

# Eclipse of the Greater Jihad

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The word *jihad* derives from the Arabic root *jhd*, signifying intense struggle or effort. It has the connotations of a moral struggle within one's own self, besides denoting an armed struggle. It thus carries the hermeneutical meaning of a moral endeavour directed toward one's own improvement or self-elevation on a moral plane, which Muslim jurists of eminence have been quoted as calling *jihad-e-akbar*, or greater *jihad*. On the other hand, preparations and participation for defense against an armed conflict that is the consequence of foreign aggression has been known as *qitaal*, or *jihad-e-asghar*, lesser *jihad*.

Islam does not lay down boundaries between religious and social values; its laws cover not only ritual, but practically every aspect of life, including the mundane. Four main sources of Islamic law, in decreasing order of importance, are 1) the Qur'an as the supreme source; 2) *sunnah*, or the life of the Prophet as an example to be followed; 3) the consensus of Muslims as a community or a polity (*ijma'*); and 4) reasoning by analogy, with precedents by scholars or jurists (*qiyas*). Another important source that has been relegated to lesser importance, but perhaps which is most important in the prevailing context, is *ijtihad*. This is the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources in the context of prevailing circumstances. In the absence of *ijtihad* (adjudication), Qur'an,

*sunnah*, *ahadith* and *ijma'*, representing a substantial core of Islamic literature, amount more or less to dictates of *shari'a*, unless an existing decision is changed on the basis of further adjudication. This is because *shari'a* law, within the confines of Qur'an and *sunnah*, and supplemented by *ijma'* and *qiyas*, serves as the *only* legal framework within which the public and private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Islamic principles of jurisprudence, and for Muslims living outside the domain. Thus, in the absence of *ijtihad*, emphasis shifts heavily to the texts, doctrines, and precedents rather than adjudication based upon existing circumstances, which was the forte of *ijtihad*. With the closing of the gates of *ijtihad* from about the tenth century onward, the centuries of intellectual evolution that characterized the hitherto progressive Islamic juristic discourse suffered an irreversible setback. Simultaneously, emphasis gradually shifted to greater reliance on the existing body of literature and thus on formal textualism, particularly involving the Qur'an, often selectively.

As a result of this ossification in the contextual paradigm, the moral *jihad* has been reduced to a mere abstraction. This is partly because the closing of the gates of *ijtihad* would usher in the era of what Karen Armstrong calls the "conservative spirit."<sup>[1]</sup> This implied going back to basics, since in a medieval agrarian society, like the Islamic one, preservation of ways of life depended upon conservation and protection of finite resources. This lifestyle constraint defined the life-parameters of the people in any primarily agrarian society. Innovation, creativity, and the like were seen as dangerous since they could potentially threaten the status quo by depleting scarce resources.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Eclipse

Western civilization, using the industrial revolution as a catalyst, moved onward, since increased production would itself be self-sustaining. Muslim societies, on the other hand, retained the conservative spirit, and Islamic jurisprudence followed suit. *Taqlid* (following dictates already laid down) was designated as a model, stifling the gateway to renewal of faith, particularly in emerging challenges. Thus, this lack of continuity in intellectual thought, manifesting itself in the lapsed practice of *ijtihad*, signaled a marked deterioration in the interpretation of *jihad-e-asghar*.

Over the centuries, the absence of adjudication, or *ijtihad*, for resolving newly emerging

issues or problems (*masail*) in light of *shari'a* has lent rigidity to these contextual paradigms, with the unfortunate effect of making the moral *jihad* a rather abstract entity. Rather than having a normative content, it has become philosophical, making it well nigh impossible for the novice trying to understand it. Even for the strict adherents trying to discover necessary guidelines to follow in their day-to-day life, the concept of greater *jihad* proves elusive beyond enjoining the eternal struggle against sin. The greater *jihad* is supposed to regulate the entire life, as it denotes the constant struggle within Muslim consciousness to live life within the boundaries of morality; a strenuous struggle is launched to resist the negative forces of temptation likely to distract followers from the prescribed path. A common problem associated with such all-embracing concepts is that they tend to lead to abstract notions mentioned only in loosely defined terms, thus failing to make sense to the pragmatist or even the devout disciple wishing to follow the same. Arguably, ritualism does play a part in the religious outlook. Going to the mosque or attending mass ordained by religion might appear as a mere formality, yet these rituals play a definite role in the satisfaction gained from religious experience. Not having these in life might detract from the overall spiritual experience for some. Thus, conceptually, greater *jihad* (*jihad-e-akbar*) falls in this category of divine injunctions that need to be interpreted progressively with the evolution of society.

