understanding and mutual respect among different political and social forces. Education at all levels can also significantly contribute to dismantling these stereotypes by fostering a panoramic understanding of world religions and cultures. Such understanding ultimately leads to peaceful ethics and teachings that need to be conscientiously derived from different standards of justice and inclusive change. It is within this context, with the primary purpose of undermining opposing views in sociology and various sources of conflict, that a fresh perspective can be opened within Islamic communities and among different Islamic traditions to promote tolerance, constructive dialogue, and genuine understanding. In the political y of contemporary Islamic societies, and in order to effectively counter the traditional and martyrdom-driven agenda of extremist jihadism, it is increasingly urgent to plan and implement a reorientation towards moderate and diverse interpretations of Islam that can resonate positively with the broader global community.

Case Studies: Reinterpretation Efforts in Islamic Institutions

As extremist interpretations of jihad take a wayward turn in various modern Islamic discourses today, numerous attempts have emerged to reinterpret, redefine, and provide clarity on the concept through the efforts of scholars of Islamic studies along with several institutions that represent a significant portion of the Muslim world. These attempts have manifested in specific initiatives presented in the form of modern Islamic institutions designed to offer fresh perspectives. (Rehman, 2022) Sifting through the countless examples available throughout the globe, the cases outlined below serve to evidence the successful reinterpretation initiatives that have sought to actively challenge and counter the pervasive web of extremist interpretations of jihad that exist. These extensive discussions provide valuable general insights on the nature of effective responses to the theological challenges that extremist interpretations could pose, presenting a collaborative approach to redefine narratives and foster more peace-oriented dialogues within and outside the Muslim community. (Ibrahim2021)

As seen in this text, the various efforts to actively challenge interpretative hijackings in contemporary discourse take place through a multitude of approaches. These strategies include a range of intra-institutional reform trials that deliberately draw themselves toward the modernization of Islam while simultaneously remaining fully anchored in the core practices and enduring traditions of Islam itself. Each specific case approaches the complex issue of teaching reinterpretation in markedly different ways, depending on their unique contexts — from the emphasis on formal education and institutional frameworks in Indonesia, extending to Lebanon's community-embedded and outreach-heavy initiatives, and then to Malaysia's focused leadership training efforts aimed at fostering a more progressive understanding of Islamic tenets (Mohamed, 2024). The following section contains invaluable insights that can be gleaned from these diverse approaches. A thorough comparison between these various methodologies can provide valuable literature and contribute meaningfully to efforts that seek to promote Islamic peace and reconciliation in our increasingly interconnected modern age. By recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, we can better navigate the complexities involved in fostering understanding and collaboration within the framework of Islamic teachings and practices (Riaz et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the answer to the complex research question regarding the reinterpretation of jihad in modern Islamic discourse has been thoroughly presented based on the historical roots of these

diverse interpretations. The discussion above has been laid out while outlining the conflictive and peaceful perspectives that arise due to extremists' recent salience and visibility in the media, as well as in various other public sphere outlets. However, it is essential to note that exclusively identifying this particular interpretation should be counteracted with a discourse that actively intensifies and elevates peaceful relevant sources and perspectives on this topic. Accordingly, any significant change or reinterpretation in the meaning of jihad might indeed be reconciliatory when it thoughtfully includes the various elements that exist within the dominant discourse surrounding this concept. A bipolar interpretation of jihad, as introduced in the initial part of this examination, alongside its critical relevance for the modern responsibilities associated with this concept, serves as a microcosm of one scholarly area of Islamic studies that warrants further inquiry. Moreover, further exploration of the diverse interpreters who significantly contribute to contemporary understandings of jihad represents one potential method for deeper exploration and analysis in this field. Such study may help clarify the nuanced arguments and perspectives that shape current perceptions and might even bridge gaps in understanding among differing viewpoints.

A thorough understanding of multiple views on this important concept could help reconcile some of the violence, both physical, in the form of armed conflict, and verbal sharpening that is present in the work of various Muslim communities and between Muslim communities and the dominant population in which they exist. Jihad is often marginalized or handled in a superficial manner in analyses relating to the rearticulating of religiosity in the contemporary period. However, future studies and reflections that consider how jihad is being reinterpreted with regard to its contribution to justice and peace, a key principle in various worldwide religions, can broaden the current knowledge related to this discussion. Collaboration at local and international levels between scholars and religious leaders who believe in the possibility of such a reinterpretation should be embarked on. Similarly, dialogue at local and international levels with activists working for peace in Muslim-majority surroundings is necessary to coordinate strategies and efforts. They represent crucial actors who experience and make sense of such dynamics on a daily basis. Engaging in proactive efforts of this kind is crucial, as it allows the challenge of interpretation to be confronted head-on and an increasingly better balance to be shifted toward jihad as a principle for which the underlying conceptualization is concerned with justice and peace.

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