

Jihād against Terrorism: A Response to Robert Spencer’s Views on Jihād

* Dr.Badshah Rehman

** Saeed Akhtar

Abstract

The word Jihād has been awfully misinterpreted in the post 9/11 literature. Quite a few critics of Islam have deliberately used Jihād as synonymous with terrorism. Robert Spencer, a prominent critic of Islamic Jihād, also maintains that Islam teaches violence, intolerance and extremism. The following research article is a critique of Spencer’s views on Islamic concept of jihad. It aims to prove that Islam is a tolerant creed and has nothing to do with violence and terrorism. The Holy Qur’an substantiates this claim and shows that the persecuted Muslim community was allowed to take up arms against the terrorists who not only tormented the innocent people but also expelled them from their native homes.

In recent Islamic scholarship as well, the usage of the concept either Tends to be avoided or is increasingly being depoliticized. The popular understanding of the concept has made it a necessary evil. This article argues that jihad is not just a war, rather it can be understood from a universal humane perspective and its philosophical moral principles can be used in greater human and social welfare.

Keywords: Jihād, Terrorism, AL-Qura’n, Sunnah, Extremism, Robert Spencer

*Assistant Professor, Deptt of Islamic Studies& religious Affairs University of Malakand

** .Lecturer Deptt of Islamic Studies& religious Affairs, University of Malakand

Introduction

It is very unfortunate that jihad has been wrongly translated by some critics of Islam as a 'holy war' and presented by others as synonymous with terrorism. In fact, jihad is a broad term which contains the meaning of struggle: struggle against harmful propensities of inner-self, struggle for one's rights, struggle against social evils and not necessarily military struggle. Once Muhammad (SAW) returned with his companions from a battle and told them that they had returned from a lesser jihad to a greater Jihād. By this he meant the spiritual Jihād. It is awfully lamentable that some terrorists invoke the Jihād'ic verses to justify their crimes, violence and oppressions. Contrary to their approach and understanding, Islam excoriates and condemns all sorts of crimes, violence and oppressions and exalts the sanctity of human life by describing the unjust murder of an individual as tantamount to the murder of mankind.¹

Comparing Jesus (peace be upon him) and Muhammad (SAW), Robert Spencer argues that the former was prince of peace and never taught violence whereas the latter taught violence and "the doctrine of holy war" against infidels. And therefore, the terrorists invoke his teachings to justify their acts of violence and terror.² Spencer ironically remarks that after a protracted period of war on terror "it is still common place to hear Islam called a religion of peace".³ Focusing on Islamic laws of war and moral principles he writes:

"...good became identified with anything that redounded to the benefits of Muslims, and evil with anything that harmed them, without any reference to larger moral standard. Moral absolutes were swept aside in favor of the overarching principle of expediency."⁴

In Spencer's views, innocent non-Muslim children and women suffer the same lot at the hand of Muslim soldiers as the actual combatants do.⁵

It is highly unreasonable to consider terror practitioners as mujahidin. The lofty concept of Islamic jihad has nothing to do with lawlessness practiced and barbarities committed by terrorists. The difference between the two ideologies is evident from their very names: the struggle against persecution is known as jihad whereas persecution of the innocent is known as Ir'haab. To put it more precisely, Islamic jihad is a dauntless battle against terrorism

Terrorism is an extreme oppression and cruelty inflicted by an individual, organization, or state on someone's religion, blood, intellect, wealth and

honor. It includes various forms, for instance, intimidation, torture, murder bloodshed, jeopardizing travelers, armed robbery etc. In other words, it includes every act of violence and threat which are committed by an individual or an outfit for criminal purposes. It aims at striking terror and fear in people's mind and endangering their life, freedom and peace. The types of terrorism are as follows: to wreak havoc on the environment, to annihilate public and private properties, and to devastate natural resources.⁶

All such detrimental and hazardous activities are termed as fasaad fil Ardh (destruction in the land), hence strictly forbidden for Muslims. The holy Qur'an puts it thus:

وَلَا تَبْغِ الْفُسَادَ فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ

And do not desire Fasaad (destruction, persecution and corruption etc.) in the land. Verily Allah does not love Mufsideen.⁷

Islam does not allow any retaliation against those innocent members of a group or community whose certain elements are involved in terror activities. It would be a travesty of justice to punish and torment the guiltless. It is pertinent to narrate how the holy Qur'an guides us in this matter. When Joseph's brothers beseeched the king to release their brother and arrest anyone of them instead, the king refused.

