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**“Text, Context and Human Agency in Interpreting Jihad:
Struggles of Political Domination, Faith, and Identity”**

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Abstract

Jihad may be the premiere example of a textual term taken out of scriptural context in order to serve human purposes. This paper reviews the use of the term in the Qur’an, Hadith and various epochs of Muslim history and examines with close scrutiny its use by Ibn Khaldun, as well as his Orientalist translator, Franz Rosenthal, and the Neo-orientalist *dhimmitude* movement. The term that initially referred to the utmost exertion “in the path of God,” i.e., by pure means to a pure end was gradually extended to include a manifest destiny for political domination. The revival of this interpretation into a form of “call to aggressive warfare” by the 20th century *hirabist* movement has been further extended by the pseudo-intellectual *dhimmitude* movement into a claim that jihad is a call for the forcible conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. Relying on the work of Franz Rosenthal, Ibn Khaldun is cited as an authority to argue that this interpretation was prevalent as early as the 14th century C.E. Using the original Arabic text of Ibn Khaldun, its immediate context in the Muqaddimah, as well as the Qur’anic and legal context, this paper demonstrates how Ibn Khaldun addressed the question of political domination. Hence, this study concludes that the disputes over the meaning of jihad demonstrate that the conflict within civilizations in which Neo-orientalists and *hirabists* share a perspective that leads toward a warfare of religious identity, while moderates both among western scholars of Islam and Muslim reformers share a perspective that leads to the recognition of a religious mandate for tolerance.

Introduction

Jihad may be the premiere example of a textual term taken out of scriptural context in order to serve human purposes. The term that initially referred to the utmost exertion “in the path of God,” i.e., by pure means to a pure end was gradually extended to include a manifest destiny for political domination. The revival of this interpretation into a form of “call to aggressive warfare” by the 20th century *hirabist* movement has been further extended by the

pseudo-intellectual dhimmitude movement into a claim that jihad is a call for the forcible conversion of non-Muslims to Islam.

Historical Context

There is no denying that jihad is used to refer to “armed struggle” in the Qur’an.¹ The word (a verbal noun) itself appears only two times in the Qur’an:

Say: If it be that your fathers your sons your brothers your mates or your kindred; the wealth that ye have gained; the commerce in which ye fear a decline; or the dwellings in which ye delight are dearer to you than God or His apostle or the **jihad** in his cause; then wait until God brings about His decision: and God guides not the rebellious. (9:24)

O ye who believe! take not My enemies and yours as friends (or protectors) offering them (your) love even though they have rejected the Truth that has come to you and have (on the contrary) driven out the Prophet and yourselves (from your homes) (simply) because ye believe in God your Lord! If ye have come out [in] **jihad** in My Way and to seek My Good Pleasure (take them not as friends) holding secret converse of love (and friendship) with them: for I know full well all that ye conceal and all that ye reveal. And any of you that does this has strayed from the Straight Path. (60:1)

In both of these cases it is modified by a phrase distinguishing this struggle from struggle in general by the qualification that it is in Allah’s way or cause (*sabîl*). Thus the encouraged jihad must be understood as shorthand for jihad *fi sabîl Allah* only. The characteristics of this jihad are implied in the first verse and made explicit in the second: war in defense of those oppressed for their submission to God. Further, the qualifier must be understood as requiring such struggle be conducted without transgressing the limits that Allah elsewhere spells out for just warfare.²

Analysis of the other forms of the word derived from the same root lead to the same conclusion. When, for example, the root form is used without the qualifier, it can be something evil, even against God, as, for example:

“We have enjoined on man kindness to parents: but if they (either of them) strive [*jahâda*] (to force) thee to join with Me (in worship) anything of which thou hast no knowledge obey them not. Ye have (all) to return to Me and I will tell you (the truth) of all that ye did.” (29:8)

The same analysis holds for many hadith. See, e.g., Sahih Bukhari 4:46, 47, 56, 63, 74, 81-83, 91, 92, 96, etc. It is not to contradict the standard interpretation of the superiority of the Greater Jihad (spiritual struggle against the evil in oneself) over the Lesser (armed struggle) to acknowledge that the more common use of the term is to refer to the Lesser Jihad.

