

Jihad: From Qur'an to Bin Laden

Richard Bonney

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Richard Bonney laments what he deems a misappropriation of the term *jihad* by both pundits in the West seeking to portray Islam as inherently violent, and a small faction of Muslim fanatics seeking political gain. Jihad, he contends, has been perverted from its original intent of encouraging spiritual athleticism and allowing for physical defense when transgression

occurs. He endeavors to return to the term's roots to detail how and why it has been manipulated over time to take on exclusively violent and aggressive connotations. By doing so, Bonney hopes to empower Muslim moderates to publicize the concept of jihad as purely defensive, as well as to enlighten non-Muslims of Islam's true message of peace, balance, and pluralism.

The author goes back to the original sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, to make his case. He demonstrates his familiarity with the Qur'an by citing verses on jihad, contextualizing them in purely spiritual and defensive terms, and briefly mentions how they could be misinterpreted if one did not view the Qur'an holistically and in its proper context. However, Bonney betrays his ignorance of the Qur'anic sciences in his rather superficial description and application of classical hermeneutics and abrogation theory. Rather than engage the prolific tradition of Qur'anic exegesis, he relies on a few modern commentators (e.g., Qamaruddin Khan and Reuven Firestone) to promote his views. He acknowledges that these interpretations may differ with the tradition, but he does not address or attempt to resolve the tension between the two.

Bonney then moves on to the hadith literature, focusing almost exclusively on *Ṣaḥih al-Bukhari* and *Ṣaḥih Muslim*, as recorded in the online database of the University of Southern California's Muslim Students Association. From his study, he contends that jihad was used to represent all types of struggle, and that it was only by chance that the Prophet was forced to actualize his particular struggle through fighting and forming a political entity. Taken out of its historical circumstance, he says, one can easily use and misuse the Hadith texts to serve violent, politico-economic purposes.

After surveying the Qur'an and the Sunnah, Bonney takes a historical approach to the term and explains how the early caliphs, whom he claims were power-hungry to the core and based most of their actions on political designs, manipulated the previously peaceful notion of jihad to expand the empire through military conquest. Despite the ruling polity's excesses, however, the author says that one class retained both the letter and the spirit of the prophetic example: the Sufis, who continued to view jihad as calling only for self-sacrifice and spiritual struggle. In time, however, the author contends that even they were corrupted by such pseudo-Sufis as al-Ghazzali and, more egregiously, Shah Waliullah, who glorified jihad in its ultimate form as armed struggle. Thus, the views of the state and the ascetics began to converge, and jihad became an all-encompassing state principle.

The concept of jihad as a state principle was promoted by such thinkers as Ibn Taymiyyah and Muhammad Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab. As their thought spread, multiple revolutionary movements emerged throughout the Muslim world calling for jihad in order to achieve goals ranging from self-determination to eradicating un-Islamic practices. Bonney describes many of these movements and highlights their salient features, saying that they took on distinctly imperialist overtones, regardless of initial intentions or rhetoric. He then describes Sunni and Shi`i revivalist/jihadist groups of the twentieth century, all of which seemed to espouse the view that jihad is, first and foremost, aggressive and political. Although he does not go into detail, Bonney provides some insightful introductory material that gives a broad understanding of their scope and nature.

The author concludes his book by discussing the Palestinian-Israeli dispute and modern global jihadists in detail. He outlines this conflict's entire history, from the Balfour Declaration to the ongoing building of the security wall. This section is both descriptive and critical, and it allows the reader to trace the religious and political justifications for Palestinian modes of attack, including suicide bombings. Though he places the onus of reconciliation on Israel, Bonney effectively problematizes the situation and wisely declines to offer a solution. He gives Afghanistan and Kashmir similar treatment, so as to help the reader understand the causes for and motives behind those people whom he calls "global jihadists" (e.g., Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri). Bonney weaves the jihadist worldview, spiritual hierarchy, oil prices, and the American war machine into his discussion to once again provide a holistic view of the situation and at the same time problematize it. In this case, he ventures a partial solution in his conclusion.

Although he hopes that non-Muslims will achieve a certain level of tolerance by reading this book, Bonney directly addresses Muslims and says that the trend of misappropriating jihad for political purposes will not cease until Muslims themselves demand a return to Islam's original Qur'anic and prophetic principles. Islam, he insists, has no room for the notion of aggressive jihad, and Muslims should do their utmost to promote a tolerant view of Islam. This is indeed a very lofty claim to make; however, the book in question does not provide sufficient material to authoritatively make such a claim. The author's lack of familiarity with the Islamic sciences leads him to make hurried conclusions based on spurious evidence. In addition, it is clear that his thoughts are not derived from critical academic works, given that over one-third of his sources are from web pages. Conscience would drive us to appreciate his analysis of the current geopolitical situation, in addition

to revisiting the primary texts with a critical eye to ascertain whether his analysis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah has potential validity.

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