قَالُوا يَا أَيُّهَا الْعَزِيزُ إِنَّ لَهُ أَبًا شَيْخًا كَبِيرًا فَخُذْ أَحَدَنَا مَكَانَهُ إِنَّا نَرَاكَ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

قَالَ مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ أَنْ نَأْخُذَ إِلَّا مَنْ وَجَدْنَا مَتَاعَنَا عِنْدَهُ إِنَّا إِذًا لَظَالِمُونَ

They said, "O 'Azeez, indeed he has a father [who is] an old man, so take one of us in place of him. Indeed, we see you as a doer of good."

He said, "[I seek] the refuge of Allah [to prevent] that we take except him with whom we found our possession. Indeed, we would then be unjust."⁸

To take up arms against innocent and faultless is a heinous act of terror but taking retributive action against the wrong doers is permissible in Islam.

وَجَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِثْلُهَا فَمَنْ عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ

And the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation - his reward is [due] from Allah. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers.⁹

الشَّهْرُ الْحَرَامُ بِالشَّهْرِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْحُرُمَاتُ قِصَاصٌ فَمَنْ اعْتَدَى عَلَيْكُمْ فَاعْتَدُوا عَلَيْهِ بِمِثْلِ مَا اعْتَدَى

عَلَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الْمُتَّقِينَ

[Fighting in] the sacred month is for [aggression committed in] the sacred month, and for [all] violations is legal retribution. So whoever has assaulted

you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you. And fear Allah and know that Allah is with those who fear Him.¹⁰

There are some moderate writers who admit that Muhammad's (SAW) life was an honest struggle. Karen Armstrong, for instance, believes that Muhammad (SAW) was a paradigmatic personality and being so he has significant lessons not only for his Muslim followers but also for the Western people. She glorifies his great "struggle" against intolerance, greed, injustice and ignorance. In her opinion, Muhammad (peace be upon him) "literary sweated" with the struggle to establish peace in the war-wrecked Arabia.¹¹

Will Durant makes a comparative judgment and concludes that Muslims exhibited and practiced greater tolerance than their Christian counterparts. He maintains that in the reign of the Umayyad Dynasty, the level of tolerance exhibited and maintained by the Muslim rulers towards non-Muslim subjects –namely Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians and Sabians- is hard to find in the Christian world. In his view, substantial measures were taken to preserve and maintain their temples and churches. He further adds that the non-Muslim citizens of the state enjoyed plenty of freedom to practice their ritual in accordance with their religious doctrines. Moreover, they were declared autonomous in being subject to the religious laws of judges and scholars.¹²

If we trace back the history of jihad in Islam, we find that it was declared permissible for the Muslim after their protracted episodes of suffering and torments. The use of arms was not allowed until their persecution reached insufferable climax. A host of companions, including Abu Bakr (RA), Ibn Abbas, Saeed Ibn Jubair, maintain that the following verse is the first one revealed in permission of war.¹³

إِذْ لِلَّذِينَ يُقَاتَلُونَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ظَلَمُوا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ نَصْرِهِمْ لَقَدِيرٌ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَقُولُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ لَهَدِمَتْ صَوَامِعُ وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدٌ يُذَكَّرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَنْصُرُهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ۝

Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory. [They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right - only because they say, "Our Lord is Allah." And were it not that Allah checks the people, some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the

name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might.¹⁴

The abovementioned verses firmly endorse the fact that Islamic jihad is a battle against terrorists, oppressors and persecutors. In Islam, war is sanctioned for the noble purpose of protection of monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques. Those terrorists who are hell bent on demolishing worship places have nothing to do with lofty ideals of Islamic jihad. They are not mujahidin, they are terrorists pure and simple. Islam does not allow persecution of guiltless people. The holy Qur'an does sanction war against non-combatants and strictly prohibits transgression even against combatants:

وَقَاتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ *O*

Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.¹⁵

The holy Qur'an encourages cordial relation with those non-Muslims who played no negative role in religious persecution and expulsion of innocent from their home and hearth:

إِنَّمَا يَنْهَاكُمْ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ قَاتَلوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَأَخْرَجوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ وَظَاهَرُوا عَلَىٰ إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَن تَوَلَّوهُمْ وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ *O*

