Jihad and the Sect

Sunni and Shia Interpretations of Striving in the Path of God

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Abstract

This article investigates sectarian-based interpretations of jihad as a concept and practice. It explores similarities and differences between Sunni and Shiite approaches to the notion of jihad and its fundamental principles. In order to examine the sectarian dimension of jihad, the most well-known and yet least understood conception in the contemporary debate about Islam, this article revisits and analyses relevant literature with a new interpretation. Sectarian-guided interpretations of the notion of jihad remain scarcely tackled and poorly researched. There seems to be a certain degree of agreement between Sunni and Shiite Muslims with respect to jihad in its spiritual and physical forms. However, questions of righteousness to launch and guide jihad, its place among the cornerstones of the faith, and the ends its application tend to serve remain controversial when it comes to sectarian-based approaches.

Keywords: jihad, Islam, Sunni, Shia, jihadism

Introduction

Jihad is likely the most well-known and yet the least understood Islamic notion in contemporary public consciousness (Maher 2017, 31). It is therefore crucial to explore jihad as a term, concept, and practice, and to outline its fundamental features and tackle the development of its basic tenets throughout Islamic history. The word *jihād* essentially means to "struggle" for a noble cause with determination or "strive" in the path of God (*jihād fī sabīl Allāh*). While different radical Islamist groups insist that their actions are determined by and fall within the Islamic jihad, and with the Western media continuing to make excessive use of the term to describe such actions, there remains a misconception of what is generally meant

by jihad in Islam (Knapp 2003, 82). One such misinterpretation is using the word jihad in a literal reference to "holy war"; however, war in Arabic is *ḥarb* and holy is *muqaddasa*, which combine to *al-ḥarb al-muqaddasa*, a phrase that does not exist in the Islamic tradition. This misconception emerges in contrast with the medieval Christian counterpart term "crusade," from Latin *crux* ("cross"). Nevertheless, the continual and ever-growing deployment of the word jihad reflects contemporary Islamists' revival of certain religious and military implications to the concept. With this context, jihad needs revisiting to illustrate what the term entails and what it essentially implies.

According to al-Qaradawi (2009), who provides an authoritative account on jihad and Islamic jurisprudential reasoning in his extensive work *Fiqh al-Jihād* (*Jurisprudence of Jihad*), the notion of jihad is multifaceted. The term and its derivations are mentioned in the Qur'an thirty-four times, primarily in reference to struggling, striving, and bearing the burden of protecting the *'ummah* (Islamic community) and defending its core religious values and beliefs. However, the concept of jihad contains more than the mere use of violence in such a struggle. Al-Qaradawi (2009, 55) identifies several characteristics of what could be called "true jihad," including the prioritization of the community's interest over self-interest, the struggle against corruption and persecution, patience and endurance, combating hypocrites, striving for invitation and clarification, and eventually fighting the enemies by force once peaceful options are exhausted.

Since the use of force emerges as a final expression of jihad in its multilayered notion, framing jihad as a mere call for violence or use of weaponry against enemies reflects a misconception and misinterpretation of what jihad essentially means. From a semantic perspective, the word قتال (*qitāl*, "fighting") stems from قَتل (*qatl*, "murdering"), whereas جهاد (*jihād*, "struggle") stems from جُهد (*juhd*, "effort"). Furthermore, although today the term jihad is frequently associated with aggression and violence, and Islam itself is perceived as a religion urging violence against other communities, the term عنف (*'unf*, "violence") is never mentioned in the Qur'an.

Nonetheless, al-Qaradawi's (2009, 56) account of the definition of jihad remains prone to criticism for the ambiguity of his conclusion. One such remark is his saying: "every fight is a jihad once it comprised a legitimate intention, but not every jihad is a fight." While the second part of this statement appears well-founded given the extensive analysis of religious texts he provides, the first part seems far from convincing. Any self-proclaimed *mujāhid* could legitimize his intention in a way that may satisfy a particular group of fellow Muslims or certain Islamic scholars, and seem "in the way of God," while bringing about harm and damage to innocents designated as enemies.