However, the paucity of enlightened interpretation of this phenomenon has dealt the concept of greater *jihad* a crippling blow, while at the same time armed *jihad* has relied progressively more on selective textual renderings to convey its message. According to Fazlur Rahman, "Among the later Muslim legal schools ... it is only the fanatic Kharijites who have declared *jihad* to be one of the pillars of the Faith."<sup>[3]</sup> Professor Rahman goes on to say: "The extreme sect of the Kharijites (the 'Seceders') maintained that a grave sinner no longer remains a Muslim and turned the fury of their *jihad* (holy war) against the established rule and the Community in general in the name of a transcendent and extreme idealism which they combined with uncompromising fanaticism."<sup>[4]</sup>

Wahabism furthered these traditions: "The feature of combining religious training with *jihad* was present in the activity of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab himself and is not an uncommon phenomenon in the pre-Modernist reform movements."<sup>[5]</sup> The marriage of the house of Saud with Wahhabism was also conducive for establishing *taqlid* as a predominant model in the land of the Arabs. Ibn Saud used the symbolism of *jihad* for indoctrinating Ikhwan

(brothers), who were extremely useful in helping conquer the two holiest places in Islam: Mecca and Medina. The *Ikhwan* were “divided into categories for the purposes of waging the *jihad* when called upon to do so: some of them were regarded as the standing army which could be called up for active service immediately and on the ruler’s order, while the rest could be called up only on a *fatwa* (Islamic decree or ruling) of the ‘*ulama.*’”<sup>[6]</sup>

However, the puritanical *Ikhwan* would not stop until Arabian territory encompassed the Transjordan and other neighboring areas, which resulted in Ibn Saud obtaining religious sanction (*fatwa*) to crush them. This would become a recurring theme with opposing groups; both, in the name of Islam, used religious sanctions to give their political actions divine sanction.

The decline of the Sufi tradition has also been a factor relegating *jihad-e-akbar* to the realms of the abstract. The Sufi way of life had always been under threat from the adherents to formalism, so the evolution of Sufism and other mystical strains tended to be relegated to the back seat when puritanical movements took over. The Sufi were great proponents of the *jihad-e-akbar* in their own sometimes exotically diverse ways, so when Sufism went into decline, the concept of greater *jihad* also suffered. This has had a debilitating effect on concretizing into reality greater *jihad*’s ethereal notions, aggravated by the fact that the Islamic philosophical tradition went into a nosedive.

The perception of the decline of Sufism has become especially widespread due to the influential writings of Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner, who argue that the “classical styles” of Sufism or *maraboutism*, which in the classical ages revolved around rural miracle-working saints and mystics, had shifted towards “scripturalism” of literalist, urban-based scholars.<sup>[7]</sup> Michael Gilson argues that the decline of Sufism has been supplanted by the institutions of trade unions, political associations, schools, and so on.<sup>[8]</sup> The potential for political manipulation of these institutions is self evident.

There has also been a discernible leaning of some Sufi orders towards armed *jihad*, which has debatably dealt a crippling blow to the prospects of a Sufi-led revival of *jihad-e-akbar*.<sup>[9]</sup> Evans-Pritchard’s argument<sup>[10]</sup> about the Sanussi order acting as a stabilizing force to the Bedouin tribes of Cyrenaica provides a framework for Libyan statehood, taking Sufism into political trajectories.<sup>[11]</sup> At least some Sufi orders thus seem to have morphed into precursors of modern nationalist movements with an adopted reliance on militancy

contrasting sharply with the peace-loving, *jihad-e-akbar*-oriented Sufi philosophy. This “neo-Sufism” was at many times militant, with a stronger tendency to gravitate to literalist *shari‘a*.<sup>[12]</sup> This brings into relief the pertinent argument that even Sufism has morphed from its philosophical worldview to a more politically-oriented stance, incorporating militancy at many points, thus contributing to armed *jihad* directly or indirectly.<sup>[13]</sup>

With the decline of the Islamic empire, from the sixteenth century onwards, there has been a perceptible deterioration in the progression of Islamic philosophical thought. This narrow focus against invading ideas brought in by colonialism, coupled with the venting of rage and rebellion, has resulted in radical and structurally imbalanced thinking. According to al-Fadl, “Muslim connections to the epistemology, processes, and products of their intellectual heritage have been severed in the modern age. ... It is not that this intellectual heritage was ideal or free of problems, but that its ethical and moral potential is far superior to anything that replaced it.”<sup>[14]</sup> Placing the problem in its epistemological context, it appears that *jihad* has consistently been used as a creative political device in response to prevailing situations throughout Islamic history.<sup>[15]</sup> It appears logical to an Islamist that in the polarized “us” versus “them” world, armed *jihad* rather than the moral *jihad* would be the weapon of choice.