However, the use of the term in the Qur’an seems to be confined to defensive jihad. This is not to imply that offensive tactics and strategies are not permitted, for they assuredly are, but rather that fighting is explicitly permitted only against those who initiate aggression:

And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who being weak are ill-treated (and oppressed)? Men women and children whose cry is: "Our Lord! rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from Thee one who will protect; and raise for us from Thee one who will help!"

Those who believe fight in the cause of Allah and those who reject faith fight in the cause of evil: so fight ye against the friends of Satan: feeble indeed is the cunning of Satan. (4:75-76).

It is equally clear that aggression does not meet the condition *fi sabil Allah*³ and that war against those who seek peace⁴ or asylum⁵ is prohibited.

The consensus on the defensive jihad is then accepted by almost all Muslims and is well established in the schools of law.⁶ With the rapid spread of Islam in its first century after the passing of the Prophet (pbuh), some Muslim scholars were attracted to a notion of manifest destiny for Islam and conceived that warfare waged for the offensive purpose of the subjugation of territory to Islamic rule (as opposed to tactical offensive war intended to defend the community from a belligerent external enemy) should also qualify as *jihad fi sabil Allah*. In order to justify this expansionist interpretation of the Qur'an in the face of the unambiguous prohibitions of aggression, its defenders had to appeal to the notion of abrogation, not merely interpreting the commands to fight the *kaafirun* as unconditional, but insisting that they nullified contrary verses such as Surat-al-Kafirun (109:1-6), in contradiction of the dominant belief that the Qur'an is eternal.

The first comprehensive treatise on jihad appears in the late eighth century⁷ and the details of how the limited Qur'anic notions of jihad expanded to include the imperialist notion cannot be ascertained without conjecture. Nonetheless, the bottom line of the classical analysis is well-known: defensive jihad is *fard 'ayn*, a requirement on the entire community, while offensive jihad is *fard al kifayah*, a collective duty to be fulfilled by representatives of the community under the authority of a legitimate caliph.⁸ (Since the Shia consider the last righteous imam to be in occultation, no expansionist jihad is possible for them.⁹ The hadith are clear that if such expansionist enterprises are admissible, their purpose cannot involve forced conversions, but only political expansion:

When the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) appointed anyone as leader of an army or detachment he would especially exhort him to fear Allah and to be good to the Muslims who were with him. He would say: Fight in the name of Allah and in the cause of Allah. Fight against those who do not believe in Allah. Wage a holy war: do not embezzle the spoils, do not break your pledge, do not mutilate (the dead) bodies and do not kill the children. When you meet enemies who are polytheists, invite them to three courses of action. If they respond to any one of these, you also accept it and restrain yourself from doing them any harm. Invite them to (accept) Islam; if they respond to you, accept it from them and desist from fighting against them. Then invite them to migrate from their lands to the land of Muhajirs and inform them that, if they do so, they shall have all the privileges and obligations of the Muhajirs. If they refuse to migrate, tell them that they will have the status of Bedouin Muslims and will be subjected to the Commands of Allah like other Muslims, but they will not receive any share from the spoils of war or Fay' except when they actually fight with the Muslims (against the nonbelievers). If they refuse to accept Islam, demand

from them the Jizyah. If they agree to pay, accept it from them and hold your hand. If they refuse to pay the tax, seek Allah's help and fight them. When you lay siege to a fort and the besieged appeal to you for protection in the name of Allah and His Prophet, do not accord to them the guarantee of Allah and His Prophet, but accord to them your own guarantee and the guarantee of your companions. It is a lesser sin that the security given by you or your companions be disregarded than that the security granted in the name of Allah and His Prophet be violated. When you besiege a fort and the besieged want you to let them out in accordance with Allah's Command, do not let them come out in accordance with His Command, but do so at your (own) command, for you do not know whether or not you will be able to carry out Allah's behest with regard to them (Sahih Muslim #4294).

