# The SAGE Encyclopedia of War: Social Science Perspectives

## Jihad

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*Jihad* is a complex concept that originates in Islamic religious discourse, with specific mentions of the word found in the Holy Qur'an. Islamic scholars, supplementing their interpretation of the concept with information from the life of Islam's Prophet Muhammad, have extrapolated three types of jihad. Two of these (self-purification and propagation of the truth) are mandatory for all Muslims at all times and are nonviolent. One of these (a defensive battle) is not mandatory unless certain stringent conditions have been met and involves violence. As a result, throughout history, the term has taken on multiple meanings in reference to political, religious, and social power. In the modern day, radical groups justifying their actions and media outlets attempting to understand or frame those actions have used jihad in violent and nonviolent contexts, often diverging from the original context and definition. Thus, the meaning of the term remains contested among both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and laypeople.

## Linguistic and Religious Origins

Etymologically, the word jihad comes from the Arabic root *juhd*, which means "to exert effort." Jihad is a noun, meaning "struggling, applying oneself, striving, or persevering." It is often mistranslated from Arabic into English as a "holy war," which is not correct. In fact, in contemporary Arabic (Modern Standard as well as the various dialects), jihad maintains its literal meaning of a struggle, an effort, or a striving.

In Islam, there is one undisputed source of law and religious principle: the Qur'an. This text is heavily supplemented by narrations of the life of the Prophet Muhammad, a collected set of traditions also known as the *hadith*. To be sure, other bodies of knowledge exist, depending on what sect a Muslim belongs to. For instance, Shi'as (also referred to as Shiites) also draw on the lives of the *Ahlul Bayt* (the People of the House of the Prophet) and Sufis also include a number of revered saint-like figures. However, the Qur'an as foremost and the hadith as an important supplement remains a principle shared by all Muslims. When speaking about or seeking to understand any Islamic concept, Islamic jurists and scholars examine the Qur'an and use the hadith as a series of guideposts.

Jihad and its derivatives are mentioned in 35 Qur'anic verses, in a variety of contexts: religious or spiritual striving (30 verses), war (2 verses), and a strong oath (3 verses). Many of the mentions of jihad in terms of religious or spiritual striving are followed by the phrase *fi sabil Allah*, which translates to "in the way of God" or "for the sake of God." The 35 verses in which the word is found include derivatives of jihad that are based on Arabic's root word structure, in which nearly all words originate from action verbs with 3 or 4 consonants as their base. As mentioned above, jihad's root word is juhd.

Based on the Qur'an and the hadith, Islamic scholars have articulated three types of jihad: *jihad al-akbar* (the greatest jihad), *jihad al-kabir* (the major jihad), and *jihad al-asghar* (the lesser jihad). Each translates to a particular type of action: jihad al-akbar involves the purification of the self, jihad al-kabir is the propagation of the truth, and jihad al-asghar is a defensive battle. Jihad al-akbar and jihad al-kabir are incumbent upon all Muslims at all times, with jihad al-akbar being the most important. By contrast, jihad al-asghar can only take place if the prerequisites articulated by the Qur'an and the hadith have been met. These requirements include (a) Muslims being driven from their homes, (b) Muslims having their lives threatened, and (c) Muslims being unable to practice Islam as a result of oppression. All three prerequisites must be met before jihad al-asghar can be initiated, which is then subject to a military code of conduct that parallels and exceeds (in some instances) what the Geneva

Conventions require.

## Radical Groups' Appropriation of Jihad

Radical groups such as Daesh, as well as affiliates of the al Qaeda network, have used the idea of jihad in a number of contexts. In particular, this use has been a conflation of the aforementioned types of jihad, mixing the mandated aspects of jihad al-akbar and jihad al-kabir (self-purification and propagation of the truth, respectively) and the violent aspect of jihad al-asghar (defensive battle). These groups select certain aspects of each type of jihad to rationalize their actions and entice new recruits to join their cause. The result is the creation of the idea that all Muslims must engage in a violent struggle against enemies of Islam, which does not accurately reflect the original and multifaceted intent of the concept of jihad.