The colonial era was instrumental in polarizing the greater and the lesser *jihad*, wherein this rift was used by one group against the other for achieving specific political goals and agendas, espousing the militant *jihad* to the detriment of the peaceful variant. Abdul Aziz Ibn al-Saud’s crushing of the Ikhwan after obtaining a *fatwa* to do so and Nasser’s persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood, purportedly after getting support from Al-Azhar seminary and others, are again just two of the many examples. The heyday of the lesser *jihad* was of course the Afghan *jihad* in the 1980s when Reagan unleashed his anticommunist doctrine. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan mustered the support of the U.S. Congress and the American people against the Soviet Union, the “Evil Empire”:

We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua, to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.<sup>[16]</sup>

The Reagan administration explicitly sought out the most militant factions to support on the

presumption that their religious fervor would be the most effective for thwarting the Soviets. This doctrine did not preclude U.S. help to avowedly anti-American *jihadis* like the Hizb-e Islami's Gulbuddin Hekmetyar.<sup>[17]</sup> This lack of enlightened interpretation results in some glaring imbalances between the doctrines of the two *jihad*s, with the armed version gaining supremacy. Islam's intellectual crisis in the post-Ottoman era has been one of the reasons accounting for Muslim intellectual malaise and stagnation. Concomitant with this stagnation, voices of modern scholars, such as the late Professor Fazlur Rahman, who advocate an "intellectual jihad" to revive the greater, moral *jihad*, have been marginalized. Rahman was exiled for speaking against the fanaticism and fundamentalism on the rise in Pakistan, this being just one of many examples of the fate befalling scholars who dare to raise their voices against blind *taqlid* in the Muslim world today.

All of these factors have concretized the violent *jihad* as a seemingly inextricable variable in modern international relations and foreign policies, even more so because the lesser *jihad* relies upon "tangible" texts (Qur'an bolstered by *ahadith*) rather than abstract notions underlying the greater *jihad*. However, as demonstrated below, this rendering is nothing but a selective distortion of doctrine that has nevertheless tended to eclipse the greater *jihad* by its pervasive message.

## Selective Textual Literalism

Maxime Rodinson succinctly sums up this decline of intellectualism in Islam as a dominant fundamentalist theme:

Islamic fundamentalism upholds a real model; albeit one that is 14 centuries old. It's a hazy ideal. When you ask Islamic fundamentalists "You say that you have answers that transcend socialism and capitalism—what are they?" they always respond with the same very vague exhortations, which can be based on two or three verses of the Qur'an or hadith—poorly interpreted in general.<sup>[18]</sup>

In contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, all the emphasis is on ritualism divested of its epistemic doctrinal context. The Qur'an is thus read with a focus entirely on its practical injunctions, most of which were designed to be responses to specific events unfolding in Islamic polity at a particular moment in time. Thus, the Qur'an's heavily doctrinal and tolerant side is marginalized. The *ahadith* also get the same selective treatment; the quest

for knowledge, which was an extremely potent element of the doctrine, is underplayed in favor of selective militant paradigms.<sup>[19]</sup>

Before examining this issue in depth, it is necessary to clarify the importance of the “verse context” in the Qur’an. Here a comparison between the biblical text and the Qur’an is helpful. There are some fundamental stylistic differences immediately apparent between the Bible and the Qur’an. One could say, for example, that the Bible’s chronological contextualization is germane to the comprehension of its messages, which are interrelated in a historical context, finally culminating in the end of history and textualism in the New Testament. The Qur’an on the other hand, is trans-historical, and at the same time meta-historical in the sense that the verses do not correspond to similar spatial or epistemological parameters that articulate chronological accounts. In fact, there is only one “full-length” story in the Qur’anic text, in the chapter on the prophet Joseph. The Qur’an is an extremely complicated document whose literary paradigms reflect the contemporary Hijazi (contemporary Muhammad an Arabic) period and the cultural nuances of pre-Islamic Arabian civilization. Another layer of complexity is added by the fact that it is rooted in cultural dialects, which were a mixture of Jewish and Christian, Persian and Greco-Roman religio-cultural permutations in pre-Qur’anic Arabia. Contrary to widespread western belief, the Qur’an is not just a simple account of the Prophet Muhammad’s life.

The Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who publicly recited a series of revelations shortly after receiving the same. These early revelations were stored in very short pieces or pericopes, the predominant method of storing knowledge for a community that depended heavily on the conveyed word. Thus, there did exist some confusion about what was remembered by different individuals and what was sometimes (but not always) recorded. Any problems or seeming inconsistencies were resolved during the lifetime of the Holy Prophet simply by asking him, as he had imbibed the meaning of the material. This resulted in some seemingly intractable inconsistencies in the texts, which needed to be reconciled after the death of Prophet Muhammad, particularly if the Qur’an was to be seen as an eternal book. The problem became rather serious when the companions (*sahaba*) of the prophet also began to pass away, endangering the preservation of the memorized word, whereupon a written recollection of the Qur’an was immediately ordered by Abu Bakr, the first caliph of the Muslim community. This was entrusted to Zayd ibn Thabit, who collected all the Qur’anic pericopes on palm branches or thin stones. He then organized the various

fragments in written form on sheets (*suhuf*), which remained in this rough form until they were edited some eighteen years later, during the caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan. This is the form of the Qur'an largely taken to be the authoritative one; thus, a strictly chronological account is not possible. The different Qur'anic chapters and sections contain subsequently numbered verses, which actually do not relate to each other in terms of chronology. *Tafasir* (Qur'anic commentaries) are needed to unlock the sometimes cryptic symbolism in the Qur'an, which uses the Arabic system known as *asbab al-nuzul*, or the occasions for God revealing particular Qur'anic verses. Without this spatial grounding, the Qur'anic verse may be subject to various interpretations.

Another genre of Qur'anic interpretative analysis, besides the *asbab* literature, is the *naskh* works, *al-nasikh wa'l-mansukh*, or "the abrogating and abrogated [verses]."<sup>[20]</sup> Since the organizational arrangement of the Qur'an is cryptic, verses that are contradictory sometimes have to be reconciled with some basic underlying principle. In the case of *jihad*, for example, does Islamic scripture prescribe avoidance of violence in propagating and defending the faith (16:125); does it call for defensive wars only (22:39-40); or does it call for unrestricted warfare (9:5)? The majority of the Qur'anic commentaries and *naskh* works seek to interpret these revelations in such a manner as to avoid inconsistency. The main method of eliminating differences has been to reconcile readings of the Qur'an through the *naskh* (abrogation) works with the *asbab* material on the occasions of revelation. A general rule of thumb has been that if certain verses could provide clear trans-historical, paradigmatic guidance about an issue, it would be taken as the underlying theme, according to which more ambiguous verses would be reconciled.

A typical fundamentalist device to get around the "commandments" of the Qur'an, so to speak, would be to simply say that certain verses are abrogated or are redundant. These verses would typically be the ones espousing the cause of peace and harmony among different communities, or the ones calling for supremacy of the greater *jihad*. There is no getting away from the meaning of these verses, since they are unqualified and cannot be molded for *jihadi* purposes. By mentioning a state of emergency or the grave peril that the *ummah* (Muslim community) is in, the fundamentalist claims to abrogate these verses of clemency by selective militant paradigms.

It is worth mentioning that al-Shafi'i, one of the foremost jurists and interpreters of hadith in classical Islamic literature, mentions that only Qur'an can abrogate the Qur'an:



God has declared that He abrogated [communications] of the Book only by means of other communications in it; that the Sunna cannot abrogate [a text in] the Book but it should only follow what is laid down in the Book, and that the Sunna is intended to explain the meaning of communications of general [nature] set forth [in the Book]).<sup>[21]</sup>

Thus, only the Qur'an can abrogate the Qur'an, as when something of a higher value can be abrogated only by something that is of equal or higher status, such as a just law that abrogates an unjust law. Even though he was responsible for the elevation of *hadith* in Islam, Shafi'i mentions clearly that *ahadith* cannot abrogate or repudiate verses of the Qur'an that are clear in their context.<sup>[22]</sup>

Thus God informed that He had commanded His Prophet to obey what was communicated to him, but that He did not empower him to alter [the Book] of his own accord. For there is in His saying: "It is not for me to alter it of my own accord" [Qur'an 10:16], an evidence for what I stated, that nothing can abrogate the Book of God save His Book. Since [God] is the originator of His [own] commands, He [alone] can repeal or confirm whatever of it He wills—glorious be His praise—but no one of His creatures may do so. For He also said: "God repeals what He wills, or confirms; with Him is the Mother of the Book" [Qur'an 13:39].<sup>[23]</sup>

From the point of view of practicing Muslims, which extremists profess to be, this system of abrogation seems quite strange since the Qur'an is immutable and permanent, a universally acknowledged assumption in the Muslim world.

## **Ahadiths Corroborating Greater Jihad**

Most of the literature on the greater *jihad* is based on the following tradition of the Prophet (PBUH). The *ahadith* master Mulla 'Ali al-Qari relates in his book *al-Mawdu'at al-Kubra*, also known as *al-Asrar al-Marfu'a*:

Suyuti said: al-Khatib al-Baghdadi relates in his "History" on the authority of Jabir: The Prophet came back from one of his campaigns saying: "You have come forth in the best way of coming forth: you have come from the smaller

jihad to the greater jihad.” They said: “And what is the greater jihad?” He replied: “The striving (mujahadat) of Allah’s servants against their idle desires.”

