The Meaning of Jihad: Textual and Contextual Interpretations

Sri Mulyati

Department of Islamic Sufism, Faculty of Theology, Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, 15412, Jakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Belief in *Jihad* (holy war) is key for a believer of Islam in the social theological sphere, where faith and *jihad* are not separated. Discussions among theologians and religious experts on the meaning of *jihad* and the thoughts they put forth have undergone changes and have developed over time. Concrete political situations have also affected views and opinions toward *jihad* and have, eventually, led to pragmatism and realism among *ulamas* and Islamic thinkers in their understanding of *jihad*. This paper attempts to explore the meaning and concept of *jihad* in Islam via textual and contextual interpretations. The writer's own research has yielded that *jihad* has wide meaning and is not limited to war alone because Allah had ordained Muslims not only to take up arms, but also to believe in holy war in terms of its existential meaning (which refers to the fight against lust) in the quest to defend Islam. This paper discusses the objectives of *jihad* in Islam as a way to glorify the name of Allah and to fight against cruelty and unfairness on God's earth.

Keywords: Contextual interpretation, faith, *jihad*, *Qur'an*, textual interpretation

INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to deliberate both on the textual and on the contextual meaning of the term *jihad*. Textually, the term *jihad* discusses in order to better understand the arguments about it. Contextually, the paper focuses on an understanding of the reasons behind *jihad* and the role it plays in a particular context.

The principal objective of this paper is to explore the true meaning of *jihad* (holy war), which actually evokes many interpretations. *Jihad* has also been subject to so many misinterpretations. Some people have understood the meaning of *jihad* as merely launching a holy war, although in the *Qur'an*, the term has various meanings. This misinterpretation has often caused some people to use only a certain and narrow understanding of *jihad* and at the same time try to legitimize their limited understanding of the term. In Indonesia, some religious leaders are aware of the political situation in the nation and give a more positive meaning to *jihad* rather than restricting its interpretation to merely a holy war.

According to the *Qur'an*, the aims of *jihad* are to spread the word of God and to abolish injustice. The *Qur'an* reiterates that all able-bodied Muslims should be willing to take up *jihad* at any point in time. It mentions that if Muslims know and understand the many rewards that God has prepared for those who perform *jihad* and are obedient to Him, they would most definitely be willing to carry out the commandment (Shihab, 2007).

Together with these aims, there are various types of *jihad* in terms of opponents to Islam and the purposes of *jihad*. There is *jihad* against the unbelievers, the hypocrites, evil and lust. These interpretations of *jihad* are for different purposes and resolutions. A scientist, for example, can take up *jihad* by using his knowledge for the good of mankind; employees can launch *jihad* by being productive; a teacher can practice *jihad* by teaching the younger generation with utmost honesty; leaders can govern with justice; entrepreneurs can realize *jihad* by being honest in their trade; while the army's loyalty to the country and ruler is yet another form of *jihad*. *Jihad* in any form and against any opponent must be for Allah and must never end. This is *haqqa jihadih,* the true *jihad* (Shihab, 2007). This phrase *haqqa jihadih* is clearly mentioned in Surah al-Hajj (*Qur'an* 22:78).

Shihab (2007) explained that *jihad* was a way to achieve a goal using available resources. *Jihad* does not recognize despair, surrender and lethargy. A *mujahid* (a word derived from *jahada*) is a person who devotes all his abilities and sacrifices with his soul and energy, thoughts, emotions and anything related to the human self (Shihab, 2007). This was evident during the Meccan Period when Muslims were not in a position to take up arms or fight physically, as stated in Surah *al-Furqan* (verse 52). A *mujahid* therefore devotes his soul and energy to *jihad*.

This verse is very relevant to the understanding of *jihad* because devotion can be a powerful tool and instrument to bring down enemies. The wrongful accusations against Islam can be countered with well-informed arguments and devotion to the religion. The use of the *Qur'an* to counter misinformation and wrongful accusations can be a stronger mental weapon compared to *jihad* with physical weapons.

Textual Meaning

Etymologically, the Arabic word *jihad* is

derived from the verb *jahada*, which means struggle and hard work. *Jahada* also means working very hard to achieve maximum results (Manzur, 2000). It could also be interpreted to mean effort, seriousness, fatigue, difficulty, illness, and anxiety. The *Qur'an* mentions the word *jihad* and its derivations as many as 40 times. Other derivational meanings of *jihad* include devoting all abilities and enduring sacrifices. *Jihad* can also mean optimizing efforts by devoting all potential and abilities both in words and actions, or anything that can be done to achieve a certain goal.

A stereotypical view of the West is that *jihad fi sabilillah* is simply a holy war to spread Islam (Gibb, 1978). This narrow understanding of the term stigmatizes Islam as a religion of violence (Fadhlullah, 1995). Some followers of the Khawarij interpret *jihad* as fighting with the use of weapons or dying of martyrdom (Rahman, 1979). For these people, using weapons is a major part of *jihad*. They do not consider other struggles as *jihad*. This has led to the counterargument, *jihad akbar* (struggle against desires), that holds struggles in matters related to economics, social, politics and military are not a priority (Fahmi, 1992). Textually, it can be seen that there are many meanings to *jihad* and each meaning is related to the function and purpose for which the term is used.