The further expansion of jihad beyond this notion of manifest destiny into a more aggressive concept is a recent development as some modern Muslims have sought to retaliate against colonialism with its own medicine. They have sought to incorporate jihad into their ideological/political version of Islam through the claim that offensive warfare is a religious duty. To avoid charges of *bid`a* they have asserted that this religious duty has been “forgotten” by the Muslims. The Egyptian radical Abd as-Salim Faraj (of the organization responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat) made the seminal articulation of this novel concept by applying Ibn Taymiyyah’s fatwa that the Mongol rule of his era was illegitimate because they did not apply Islamic law, despite professing the Islamic faith, to the Egypt of his own time and then going a step further and insisting that it was not only the right of Muslims to fight such a regime, but their duty.¹⁰ Subsequently, disciples of this notion have gone further still, insisting that it is necessary to take the battle beyond the “near enemy” of the dictators ruling the Muslim world to the homelands of “the far enemy” their imperial sponsors.¹¹

Ibn Khaldun and His Translator

Relying on the work of the Orientalist translator Franz Rosenthal, the Neo-orientalist *dhimmitude* movement has cited Ibn Khaldun as an authority to argue that the interpretation of jihad as a call to forced conversion was prevalent as early as the 14th century C.E.¹² Here is Rosenthal’s translation:

In the Muslim community, the holy war is a religious duty, because the universalism of the (Muslim) mission and the (obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or force. Therefore, caliphate and royal authority are united in (Islam), so that the person in charge can devote the available strength to both of them at the same time.¹³

The legal and Qur’anic context has been explored above and leaves no room for forced conversions. In addition to the passages cited, one may add the categorical “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256) which, notwithstanding the claims of Pope Benedict to the contrary¹⁴ is in a late Medinan surah and cannot be considered to have been abrogated by any reasonable standards of *tafsîr*. Thus, Rosenthal’s implication that a scholar of Ibn Khaldun’s caliber is arguing for forced conversions in the event persuasion fails. Rosenthal was sometimes aware of his limitations in understanding technical terminology¹⁵ and it is more plausible that, lacking the contextual knowledge of Islam available to the *engagè*,

Rosenthal has blundered in translation. We shall consider the Arabic text and its immediate context in the Muqaddimah in order to establish Ibn Khaldun's actual intention.

Here is a literal translation of the Arabic text¹⁶ with the key words left transliterated:

And whereas the religious-community-of-Islam the jihad is universal in her made legitimate in general *ad-dawah* and *hamala* a-whole-people to the religion of Islam by persuasion and by force, the caliphate and royal authority are united in her so those in authority can apply the power to both together.

What Rosenthal translates as "the Muslim mission," probably because it contains the word *da`wah*, is a difficult phrase including words meaning "legal" and "in general." However, there are two key words here *da`wah* (calling to the faith) and "*hamala*" (literally, to carry) which can here mean to convert or rule over. Given the prohibition on forced conversion, it must refer to the imposition of political authority, and the modifier "by persuasion and by force" refers to the two duties: *da`wa* (missionary work) by persuasion and *hamala* (expansion of political domain) by force. This is born out by an examination of the immediate context, even as provided by Rosenthal's own translation of the preceding and following paragraphs. The preceding paragraph states:

It should be known that after the removal of its prophet, a religious group must have someone to take care of it. (Such a person) must cause the people to act according to the religious laws. In a way, he stands to them in the place (*kehalifah*, caliph) of their prophet, in as much as (he urges) the obligations which (the prophet) had imposed upon them. Furthermore, in accordance with the afore-mentioned need for political leadership in social organization, the human species must have a person who will cause them to act in accordance with what is good for them and who will prevent them by force from doing things harmful to them. Such a person is the one who is called the ruler.¹⁷

Ibn Khaldun clearly addresses two different functions: religious leadership of the religious community and political leadership of the general community. It is in the Caliph's capacity as the latter to which the arguments of the rest of the Muqaddimah is addressed. Thus it appears that Ibn Khaldun is discussing not forced conversions, but political expansion by military means. The paragraph following the main one demonstrates this conclusively by showing that Ibn Khaldun's thesis is that the mandate of establishing a just society (as opposed to forcing people into the Muslim religious community) is unique to Islam.