Most fundamentalists refute this prophetic tradition by reference to Ibn Taymiyyah,<sup>[24]</sup> who refutes this tradition outright. Ibn Taymiyyah said in *al-Furqan*, “This hadith has no sources and nobody whosoever in the field of Islamic knowledge has narrated it. Jihad against the disbelievers is the most noble of actions and moreover it is the most important action for the mankind.”<sup>[25]</sup>

However, other scholars, such as al-Bayhaqi in his *al-Zuhd al-Kabir*<sup>[26]</sup> and al-Khatib in his *Tarikh Baghdad*,<sup>[27]</sup> have tended to display skepticism about the strength of the chain, labeling its lineage as “weak” rather than discarding the tradition outright as uncorroborated and having no chain of narrators as has Ibn Taymiyyah. Haddad justifies the existence of the tradition by creating it with the Qur’an and established reports, “at least two of them explicit in the preference of the *mujahada* or *jihad* of the ego over any other type but without using the specific term *jihad akbar*.”<sup>[28]</sup> However, Haddad does not explain how this analysis can be rationalized in light of the following verses from Qur’an (my translations):

Not equal are those of the believers who sit (at home), except those who are disabled (by injury or are blind or lame, etc.), and those who strive hard and fight in the Cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives. Allah has preferred in grades those who strive hard and fight with their wealth and their lives above those who sit (at home). Unto each, Allah has promised good (Paradise), but Allah has preferred those who strive hard and fight, above those who sit (at home) by a huge reward; Degrees of (higher) grades from Him, and Forgiveness and Mercy. And Allah is Ever Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful.  
(Qur’an 4:95-96)

The proponents of *jihad bi’s-saif* (jihad by sword or armed *jihad*) also tend to quote the following hadith to bolster their claims. The following *hadith* is narrated by Imam Muslim [Hadith No. 4636] from Abu Hurayrah, who said:

The Prophet (PBUH) was asked: “O Prophet of God! What deed could be an equivalent of *Jihad Fi Sabilillaah*?” He answered: “You do not have the

strength to do that deed.” The narrator said: They repeated the question twice or thrice. Every time he answered: “You do not have the strength to do it.” When the question was asked for the third time, he said: “One who goes out for Jihad is like a person who keeps fasts, stands in prayer (constantly), (obeying) Allah’s (behests contained in) the Aayah (of the Qur’an), and does not exhibit any lassitude in fasting and praying until the Mujahid returns from Jihad Fi Sabilillaah.”

There is also a *hadith* narrated by Bukhari [Volume 4, Hadith 44] from Abu Hurayrah, who said:

A man came to Allah’s Messenger (PBUH) and said, “Guide me to such a deed as equals Jihad (in reward).” He replied, “I do not find such a deed.” Then he added, “Can you, while the Mujahid has gone for Jihad, enter your mosque to perform Salat without ceasing and observe Saum without breaking it?” The man said, “But who can do that?”

Finally, there is a helpful *hadith* in Al-Mustadrak 2/73, narrated by Hakim al-Nishaburi with a *sahih sanad* (a saying of the Prophet with a credible lineage, narrated by authorities deemed to be truthful, in an unbroken chain of rendering) authenticated by al-Dhahabi, from Muaz bin Anas, who said:

A woman once came to the Prophet (PBUH) and asked: “O Rasulullaah! My husband has departed for war and usually if he prays I follow him in his Salat and I follow him in all his acts of worship. Because of that inform me of an act which can equal his until he returns.” He said to her: “Are you able to stand without sitting, perform *Saum* without breaking it and *Dhikr* until your husband returns?” She replied: “I am not strong enough, o Rasulullaah.” So he said to her: “By Allah in whose hand I am, even if you were strong enough it would surely not attain one tenth of your husband’s deeds.”