The Islamic world has witnessed the rise and development of various interpretations of the notion of jihad, including sectarian-based approaches. Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims view jihad from different perspectives and through diverse lenses. In order to explore each sect's approach to jihad as a concept and practice laid down in primary sources of the Islamic faith, revisiting the classical notion of jihad and examining its deployment by various Islamist organizations over the recent decades seems inevitable.

The Classical Concept of Jihad

Islamic scholars generally agree on the definition of jihad as the effort made by a Muslim to fight against evil inside himself/herself and in the surrounding community, and ultimately pursuing and combating evil wherever it may exist. That is, fighting injustice, hypocrisy, oppression, and forces hostile to the Muslim community. It is a multidimensional process that involves spiritual intention and determination (عمل القلب بالنية والعزم; *ʿamalu l-qalb bilnīyah wal-ʿazm*); communication for the sake of invitation and clarification (عمل اللسان بالدعوة والبيان; *ʿamalu l-isān bid-daʿwah wal-bayān*); intellectual opinions and planning (عمل العقل بالرأي والتدبير; *ʿamalu l-ʿql bir-ra'ī wat-tadbīr*); and physical effort in combat (عمل البدن بالقتال; *ʿamalu l-badan bil-qitāl*) (Al-Qaradawi 2009, 68).

Within the framework of its classical interpretation, two basic types of jihad can be identified – defensive struggle (جهاد الدفع; *Jihād al-Dafʿ*) and proactive/offensive struggle (جهاد الطلب; *Jihād al-Ṭalab*). The former implies resistance against hostile forces that invade or occupy Islamic territories and attack Muslims and their properties, whereas the latter entails carrying out premediated armed operations against enemy forces on their own soil, motivated by the preconceived urgency to expand the Islamic territory and to enable those living under the rule of enemy forces to receive the message of Islam. However, it is worth noting that the historical context and the surrounding circumstances are of key significance to understand the rise and development of such interpretations and jurisprudential reasoning about the notion of jihad among Muslims.

In terms of its appeal for struggle in the path of God, the Qur'an founded the basis for the notion of jihad as struggle for God's cause and godly order. This conception dismissed tribal goals and communal concerns within the holy struggle, "even if the motivation was grounded in Islamic revelation" (Heck 2004, 96). In his *The Origins of Holy War in Islam*, Firestone (1999) suggests that in the early seventh century, the first followers of Muhammad did not take jihad as a struggle in the path of God wholeheartedly as it implied confronting their non-Muslim tribal kinsmen in the context of high levels of intertribal violence and "heightened insecurity through the [Arabian] peninsula" (Firestone 1999, 25) immediately before the emergence of Islam. Muhammad's message is believed to have played a key role in weaning tribal peoples away from their usual incentives for conflict, including material interests and tribal prestige (Donner 1991, 34).

The Qur'anic declaration of jihad cannot be reduced to mere armed struggle, since "virtually all instances of the root j-h-d speak primarily to the question of true intention and devotion" (Heck 2004, 97). Jihad is primarily a method of measurement to distinguish between authentic belief and disbelief or infidelity, and to rate the degree of merit as well as the intention of the believers. This is tackled repeatedly in the Qur'an, and in that context jihad emerges as the emblem and mark of the believers who demonstrate a high level of commitment, devotion, and determination to fearlessly bear and bring forth the mission of God without doubt or uncertainty (Q 5:54, 49:15). In its reference to the significance of jihad, the Qur'an primarily stresses the level of dedication to God's cause vis-à-vis excessive attention to worldly matters (Q 9:19, 9:24, 60:2). This emerges in contrast to how the concept of jihad often has been perceived by many as a mere call for war and conflict. Various Qur'anic verses signify jihad as meriting forgiveness and divine favor (Q 4:95, 4:96, 9:20, 9:6, 29:7),

indicating a basic element in one's relation with and orientation to God (Q 22:78, 29:69, 61:11) that is, nonetheless, eventually known only to God (Heck 2004, 98).

In the hadith, which is deemed the second most authoritative source of the Islamic law, jihad implies a physical action or an armed activity in the cause of God. For instance, Hadiths 1297 and 1300 read:

> Death puts an end to all action, except in the case of one who patrols the frontier in the cause of Allah, for his activity continues to grow till the Day of Judgement and he is shielded against the trials of the grave. . . . Everyone who is injured in the cause of Allah will appear on the Day of Judgement with his wound bleeding, its color the color of blood and its smell like the fragrance of musk (Nawawi 2006, 222).