Allah only forbids you from those who fight you because of religion and expel you from your homes and aid in your expulsion - [forbids] that you make allies of them. And whoever makes allies of them, then it is those who are the wrongdoers.¹⁶

Islam wants the rule of law and implementation of justice: justice for all, whatever their cast, color or creed may be. Sword is used against oppression whether it comes from Muslims or non-Muslims. The holy Qur'an couches it thus:

وَإِنْ طَائِفَتَانِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ اقْتَتَلُوا فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا فَإِنْ بَغَتْ إِحْدَاهُمَا عَلَى الْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَاتِلُوا الَّتِي تَبْغِي حَتَّىٰ تَفِيءَ إِلَىٰ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ فَإِنْ فَاءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا بِالْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ *O*

*And if two factions among the believers should fight, then make settlement between the two. But if one of them oppresses the other, then fight against the one that oppresses until it returns to the ordinance of Allah. And if it returns, then make settlement between them in justice and act justly. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly.*¹⁷

The holy Qur'an prescribes severe chastisement for the terrorists who spoil peace and bring about fasaad (destruction).

إِنَّمَا جَزَاءُ الَّذِينَ يُحَارِبُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَيَسْعَوْنَ فِي الْأَرْضِ فَسَادًا أَنْ يُقَتَّلُوا أَوْ يُصَلَّبُوا أَوْ تُقَطَّعَ
أَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُمْ مِنْ خِلَافٍ أَوْ يُنْفَوْا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ ذَلِكَ لَهُمْ جِزْيٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ

Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment.¹⁸

Islamic jihad is a war against those terrorists who oppress helpless men, women and children. To put it more appropriately, jihad is an answer the call of the downtrodden who need to be saved by sword.

وَمَا لَكُمْ لَا تُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَالْمُسْتَضْعَفِينَ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَالنِّسَاءِ وَالْوِلْدَانِ الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا

أَخْرِجْنَا مِنْ هَذِهِ الْقَرْيَةِ الظَّالِمِ أَهْلُهَا وَاجْعَلْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ وَلِيًّا وَاجْعَلْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ نَصِيرًا

And what is [the matter] with you that you fight not in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, "Our Lord, take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper."¹⁹

Terror acts are generally directed against innocent civilians whereas Jihād is meant to protect them. Islamic Shari'a has laid down strict rules and moral principles for the soldiers on the battlefield as borne out by the following instructions:

فَلَا يَحِلُّ فِيهَا قَتْلُ امْرَأَةٍ وَلَا صَبِيٍّ ، وَلَا شَيْخٍ قَانٍ ، وَلَا مُقْعَدٍ وَلَا يَابِسِ الشَّقِيِّ ، وَلَا أَعْمَى ، وَلَا مَقْطُوعِ
الْيَدِ وَالرَّجْلِ مِنْ خِلَافٍ ، وَلَا مَقْطُوعِ الْيَدِ الْبُيْمَى ، وَلَا مَعْتُوهٍ ، وَلَا رَاهِبٍ فِي صَوْمَعَةٍ ، وَلَا سَائِحٍ فِي
الْجِبَالِ لَا يُخَالِطُ النَّاسَ ، وَقَوْمٍ فِي دَارٍ أَوْ كَنِيْسَةٍ تَرْهَبُوا وَطَبَقَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْبَابُ.

It is forbidden to kill woman, children, aged people, the crippled, the blind, and those who have their hand or leg amputated, idiot, monk in the monastery, he who lives in seclusion on the mountains and does not mix up with people, people in their house and church who have shut the doors behind them.²⁰

To sum up, Islamic Jihad is an anti-terror ideology. It is a war against oppression and persecution as the prophet of Islam (SAW) categorically declared that he who knowingly strengthens and supports an oppressor, he gets out of the fold of Islam.

Conclusion

Jihād has become a misunderstood concept today due to deviant use of it by deviant Islamic groups. Jihad contains a universal humane philosophy aimed more at human welfare than social warfare. Jihad is the manifestation of the individual and collective universal mission in Islam. At the individual level, it manifests in persistent control of the self against evil desires. At the collective level, it manifests in the implementation of the fundamental principles and values of justice, cooperation, non-aggression, and fights against abuse of human rights, social disturbance, and terrorism. Jihad can be understood and used in a positive sense and its universal moral philosophy and principals can be utilized to greater social and global benefits.

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