## **The Balance**

As seen above, the lineage of greater *jihad* is rather weak, which becomes even more apparent by a cursory review of the literature pertaining to armed *jihad*. However, as I

demonstrate below, the verses that purportedly downplay the importance of greater *jihad* by emphasizing lesser *jihad* are not solidly grounded in epistemology either, but do seem to have a stronger lineage (from the Qur'an):

- And fight them until there is no more *fitna* and religion becomes God's (*wayakun al-din li'llah*). But if they cease, let there be no hostility except to the oppressors. (Sura 2:193)
- Fight in the way of God against those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Verily, God does not love the transgressors [of limits]. (Sura 2:190)
- And slay them whosoever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. ( Sura 2:191)

The word *fitna* has been exploited by jihadist discourse to imply “western political statehood,” which is wordplay upon the Qur'anic meaning. By itself, the lexical meaning of *fitna* is “testing” or “purifying through testing.”<sup>[29]</sup> But in a particular context, like this one, the word has been defined as the trials and tribulations of the *ummah* as a result of exposure to shirk, or “idolatry.”<sup>[30]</sup> Some scholars take this to be synonymous with sedition.<sup>[31]</sup> The former connotation would place the meaning in the simple lexical representation of an ideology. This is supported by canonical representations of *fitna* in other militant verses. Both Tabari and Ibn Kathir try to contextualize *fitna* in terms of temptation of the *ummah* to stray from the right path. Tabari understands *fitna* as outside temptation that seduces the *ummah* away from the right path.<sup>[32]</sup>

To comprehend the meaning of verse 193 in its hermeneutical context, verses 2:190-191 need to be read simultaneously.<sup>[33]</sup> Many *jihadist* accounts place these verses simultaneously in the same tract; or at least narrate two from this trio, with an intervening verse usually being omitted. Most of the traditional Qur'anic commentators are unanimous in accepting these verses as sanctifying war in self-defense. In this context the expression “*la ta'tadu*,” used in the body of the verse, is taken to signify “do not commit aggression”; while “*al-mu'tadin*” connotes those who commit aggression. The defensive nature of a fight “in God's cause” encompasses the ethical principles ordained by God, which is self-evident in the reference to “those who wage war against you,” and has been still further clarified in Sura 22:39 (“permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged”), which, according to all available traditions, constitutes the earliest (and therefore

fundamental) Qur'anic reference to the question of *jihad*, or holy war.<sup>[34]</sup> This is the fundamental principle that is enshrined throughout the rest of the Qur'anic text; this is evident from 60:8 as well as from the concluding sentence of 4:91, both of which belong to a later period than the above verse.

When verse 191 is interpolated in the context of 190, the injunction “slay them wherever you may come upon them” pertains to the context of hostilities that have already been initiated and are in progress (*Razi*), on the understanding that “those who wage war against you” are the aggressors or oppressors. Thus, according to the Islamic just war theory, a war of liberation is a war “in God’s cause.” *Fitna* here is meant to symbolize “oppression,” whose hermeneutical context can be inferred by the application of the term to any outside influence that may cause man to deviate from the right path.<sup>[35]</sup>

As regards verse 193, “and religion belongs to God [alone],” that is, until God can be worshipped without fear of persecution, and none is compelled to bow down in awe before another human being” (see also 22:40). The term *din* is used in this context, which implies that religion has a substantive content and a moral content arising from such substantive content, thus giving rise to the presumption that the meaning of the text is ideological as well as physical.

Al-Tabari interprets these verses not as a *carte blanche* to attack any and all non-Muslim peoples. The verse was revealed specifically in relation to military exigencies of the time when the idolaters of Makka, referred to in interpretative sources and the Qur'an by the term *mushrikun* or *mushrikin* (singular *mushrik*),<sup>[36]</sup> committed specific acts of self-aggrandizement against the fledgling Muslim community. The term takes its lexical meaning from a three-letter Arabic root *sh-r-k*, which means “to associate” or “take a partner unto something,” and the word *mushrikun* thus translates into “those who take a partner unto God,” which is abbreviated to “polytheists” or “idolaters.” In Islamic legal paradigms, the militant injunctions against polytheism cannot be taken to pertain to either Jews or Christians, since none of them have been referred to as the *mushrikun*. They are designated scriptuaries or *ahl al-kitab*, meaning “People of the Book.” It is important to contextualize this call to *jihad* as being revealed against a specific group (the idolaters of Makka) within a specific historical context (religious persecution of Muslims). Al-Tabari corroborates this fact, and his view is considered to be the view of most Qur'an interpreters.<sup>[37]</sup> The Jihadist

project would like to project this as a trans-historical, eternal narrative, but that claim is not supported by any classical commentaries.