Moreover, Hadith 1302 concludes: "Paradise becomes incumbent for those who fight in the cause of Allah even for the briefest space" (Nawawi 2006, 223). Also, Hadith 1342 reads: "He who shoots an arrow in the cause of Allah has merit equal to the freeing of a slave" (Nawawi 2006, 227). Hadith 1346 carries a comparable message, as it says: "He who dies without having fought in the cause of Allah and without having thought of it in his mind dies with one characteristic of hypocrisy within him" (Nawawi 2006, 227). On martyrdom, as defined by the Prophet Muhammad with respect to jihad, the Hadith 1358 maintains: "There are five who are martyrs: he who dies of the plague, he who dies of cholera, he who dies of drowning, he who is killed by the falling of a wall and he who becomes a martyr by fighting in the cause of Allah" (Nawawi 2006, 228).

Thus, the hadith generally tackles jihad from different angles, yet it sheds light on a physical embodiment of jihad as an activity of self-sacrifice, participation in armed struggle in the path of God, and aspiration for martyrdom (*shahādah*) for God's cause. Although the hadith's approach to jihad was bound considerably to the events and developments that came to define the early stage of Islamic revelation, most jurists and theologians of classical Islam interpreted jihad in the context of armed struggle and tried to illustrate it in military terms.

The common understanding of the notion of jihad does not particularly imply that it is a requirement of every individual Muslim, known as *farḍ ʿayn*, but rather that it is a general obligation of the Muslim community or a collective duty, known as *farḍ kifāyah* (Hegghammer 2010, 74). Considering jihad as a collective requirement rather than an individual duty stems from the fact that the concept essentially entails a voluntary activity rather than a compulsory one (Al-Qaradawi 2009, 88). An obvious support for this argument is the fact that jihad does not literally emerge among the so-called pillars of Islam or the five duties incumbent on each Muslim, known as *Arkān al-Islām*.[1] Although jihad arises in the hadith as the sixth pillar of Islam, it is in the form of a communal and collective requirement and not as an individual duty. Once urged to perform jihad, mainly in the case of defending one's own territory against enemy assault or to combat injustice and corruption within society, it is sufficient for a group

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[1] *Arkān al-Islām* comprises the Muslim profession of faith (*al-Shahādah*), prayer (*Salāt*), the distribution of alms to the poor (*Zakāt*), the fasting of Ramadan (*Sawm*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those financially and physically capable (*Ḥajj*). See Al Qaradawi 2009, 82.

of Muslims to voluntarily carry the burden and perform the duty of jihad as representatives and defenders of the community as a whole (Al-Qaradawi 2009, 83).

Jihad and Militancy

The 20th century has witnessed the rise of several Islamic theorists who have approached jihad from various standpoints and contributed to the revival as well as the transformation of certain aspects of jihad in accordance with surrounding developments across the Middle East. One of the first Islamic thinkers to tackle the notion of jihad on a systematic basis in the 20th century was Sayyid Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), who considered warfare a necessary means not just to expand Islam's political dominance but also to attain justice, including freedom of religion. Mawdudi viewed jihad as a "war of liberation" aimed at establishing politically independent Muslim states (Knapp 2003, 86). His perspectives have played a key role in transforming the classical notion of jihad into a concept increasingly associated with contemporary questions and activities such as national liberation currents and anticolonialism movements. Such views are principally aligned with Ibn Taymiyya's teachings that recommend overthrowing any government that fails to enforce the Islamic Sharia (Knapp 2003, 87). This revolutionary concept of jihad essentially implies that any ruler in the Islamic world who fails to show absolute and unconditional commitment to Sharia as the sole legitimate source of government does not fit as a leader of jihad, and therefore needs to be toppled and replaced. Hence, Muslims are required first to direct their jihad towards internal enemies before combatting external adversaries. Such strictly orthodox thoughts and teachings have paved the path for radical Islamists to refer to jihad as an obligatory duty for every individual Muslim and to reject its interpretation as a communal duty (Streusand 1995, 5).