The other religious groups did not have a universal mission, and the holy war [*jihad*] was not a religious duty to them, save only for the purposes of defense. It has thus come about that the person in charge of religious affairs in (other religious groups) is not concerned with power politics at all. (Among them,) royal authority comes to those who have it, by accident and in same way that has nothing to do with religion. It comes to them as the necessary result of group feeling, which by its very nature seeks to obtain royal authority, as we have mentioned before, and not because they are under obligation to gain power over other nations, as is the case with Islam. They are merely required to establish their religion among their own (people).¹⁸

Despite Rosenthal's mistranslation of *jihad* as "holy war" it is clear that Ibn Khaldun is here summarizing the classical view that offensive jihad is for the purpose of expanding the political realm of Islam. Charles Butterworth has analyzed this passage this way:

The context suggests that caliphs and kings seek power for their own ends. That is why the one passes into the other or why they come to be the same. And that is precisely what IK is trying to explain at this point.... IK speaks as one who describes what happens in different kinds of dynasties, and here he is intent on showing how the caliphate comes to be linked with royal authority. Nothing more. He describes a particular phenomenon and seeks to show how it came about.¹⁹

The idea that *hamala* should be translated as conversion becomes even less tenable when we note that Ibn Khaldun has identified social solidarity as a tendency to want to establish political dominance over the other, not as a desire to assimilate.²⁰ Finally, and conclusively, he is contrasting Islam to Christianity. Surely he is not claiming that Christianity has not sought to convert people by force.²¹ Thus, we cannot escape the fact that his claim is that Muslim political authority seeks political expansion, not forced conversion.

Further, we must be aware that because he is describing socio-historical forces, and not jump to the conclusion that Ibn Khaldun himself necessarily advocates the manifest destiny argument. He may only be reporting it, which is his job as a historian. He is not speaking as a jurist. He may well have held a contrary view, as one of the main points of Ibn Khaldun's analysis elsewhere in the *Muqaddimah* is that expansion of empire tends to lead to the downfall of dynasties. The positive aspect of basing social solidarity in a religion whose mission is the establishment of justice is that it holds the promise of maintaining the just policies that allow prosperity to be maintained. This, despite the fact that it is still susceptible to the corruption that leads to the downfall of civilizations. In this respect, Ibn Khaldun views Muslim expansionism in the same light he might view Francis Fukuyama's "end of history thesis."²² The *Muqaddimah*, it must be remembered, is his preface to his multivolume universal history. As Muhsin Mahdi reminds us, "Ibn Khaldun is not interested in religion as such, but its political significance. It is politics (*siyāsa*) and not religion."²³

Conclusions

We will live in a time of conflicts within civilizations.²⁴ Disputes over the meaning of jihad demonstrate that the conflict within civilizations in which Neo-orientalists and hirabists (misnamed jihadists) share a perspective that leads toward a warfare of religious identity, while moderates both among Western scholars of Islam and Muslim reformers share a perspective that leads to the recognition of a religious mandate for tolerance. Ibn Khaldun's notion that political authority stems from a social solidarity accounts for how even a society established on a religious obligation to establish justice can easily turn into a society that seeks domination based on religious identity.²⁵ Of course, we live in a different world than Ibn Khaldun did and it is possible to debate whether or not that that was his intention. However, given the world we live in today, I have no doubt that whether he intended it or not, this is the lesson we should take from him.

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