Contextual Meaning

Al-Isfahani (n.d.), an eleventh-century Muslim scholar of *Qur'an*ic exegesis and Arabic language, explained that *jihad* meant to exert every ability to defend oneself from the enemy. He divided *jihad* into three types: *jihad* against visible enemies, *jihad* against demons, and *jihad* against oneself (Al-Isfahani, n.d.). These are related to the context of *jihad*.

Jihad can only be pursued by those who truly believe in the holy book and understand it well. Facing opponents who are bent on distorting facts, or those who have no knowledge or misunderstand the teachings of the *Qur'an*, is definitely much more difficult than fighting battles with weapons. Therefore, *jihad* by using the firm understanding of the *Qur'an* is far greater and stronger than any holy war (Shihab, 2007).

Jihad is not always concerned with taking up arms. This was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when he was still in Mecca. At the time, the Muslims were weak and defenseless. The prophet was commanded to perfom *jihad* by devoting all efforts to face the polytheists with words that touched the mind and heart and without weapons. The meaning of *jihad* was contextualized for the Prophet.

There is also *jihad fi sabilillah,* a phrase which means the struggle to realize the religious message in the way of Allah. In Surah *al-Ma'idah* (verse 35), we read: "*O ye who believe, fear Allah and seek the way that is near to Him, and strive in His Way, that ye may be fortunate*". This is Allah's motivation for Muslims to achieve what is promised on the Day of Judgment for those who perform *jihad* for His sake. The reward is a great, eternal and lasting fortune and

happiness in the chambers of paradise where the faithful resides forever (*al-Rifa'i*, n.d.).

Verse 5:35 above actually explains that *jihad* in the way of Allah is to manifest the welfare of life in this world and in the Hereafter. *Jihad* is a duty for those who believe and should be done on the basis of devotion to Allah. *Jihad* in Allah's way is also an effort or endeavour on the part of the believer as a vicegerent of Allah on Earth to achieve something better and to reach *al-falah* (luck, victory, prosperity, welfare in this world and in the Hereafter). The verse also explains that *jihad* in the way of Allah begins with the command to be pious towards Him and to find a way towards righteousness. In short, it can be said that faith, piety, efforts and *jihad* are contextualized as a series of attitudes and activities of a Muslim person's life to achieve inner and outer happiness, in this world and the Hereafter.

Fi Sabilillah also means in the way of Allah, that is the path that takes someone towards God, both through belief and deeds. Specifically *fi sabilillah* means fighting against the enemy of religion. In general, the meaning of *fi sabilillah* includes all deeds or sincere charity which is used to *taqarrub* to God, to carry out all the tasks that are both compulsory and optional such as the propagation (*da'wah*) of Islam, the eradication of illiteracy (especially that related to the *Qur'an)*, translation of the *Qur'an* into different languages, building hospitals, financing the activities of Islamic organizations, building of public wells and toilets, establishing orphanages and schools.

Allah informs that in performing *jihad*, one should perform it fully as commanded in Surah *al-Hajj* (verse 78). He uses the words *haqqa jihadih* which means the true *jihad*, and only those who perform true *jihad* sincerely will receive God's Grace.

Meanwhile, in Surah *al-Anfal* (verse 72) we read of those who believe in Him and His Messenger and emigrated by leaving their homes because of their displeasure towards the unbelievers. They strived with their wealth, among others, by giving assistance for *jihad* efforts and the defense of religious values. These Muslims who defended the messenger and the *muhajirin* (immigrants) were in a very high position in the sight of Allah. This is a clear action of *jihad*.

Verse 72 of Surah *al-Anfal* states that when war is declared, everyone in the Muslim community should support *jihad*, except those whose circumstances do not permit it. In Surah *al-Fath* (48: 17) we read: *No blame on those who are blind and crippled over and above those who were sick (if they do not go to war)*.

It should be noted from this verse that although a person is not physically capable of taking up *jihad*, he could perform other duties within his abilities. In this context, Imam al-Zuhri narrated that the great scholar Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib participated in a war even though he was blind in one eye. When someone said "Don't you have a reason for not participating?" He replied: "Allah commands us to go to *jihad* under any situation. If I cannot go to war, then at least I can rally others to join the troops and I can take good care of goods and supplies" (Shihab, 2007).

This was also the case with Abu Talha who was one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad. Upon reading Surah *al-Fath* (verse 17), he said, "I understand that my Lord asks me to pursue *jihad* when young and old." He then ordered his sons to prepare his instruments of war. They said, "Look, you have performed *jihad* during the time of the Prophet until his death, as well as during the time of Abu Bakr and Umar, so now you do not need to go to war any longer, let us do the fighting." However, Abu Talha insisted on performing *jihad* which sadly eventually led him to his death. Interestingly, his body was only found and buried after a week but it was still intact and odorless.