The rise of various interpretations of the concept of jihad by prominent Islamic scholars in the early 20th century, in the context of contemporary developments witnessed across the Middle East, eventually resulted in the emergence of a current known as jihadism – later referred to as Salafi-jihadism. Since its rise in the late 1970s, this movement of thought and action has evolved gradually. Wright et al. (2017, 8) identify five phases defining the development of jihadism over the past four decades – the inception, cross-pollination, causation, realization, and crossroads. The first phase, the inception, was characterized by the impact of Islamic ideologues, such as those by Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and his protégés in the Egyptian prison system who advocated and promoted the rhetoric of *takfirism* (the excommunication of fellow Muslims). The second phase, cross-pollination, marks the process of intermarriage between the theological orthodoxy of Salafism and the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamism, which was defined by the group's religio-political activism after the expulsion of its members from different Arab states and their escape to Saudi Arabia. This phase also implies the Salafization of jihadism among various Islamic currents in the 1980s–90s, a process accompanied by the employment of violent tactics and an increasing adoption of Salafi theology as the sole legitimate form of jihad among many jihadists. The third phase, identified as the causation, saw the spread of Salafist activism that was driven and inspired by key events and developments across the region, including the Afghan War (1979–89) and the first Gulf War (1990–91), during which Saudi Arabia was perceived by Salafists as betraying Islam, causing the emergence of a movement referred to as the Awakening. The fourth phase, realization, featured heavy operations, including the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

This phase marked the rise of jihadism as the major serious threat to the West, while for jihadist movements it was perceived as the start of a potentially greater era to grow and thrive. The fifth defining phase of the development of jihadism, the crossroads, began with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, during which jihadist organizations shifted and adjusted their tactics, strategy, objective, and identity. Such shifts continued to take place in the years that followed, and the motives and inspirations among groups that fall under the umbrella of jihadism remain diversified amid the development of capabilities that enable them to mobilize greater numbers of recruits and sustain their ideological tenets.

Thus, the rise of various, mainly radical, interpretations of the concept of jihad by a new generation of Islamic scholars, who were increasingly driven by contemporary developments taking place largely in the Middle East, has played a key role in inspiring and motivating numerous Islamic militant groups to emerge and grow. Extremist Islamists, whether Sunni or Shia, have found themselves equipped by a sufficient number of theological verdicts and decrees that allowed, and even urged them, to resort to force and violence under the umbrella of jihad allegedly for the sake of Islam and the *'ummah*.

Pamphlets and monographs developed by the pioneers of Salafi-jihadism constitute a crucial source of inspiration for most of the Sunni-based militant groups that emerged over the past few decades (Alsulaiman 2016, 187). Such sources feed the perspective on political violence as jihad, refer to the armed form of jihad as the heart of Islam, and blame its neglect for the deterioration of Islam's position in the world. Combating pro-modernization Muslims, toppling secular or apostate regimes, establishing Islamic Sharia rule in Muslim states, restoring the caliphate, and expanding Islamic territory are key objectives of jihad as promoted by the Salafi-Jihadi discourse and its literature. The sources to which Shiite extremists resort in order to feed their ideological tenets and perspectives on jihad are no less significant than those of the Sunnis. Prominent Shia religious leader Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini (1902–1989) emphasized the necessity to expose and overthrow tyrannical rulers for not abiding by the Islamic laws of Sharia, urging Islamic jurists to lead such a revolution and establish Islamic governments once the apostate rulers are removed. This was considered a call to all Muslims to struggle for the sake of establishing the Sharia rule. Khomeini argued that once the genuine Islamic teachings have prevailed among Muslims, each member of the *'ummah* can become a *mujāhid* or struggler for God's cause (Knapp 2003, 89). Other influential Shia theorists and ideologues, such as Murtaza Mutahhari (1920–1979) and Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah (1935–2010), advocated armed jihad and called for the use of force as a necessary means in the jihad against the enemies of Islam. Speeches and pamphlets produced by such authoritative ideologues have inspired and triggered an undeniably remarkable wave of Shia militancy in the Middle East over the recent years, operating within the framework of a sectarian-based jihad comparable to that of Sunni extremists in violence and aggression.