Radical groups tap into a number of factors when creating this new form of jihad, which they combine into a process that radicalizes people and leads them to violence:

1. Radical groups seek out individuals (youth, in particular) who face challenging socioeconomic or sociopolitical circumstances (lack of employment opportunities and effective social integration, for instance) and are otherwise disillusioned from engaging with broader society. Membership in a radical group creates a sense of purpose and value.
2. Working in concert with the first step of the process, these radical groups latch onto a widespread victim mentality that plagues a number of Muslim communities in Muslim and non-Muslim countries, positioning Muslims as oppressed by the West given the Occupied Palestinian Territories, recent high-profile wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and other events.
3. Radical groups ignore the economic and sociopolitical realities of these contexts in favor of stark religious "us vs. them" terms (Islam vs. Judeo-Christianity), leading to the conclusion that Islam is under attack. This perspective positions the youth as a comrade fighting for justice and truth, part of a larger endeavor.
4. Radical groups map the Islam-is-under-attack philosophy onto jihad al-asghar, which is then conflated with the mandatory aspect of jihad-al akbar and jihad al-kabir. This makes violence mandatory, in an effort to "defend Islam."

All of this is delivered via a savvy social media and marketing presence based on high-production-value films that garner excitement for and sensationalize the group's activities. The result is jihad as an attractive and potent ideology that radicalizes individuals and moves them toward violence.

Further, this new form of jihad is used as a justification for the creation of a broader Islamic state through violence. Radical groups pull on jihad al-kabir (highlighting the importance of spreading Islam as a propagation of the truth) and link it to the Islamic concept of *al-ummah*, or the supra-national community of Muslims. All Muslims are considered members of the ummah, which exists to unify Muslims and benefit all people by upholding Islam. Propagating the truth, then, is equated to spreading Islam on the way to creating a stronger ummah, no matter the cost. By creating a stronger ummah through jihad, radical groups believe that their ability to control the experience of the Muslim supranational community will enable them to impose an extreme interpretation of Islam on Muslims. It is no surprise, then, that the majority of those who are victimized by Daesh's violence are Muslim rather than non-Muslim.

However, there are varying shades of this new form of jihad, as used by al Qaeda and Daesh,

which stem from these groups' origins and affect their actions. The al Qaeda network began as a form of political Islam that followed the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian author who was a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-20th century. Daesh, however, aligns more with the extremist Sunni sect of Wahhabism (also known as Salafism and most championed by Saudi Arabia), which has been criticized for going beyond the bounds of Islam by demonstrating a lack of respect toward women, persecuting those outside the narrow Wahhabi definition of monotheism, and driving violence between Sunnis and Shi'as around the world. Indeed, some scholars have indicated that violence is a means to an end for al Qaeda whereas for Daesh, violence is an end in and of itself.

### Media Use of the Term

In the English-speaking world, academics first used the term jihad in the 1990s in concert with the term Salafi, in an effort to specify the ideology that violent radical groups were following. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, in the United States, use of jihad and jihadism in the mainstream media became more widespread, with a tremendous increase in their use among broadcast television, radio reporting, and online news outlets. This took place at the same time as a number of video messages that called for all Muslims to engage in a global struggle against the West were released by radical groups such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. The media's adoption of the term and its variants began as an effort to separate out violent jihadists (those who see violence as an integral part of solidifying the ummah) from nonviolent Islamists (those who prefer to reform preexisting political and social structures in accordance with Islamic values).

There has been significant backlash from the Muslim community and think tanks alike regarding the media's use of the terms jihad and jihadism. Many Muslims argue that the association made by terming an individual or a group jihadist cheapens the spiritual and religious value of jihad by linking it to illicit violence; they prefer to label these individuals and groups as extremists or deviants. Additionally, some academics have argued that the media's use of the term has helped radical groups legitimize the idea that the West is attacking Muslims. They have also argued that widespread media usage of the term has created and emphasized a link between Islam and terrorism, writ large. Some believe that this has contributed to an increase in negative perceptions of Islam across the United States.

A few major media outlets, such as the BBC and National Geographic, have attempted to clarify the term. Most of the attempts at clarification, however, have come from Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Supreme Council of North America. At the same time, a number of popular websites, such as Jihad Watch, have a sensationalized reporting on and use of the term. Furthermore, conservative public figures such as Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, and Ann Coulter and Pamela Geller in the United States have publicly used the term in an effort to engender fear and increase anti-Muslim sentiment in their respective countries.

This new form of jihad has also received major airtime on social media. YouTube and Facebook feature a regular stream of videos that emphasize it, videos that are often created and uploaded by Daesh and other radical groups. These videos are closer in character to MTV music videos than they are to recruitment messages for violent groups. YouTube, in particular, has also become a space for radical groups to release videos demonstrating military preparations and trainings, beheadings, the destruction of cultural relics, and other actions. Both the U.S. Intelligence Community and policy-making bodies monitor and respond to these social media outlets, including an official brief for the House Subcommittee on

Counterterrorism and Intelligence that explored how radical groups are using social media for their own benefit.

***See also***Afghanistan, War in; Al Qaeda; Islam, Shiite; Islam, Sunni; Social Media

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**Further Readings**

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