Extremists are usually careful to omit or superficially gloss over this interlinked verse, which they interpret as the first call to military *jihad*, but which, in reality, places limits upon the Muslim combatants against the *mushrikun*. Verse 2:190 speaks of “fight[ing] in the way of God,” but also of not transgressing the “limits.” The limits have been clearly demarcated, with al-Tabari relating many accounts of the same; he mentions, for instance, that the cousin of the Prophet of Islam, Ibn Abbas, commented upon verse 2:190 as follows:

Do not kill women, or children, or the old, or the one who greets you with peace, or [the one who] restrains his hand [from hurting you], and if you do this then you have transgressed.<sup>[38]</sup>

Another tradition, also related by al-Tabari, comes from the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Aziz, or Umar II (99/717-101/720 C.E.), who contextualized 2:191 as: “Do not fight he who does not fight you, that is to say women, children, and monks.”<sup>[39]</sup>

Al-Tabari’s discourse is very much in keeping with recorded *ahadiths* of the Prophet and sayings attributed to the early Muslim caliphs. It is duly reported in several early Islamic anthologies and discursive tracts that when the Holy Prophet found women killed in some battles, he was deeply disturbed and strongly condemned acts resulting in killing of noncombatants such as women and children.<sup>[40]</sup>

When Abu Bakr, the first caliph, dispatched an army to Syria, he went on foot with Yazid ibn Abu Sufyan, who was the commander of a quarter of the forces. Abu Bakr said to him, “I instruct you in ten matters: Do not kill women, children, the old, or the infirm; do not cut down fruit-bearing trees; do not destroy any town; do not cut the gums of sheep or camels except for the purpose of eating ...” and so on.<sup>[41]</sup>

Extremists thus place the emotive *weltanschauung* at the paradigmatic centre of the religious universe: “When ‘our’ women and children have cried for help, why have ‘we’ not risen up to avenge the same?” This requires the concept of a vendetta, which is just not possible by a traditional Islamic literature review. Ibn Kathir relays a *hadith* in which the Prophet tells the story of a community of people who were weak and who were victimized by a stronger group. The weaker group eventually gained dominance and tried to suppress

the previously superior group. Kathir relays the words of the Prophet: “And God was displeased with them till the Day of Resurrection.” Ibn Kathir interprets this *hadith*, saying, “When they [the weak] possessed power over the strong, then they committed outrageous/unlawful/brutal acts (*al tadu*) against them ... and God was displeased with them by reason of this brutality (*i'tida*).” Thus, Ibn Kathir points out an important principle of just war in Islam: acts of brutality committed against Muslims are not always an excuse for Muslims to respond in kind, even when they are in a position to do so. This idea resonates throughout the traditional texts, but it is an idea that is ignored by modern extremists in order to justify acts of terrorism that do not differentiate between combatant and noncombatants. This discourse also rationalizes acts of terrorism carried out by perpetrators who act offensively, are ostensibly in a stronger, not weaker, position than their opponents, and who hold the lives of their target populations in their hands.

## Problematic Texts

**“And fight against them until there is no more oppression and all worship is devoted to God alone. And if they desist—behold, God sees all that they do.” (Al Anfal 39)**

This is a stark example of the problem traditionalists run into when they try countering jihadist propaganda. The complexity of Qur’anic discourse and the attendant problems of interpretation mean that these tracts will be read at face value by a majority of the lay audience. The hermeneutical context of the verse will not be apparent from a superficial reading; some amount of research, however, clearly documents the true nature of this verse. But it is doubtful that most of the lay audience will undertake, or would even want to undertake, this much effort at deciphering the hidden symbolism of this verse. Moreover, this verse is nearly the identical twin of Al-Baqarah (2) 193, which is considered one of the “sword” verses. As the connotation described earlier shows, both this verse and 193 advocate self-defense in the widest sense of the word as the only justification for war. *Fitna* here is again used in the ideological sense of the word.

**“[And] Fight against those who—despite having been vouchsafed revelation [aforetime]—do not [truly] believe in God or the Last Day, and who do not forbid what has been forbidden by God and His Apostle, nor acknowledge the religion of truth from among the People of the Book, until they pay the poll tax (al-Jizya) out of hand (an yad), having been brought low (wahum saghinin).” (Sura 9:29)**

This *ayat* seems to enjoin lesser *jihad* in a straight-forward manner upon all non-Muslims, regardless of whether they are people of the book. Scrutiny reveals otherwise, however. A fundamental principle, which needs to be observed in any interpretation of the Qur'an, is that the text needs to be understood in a consistent sense. Thus, the Qur'anic statements and ordinances must be seen as mutually complementary and cannot be taken as if some parts are inconsistent with others. In this case, the recurrent Qur'anic theme is that war is permitted only in self-defense.

Harmonizing this verse on that principle, war can only be authorized in retaliation for blatant aggression or an unmistakable threat to the security of the *ummah*. Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), commenting on this verse, declared, "Fighting has been made obligatory in Islam only for the sake of defending the truth and its followers. ... All the campaigns of the Prophet were defensive in character; and so were the wars undertaken by the companions in the earliest period [of Islam]."<sup>[42]</sup>

The term "apostle" is used here in the generic sense. Influential commentators, such as Muhammad Abduh, agree that this refers to something that is very grave and has been forbidden by apostles of God, preceding Muhammad, in an unbroken chain, particularly with regard to Moses.<sup>[43]</sup> Unprovoked aggression against a community is a grave commission that has been forbidden by all apostles bringing their message to Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Most of the commentators agree that this verse refers to only a nominal group of followers of earlier revelations who denied their own profound beliefs of proscription of unprovoked aggression by committing acts of the same towards Muslims.