The emergence and growth of Islamist militant organizations such as Sunni-based ISIS and Shia-based al-Hashd al-Shaabi, whose leaders have constantly emphasized their commitment to an extremist version of jihad, can be seen as a fruit of the emerging radical theorizations, interpretations, and elucidations on the conception of jihad, which have continued to flow and unfold throughout the 20th century and early 21st century. The tactics, targets, and arenas of operation pursued by such groups in recent years indicate the dramatic evolution of the movement of jihadism (Wright et al. 2017, 5). Such a development constitutes

an unprecedented transformation of the basic idea of jihad into a radical concept upon which some of the most fanatical and atrocious organizations are based in terms of thought, ideology, discourse, and course of action. Furthermore, globalization and the digital age surface at the heart of the propaganda and recruitment campaigns launched by radical groups to attract as many members and sympathizers to their alleged cause as possible, and thus jihad has been exploited as a brand to provide religious legitimacy to their cause and emotionally manipulate the recipients of their increasingly ideological discourse.

Sunni and Shia Interpretations

Sunni and Shia Muslims principally agree on the application of jihad under particular circumstances that justify a struggle in the path of God. Such circumstances include defenses of faith, territory, property, and way of life. Jihad, in its spiritual and physical forms, is thus justified by both Sunnis and Shiites in cases of repelling threats of invasion by hostile troops, protecting Muslims and their property, and guaranteeing the freedom to practice and spread Islam. However, the issue of having an eligible and righteous authority to wage and direct jihad emerged as a divisive factor between Sunnis and Shiites. According to Sunni interpretations of the "right authority" to call for and direct jihad, all Muslim caliphs and legitimate leaderships possess the right to wage and guide jihad as long as they hold political and religious authority and possess the support of Islamic scholars, or *ʿulamā'*. Shia Muslims, however, believe that this right has been exclusively reserved for the imams, but it was arbitrarily and wrongly deprived from them by the Sunni majority. This disagreement is deeply rooted in the Sunni-Shiite struggle over whether religio-political leadership was meant to be passed on by bloodline, known as the Shiite Imamate, or through election, known as the Sunni Caliphate (Holtmann 2014, 142). Hence, the jurisprudential variance between Sunni and Shiite conceptions of jihad has been shaped by historical developments and the associated religio-political approach of the *ʿulamā'*.

One of the basic differences between Sunni and Shiite doctrines regarding their approach to jihad is that the latter considers it a genuine pillar of Islam. While the Sunnis chiefly recognize the five duties incumbent on each Muslim – comprising *al-Shahādah*, *Ṣalāt*, *Zakāt*, *Ṣawm*, and *Ḥajj* – as the undisputable five pillars of Islam (*Arkān al-Islām*), the Shia deem jihad as another basic *rukn* ("pillar") of the religion, the commitment to which is essential and at the core of the Islamic faith (Al-Qaradawi 2009, 76). This Shiite approach emphasizes legitimacy, right intention, and commitment to the basic ethics of Islam as fundamental elements that need to coexist in any form of jihad for it to be a true struggle in the path of God and eventually be rewarded. If a jihad is legitimate and justified (*mashrūʿan*), based on the right intention (*wa-ṣaḥḥat fīh an-nīyah*), and carried out in accordance with Islamic ethical principles (*akhlāqīyāt al-Islām*) and within the boundaries of God's teachings (*wal-tuzimat fīh ḥudūd Allāh*), it is considered the greatest way to worship and draw nearer to God. The Shia Imamate notably refers to this kind of jihad, combining all these elements, as the sixth pillar of Islam. According to Islamic scholars, the Shiite belief that jihad is one of fundamental duties incumbent on each Muslim ought to be viewed as the main point of difference with respect to jihad between Shiites and the Sunnis going beyond the question of determining the correct authority to launch and direct jihad. Imām Ahmed ibn Hanbal (780–855 CE) – an Islamic theologian, jurist, and founder of the traditionalist Ḥanbalī school of law – considered jihad the greatest

voluntary practice and the utmost form of sacrifice to demonstrate one's degree of commitment to Islam, a statement supported by numerous Qur'anic verses and quotations from the hadith. Such teachings, although initially introduced by Sunni scholars, were the inspiration for Shiite insistence on embracing jihad as a genuine pillar of Islam.