The word wealth is put prior to soul (self) in another understanding of *jihad*. This understanding emphasizes the need for giving donations and helping others in need. This was especially seen during the Battle of Tabuk where the Muslims greatly needed funds for the war. The war was nicknamed *Hour al-'usrah* (the time of crisis) because the enemy was large in number, the distance was far and the situation was difficult. However, there were Muslims who were reluctant to go to war. Uthman ibn 'Affan, a holy companion of the Holy Prophet who later became Islam's third caliph, contributed a thousand dirhams, a very large amount at that time, to the cause of war. This led the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) to pray: "O Allah (may Allah be pleased with him,Uthman,) for I am indeed happy for him." This was narrated by Ibn Hisham in his *Sirah*. Another narration states that Uthman donated two hundred camels and equipment and a large sum of money.

Most importantly, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) introduced *jihad* in its broadest sense with a general and encompassing meaning toward the faith of Islam. Some Qur'anic experts have debated the concept of *jihad* and proposed changes and developments to the context and environment of each of them. Political situations have led scholars and Muslim thinkers to be pragmatic and realistic in their assessment of *jihad* (al-Qadiri, 1985). The Khawarij, for example, set *jihad* as the sixth pillar of *Iman*, or faith (Rahman, 1979).

Jihad constitutes a fundamental identity of a believer in social praxis theology where the concepts of faith and *jihad* are inseparable (Anees & Sardar, 1992). Surah *Al-Hujurat* (49: 15) and *hadith* reflect this: *"Indeed, those who believe that only those who believe (have faith) in Allah and His Messenger, then they do not hesitate and they struggle (jihad) with their wealth and their lives in Allah's way, those people are the right ones."*

Another writer who discussed jihad was al-Qadiriy (1985). He agreed with the notion of *jihad* presented by Ibnu Taimiyyah, which highlighted the ability to achieve what is loved by Allah and to reject what is hated by Him. To him, *jihad* is working very hard in order to achieve what is loved by God, faith and good deeds, and reject what God hates, disbelief, wickedness and disobedience (al-Qadiry, 1985). Although he included war as a *jihad*, he also included spending money and making efforts to support the religion of

Allah and the struggle against lust and the devil as *jihad* (Ad-Daqs, 1972).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is clear that the concept of *jihad* in Islam is very wide, and has many meanings and interpretations. There appears to be two extreme views of *jihad*; the belief that *jihad* is a war to physically confront the enemies of Islam and the belief that *jihad* is a war against lust or sins. The understanding of the term therefore does not refer to war only. God commands Muslims to defend themselves, their religion and homeland and to this end Muslims can exercise *jihad* physically or mentally. The purpose of *jihad* in Islam is to elevate the word of God and to eliminate injustices committed by those who are hostile to Islam. Eradicating ignorance, poverty and diseases are *jihad* which are no less important than the taking up of arms. A scientist strives to take advantage of his knowledge, employees work hard, teachers teach with the best of their abilities, leaders lead justly, entrepreneurs trade honesty, and so on. All these efforts can be viewed as *jihad*.

REFERENCES

Ad-Daqs, K. S. (1972). *Ayatul-jihad fil-Qur`anil-Karim: Maudu'iyyah wa tarikhiyyah wa bayaniyyah* [The Jihad Qur'anic verses: Themes, historical, & explanations]. Kuwait: Darul-Bayan.

Al-Isfahani, R. (n.d.). *Mu'jam mufradat alfazh al-Qur'an* [Dictionary of the terms of the *Qur'an*]. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Fikr.

Al-Qadiriy, A. I. A. (1985). *Al-jihad fi sabilillah: Haqiqatuhu wa ghayatuhu* [*Jihad* in the way of Allah: The reality & objectives]. Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Darul Manarah.

Al-Rifa'i, M. N. (n.d.). *Taysir al-Qadir al-li'aliyy ikhtishar tafsir Ibn Katsir* [al-Qadir's simple high of the summary of Ibn Kathir exegesis] (Vol. 2). Maktabah al Ma'arif.

Al-Rifa'i, M. N. (n.d.), *Taysir al-Qadir al-li'aliyy ikhtishar Tafsir Ibn Katsir* [al-Qadir's simple high of the summary of Ibn Kathir exegesis] (Vol. 3). Maktabah al Ma'arif.

Anees. M. A., & Ziauddin, S. (1992). *Jihad*. In Z. Sardar & M. W. Davies (Eds.), *Faces of Islam: A discussion on issues of contemporary* (A. E. Priyono, & A. Armando, Trans.). Bandung, Indonesia: Mizan.

Fadhlullah, M. H. (1995). *Islam and the logic strength* (A. Mohammad & A. Adhiem, Transl.). Bandung, Indonesia: Mizan.

Fahmi, A. (1992). *The association of assessing jihad: Between hujjah and sword.* Bandung, Indonesia: Foundation Fi Zhilal Koran.

Gibb, H. A. R. (1978). *Modern trends in Islam.* New York, USA: Octagon Books.

Manzur, I. (2000). *Lisan al-'Arab* [Tongue of Arabs] (3rd ed.). Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Sader.

Rahman, F. (1979). *Islam.* Chicago, USA: University of Chicago Press.

Shihab, Q. (2007). *Tafsir al-mishbah* [Al-mishbah exegesis]. Jakarta, Indonesia: Lentera Hati.