Delving into the Shiite perception of jihad demonstrates that the historical suffering and grievances of Shia Muslims is bound intimately with their understanding of the notion of jihad (Moghadam 2003, 2). One of the key incidents crucial to the identity-building of Shiites was the martyrdom of Imam al-Hussein, Prophet Mohammed's grandson and Ali's younger son, during a battle with Sunni Umayyad forces in Karbala, Iraq, in 680 on *ʿAshurāʾ*, the tenth day of the month *Muḥarram* in the Islamic calendar. Shiites believe that the tale of al-Hussein's martyrdom holds moral lessons for the community, and it has become a symbol for struggling against suppression and striving for justice. This interpretation, which constitutes a key element of Shiite doctrine, tends to draw a direct link between the martyrdom of al-Hussein and the fundamental notion of jihad as a struggle for God's cause and godly order. Another element within the Shiite doctrine of jihad is the ghaybah or occultation of the Twelfth Imām. Twelver Shiism (*Ithna ʿAshari*) is the largest denomination of Shia Muslims, and its followers believe that the prophet's spiritual authority and religious leadership passed on to twelve of his descendants, beginning with Ali, Hasan, and al-Hussein. The Twelvers believe that the twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, known as the "Awaited Imam" or "Hidden Imam," disappeared from a cave below a mosque in 874 CE and will reappear at the end of the time to bring absolute justice and peace to the world (Dabashi 2011; Mottahedeh 2003). Thus, it is the twelfth imam who, according to the majority of Shiites, possesses the true authority to direct jihad, and in his absence the concerned *ʿulamāʾ* or *Mujtahids* – the most senior religious scholars –perform this task until his return.

The main point of difference between the Sunni and Shiite perceptions of jihad is thus the righteousness and legitimacy of an authority to initiate and guide jihad. According to mainstream Shiite scholars, while a defensive jihad that is aimed at protecting and defending the *'ummah* against an outside attack is compulsory and may be authorized by the Mujtahids, the authorization of offensive jihad remains unlawful in the absence of the twelfth imam. *Having* a history marked by grievances and suffering, many Shiites perceive Sunnis as the main source of their miseries and they therefore believe that Shiites must resist and fight against what they deem to be long-standing injustices and oppression. In terms of combating fellow Muslims under the banner of jihad, a classical Shiite interpretation of jihad was introduced by the *ʿulamāʾ* as part of "jihad of the sword," which permits fighting even against fellow Muslims found guilty of spreading discord, schism, and injustice in the Islamic realm (Moghadam 2003, 3). Such an interpretation has created a greater divide in Muslim society and contributes to the continuity and escalation of sectarian differences and confrontations between Sunnis and Shiites into the modern era.

Both Sunni and Shia sects agree on the significance of having the proper *nīyah*, or "right intention," before declaring or calling for jihad. Engaging in armed jihad for the sake of "conquest, booty, or honor in the eyes of one's companions" would not be regarded as a true jihad and thus would go unrewarded, because the sole valid objective of jihad is to "draw near God" and hence struggle in God's path (Knapp 2003, 86). With the right intention, however,

there remain other conditions before the launch of jihad could gain its legitimacy. These conditions include offering the enemy the so-called triple alternative: accept Islam, pay the *jizyah* (tax imposed on non-Muslim "People of the Book" residing in a Muslim-controlled area), or fight. The fundamental significance of *nīyah*, agreed on both by Sunni and Shiite scholars, is embraced for its key relevance to the Godly reward, that is believed to follow martyrdom after joining an armed struggle for God's cause (Heck 2004, 101). Delving into the jurisprudential literature of early Islamic history, al-Qaradawi explains that for jihad to rise to the degree of truthfulness and righteousness and in order for it to accomplish its intended divine purpose, two crucial conditions should exist inside each participant, or *mujāhid*: the *nīyah*, or "right intention," and *isteʿdād*, or "willingness" (Al-Qaradawi 2009, 128). Having the *nīyah* to strive for God's cause would enable a Muslim to join jihad once called to do so, and those who appear unable to participate for certain, justified reasons would still enjoy the privilege of having the *nīyah* towards jihad. In this context, *isteʿdād* arises as a crucial building-block of jihad; having the *nīyah* without *isteʿdād* would impede the whole process. Hence, it is expected that Muslim have both *nīyah* and *isteʿdād* with respect to jihad to contribute to the defense of Islamic territory or when the safety of Muslims and their properties are threatened. Noteworthy, this interpretation with regard to *nīyah* and *isteʿdād* comes in the context of *Jihād al-Dafʿ*, or "defensive struggle," and under the assumption that jihad is a "collective communal duty," or *farḍ kifāyah*. Nonetheless, the "righteousness" of the intention associated with jihad and its legitimate determiner remain controversial.

Various fatwas by Islamic *ʿulamāʾ* tend to tackle the conception of jihad through a sectarian lens. An example of this is the 2014 fatwa by the Iraqi Shiite scholar and religious authority Imam Ali al-Sistani, in which he urged capable members of the Iraqi Shiite community to unify their ranks and defend their country and faith against ISIS. His fatwa primarily focused on launching *Jihād al-Dafʿ*, defensive struggle, as a communal duty (*farḍ kifāyah*). This fatwa was the basis for the establishment of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a coalition of Shiite militias that battled ISIS between 2014 and 2017.

> With Allah's grace, the hidden assistance of our great leader Imam al-Mahdi, and the blessed historical fatwa of the Religious Reference Imam Ali al-Sistani have foiled the agenda of those barbarians [Sunni-based ISIS] to destroy Iraq . . . The fatwa of *jihād kifāyah* has been launched within the framework of a highly organized campaign by the [Shia] *mujāhidīn*, under the supervision of Imam al-Sistani, whose advice has guaranteed the commitment of al-Hashd members to the Islamic principles (Al-Tawjih al-Aqaidi, 2016).

The fatwa of Imam al-Sistani was embraced by Iraqi Shiites as a call for jihad, and the emphasis on the necessity to act upon it reflects the essential Shiite belief in the exclusive right of the imams to initiate and guide jihad in its defensive form. Also, the reference to the concept of *jihād kifāyah* emphasizes the voluntary basis of the alleged jihad led by al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The defensive and voluntary nature of the jihad called for by Imam Ali al-Sistani implies the basic Shiite belief that the authorization of offensive jihad remains unlawful in the absence of the Hidden Imam, al-Mahdi. Given the fact that the perceived enemies in this struggle are also Muslims, such a fatwa and what it implies could be viewed in the context of jihad of the sword,

which permits fighting even against fellow Muslims once those are found guilty of spreading discord and injustice in *Dār al-Islām*.

This arises in contrast to prominent *fatāwa* by Sunni scholars whose calls for jihad do not seem restricted to defensive struggle, but rather encourage, to a certain degree, engagement in offensive jihad for the sake of spreading the Islamic message and combating foes and adversaries beyond the borders of *Dār al-Islām*. An illustrative example of this is a fatwa by Abdul Aziz Bin Baaz, the former mufti[2] of Saudi Arabia, who considers *Jihād al-Ṭalab* as a necessary stage of struggling in the path of god in order to ensure the establishment of God's absolute dominion on earth.

> Launching jihad against the *mushrikīn* [polytheists] and invading them in their own lands is necessary to eliminate *fitna* [discord] and ensure an absolute worship of Allah alone and the expansion of the Islamic realm by means of eliminating the preachers of *kufr* [disbelief] and *ilḥād* [atheism]. Only then [through *Jihād al-Ṭalab*] would mankind enjoy justice under the Sharīʿa. . . . Hence, those who claim that jihad should be limited to its defensive form are deeply mistaken, because that contradicts the teachings of the Prophet and his pious companions (Bin Baaz 1973).

The insistence on launching *Jihād al-Ṭalab* against the enemies of Islam on their own soil (*fī ʿuqri dārih*), with the pious intention (*nīyah*) to strive for God's cause and the alleged determination (*ʿazm*) to spread the message of Islam and establish God's dominion on earth, relates to Sunni doctrinal tenets that have inspired such an interpretation of jihad. Hence, while the majority of Shiites insist on embracing and acting upon the belief in the return of the Hidden Imam at the end of time to bring justice to the world, and thus focusing their efforts on the defensive jihad, orthodox Sunnis believe that once the necessary means are available for launching jihad to ensure the expansion of Islam and God's dominion on earth, one is obliged to participate in jihad, be it defensive or offensive. Such theological interpretations and recommendations by strict Sunni scholars constitute inspirational sources for radical Sunni movements in their alleged jihad.

Conclusion

While both Sunnis and Shiites agree on the basic principles of the conception of jihad, in its spiritual and physical forms, as a communal requirement to protect the faith and defend Islamic territory and the 'ummah's property against any outside aggression, they still disagree on certain points in this regard. They also both agree on the necessity of having *nīyah* and *isteʿdād* for any form of jihad to succeed. The question of the legitimacy and righteousness of an authority to call for, initiate, and direct jihad constitutes a fundamental point of disagreement between the sects. While Sunnis consider any authority or leader who has gained consensus from the public to lead as eligible to launch and guide jihad, Shiites, particularly Twelvers, believe that this privilege solely belongs to the Hidden Imam, especially when it comes to offensive jihad, and that the mujtahids are only allowed to lead the defensive form

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[2] A mufti is a religious jurist who issues legal decisions (fatwahs) on practical problems for which no precise answer is found in the religious law.

of jihad in his absence. The perceived long-standing grievances among Shia Muslims are deemed central to the sect's understanding of jihad, as crystallized in the classical Shia perception of jihad of the sword even against fellow Muslims accused of spreading schism and injustice in the Islamic realm. Such interpretations were historically faced with Sunni reactions and contributed to the escalation of the sectarian divide within the Muslim society and continued to surface into the modern era. Another aspect of difference between Sunni and Shiite perceptions of jihad is whether to consider it a genuine pillar of Islam. Sunni Muslim's insistence on clinging to the notorious *al-Arkān al-Khamsah* as the only obligatory practices measuring one's commitment to the faith is faced by a predominantly Shiite perspective of embracing jihad as a significant part of those pillars once the jihad is justified, based on right intentions, and carried out according to the ethical principles of Islam and within the moral boundaries determined by the faith.

Thus, the rise of sectarian-guided interpretations of the concept and practice of jihad seems to find its roots in the Sunni-Shiite rifts that emerged in the early years of Islam, which have greatly overshadowed the intellectual work of influential Islamic theologians and the teachings of religious authorities over centuries. Throughout the long-standing process of identity-building among Shiites, certain distinguishable values, such as the attachment to the Shiite imams and their righteousness as carriers of the prophetic light to lead the 'ummah, have been constantly emphasized and revisited by Shiite clerics as a *manhaj*, or method to preserve the identity of the sect. Even fundamental collective Islamic principles, such as jihad, have been sectarianized – like the underlined difference over the legitimacy of launching offensive jihad in the absence of the Hidden Imam – for the sake of demarcating the borderline between loyalty to an in-group – or *ʿaṣabiyya*, as Ibn Khaldun puts it (Champion 2005, 64) – and disavowal of an out-group. While for moderate Sunni and Shia Muslims jihad remains a question of measuring the devotion of members of the *'ummah* with regard to striving in the path of God, spiritually and physically in the case of defending the Islamic faith and protecting its values, ultra-orthodox representatives of these sects tend to (re)interpret the religious struggle as an instrument for indoctrination and ideologization in order to serve their destructive dogmas. Among the main contemporary manifestations of sectarian-guided extremism was the rise of Sunni-based al-Qaeda and ISIS and Shia-based Hezbollah and al-Hashd al-Shaabi. The global-mindedness of extremist organizations like ISIS in their recruitment campaigns and terrorist activities may be seen as a reflection of their boundless perspective on offensive jihad in the quest for establishing an alleged Sunni caliphate. This while the strict attachment of Shiite groups such as al-Hashd al-Shaabi to the fatwas of their *mujtahid* imams that primarily focus on defensive jihad – on local and regional scale – may be viewed as a reflection of their commitment to the Shiite imamate – at least when it comes to sectarian-based restrictions on the launch of and participation in jihad. It is worth mentioning that such groups often resort to recontextualizing religious verses and reinterpreting theological themes for their own agendas, and they merely represent a small minority of radicalized members of the 'ummah. Yet, given the analysis provided throughout this article, despite the sectarian-guided differences regarding the interpretation of striving in the path of God, the jihad propagated and claimed by such extremist groups seems far from the jihad mentioned and called for in the Qur'an and the Hadith, especially in terms of context and ultimate objectives.

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