The term *jizya*, a tax of sorts, is rooted in the concept of "having become incorporated in the Islamic state." The payment of *jizya*, like the corresponding term *dhimmi*, has become a byword in counter-Jihadist circles, giving rise to the term *dhimmitude*. Asad categorizes *jizya* as an "exemption tax," the term being used in the Qur'an only once.<sup>[44]</sup> It is important to contextualize this tax in the *weltanschauung* of Islamic society as an ideological entity that envisages every able-bodied Muslim being ready for *jihad*, which in turn is called for whenever a defensive war against unprovoked aggression is to be fought. Non-Muslims are not expected to be available for this compulsory duty, but they are required to pay this tax in order to balance out the civic duties of all citizens, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, living



in the state. Even though no exact rate has been determined by the Qur'an, the *jizya* is considerably lower in rates than the corresponding Muslim wealth tax called *zakat*, since occasions for defensive battles do not arise as frequently as the need of the state to ensure a free flow of capital. Contrary to jihadist and counter-jihadist literature, *dhimma* (the one who pays *x*) is not a derogatory term; its lexical root, *ahl adh-dhimmah*, translates into “covenanted” or “protected” people, whose safety is statutorily assured and is obligatory on the Islamic state.

**“And why should you not fight in the way of God and those who are weak—men, women, and children, whose cry has been: ‘Our Lord, rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, from you, one who will help.’” (Sura 4:75)**

This verse has been used consistently as divine sanction by extremists wishing to legitimize their terrorist actions. However, according to the traditional commentators of Islam, the reason for the revelation of 4:75 was different; some Muslims who stayed on in Mecca after the **hijra** (the migration of the fledgling Muslim community from Mecca to Medina in the face of ceaseless persecution by the Meccan tribes) were being oppressed and forbidden from practicing their religion freely. Some Meccans wished to be Muslims but would not convert out of fear of their fellow tribesmen.<sup>[45]</sup> This establishes a clearly documented historical context for this verse, which hardly lends credence to it for use as a trans-historical, violent tool. Furthermore, the two conditionalities for proposing such *jihad* as laid down by the historical context of the verse are hardly fulfilled in the modern West; for the least that can be said is that in the West, like many places in the “Islamic” world itself, Muslims are basically free to worship as they see fit, nor is there any attempt to stop men or women from converting to Islam. The use of verse 4:75 is then an ingenuous emotive ruse that works by evoking the symbolism of women and innocents being slaughtered (as in Gaza or elsewhere) to foster a feeling of resentment in the target audience.

**“O You who have attained to faith! Just retribution is ordained for you in causes of killing” (Sura 2:178)**

This is a classic example of Qur'anic verses quoted incompletely or out of context in jihadist literature. This is not a clause pertaining to retribution for Muslims killed somewhere in the world. It is instead a reference to the establishment of Islamic law in a state. This verse envisages a system of social rights and obligations in a society, which

should translate into practical laws governing the interactive behaviour of the individual and the society. As narrated earlier, the Qur'an is not a spatially or chronologically limited document, which is why it "consistently" intertwines its moral and spiritual exhortations with pragmatic ordinances regulating mundane existence. One of the principal jobs of a government is safeguarding the lives and the individual security of its citizens, which is why punishment of homicide needs to be contextualized. The term *qisas* is interpolated in this injunction as an indemnity paid by the murderer to the victim's family in lieu of them freely and willingly granting the murderer a pardon. This is not allegorical in any sense, and neither can it be distorted in any way to apply to any form of blood money contract that can be negotiated between the Muslims and non-Muslims. In this context Asad states:

As for the term *Qisas* ... it must be pointed out that—according to all the classical commentators—it is almost synonymous with *musawah*, i.e., "making a thing equal [to another thing]": in this instance, making the punishment equal (or appropriate) to the crime—a meaning which is best rendered as "just retribution" and not (as has been often, and erroneously, done) as "retaliation." Seeing that the Qur'an speaks here of "cases of killing" (*fi'l-qatla*, lit., "in the matter of the killed") in general, and taking into account that this expression covers all possible cases of homicide—premeditated murder, murder under extreme provocation, culpable homicide, accidental manslaughter, and so forth—it is obvious that the taking of a life for a life (implied in the term "retaliation") would not in every case correspond to the demands of equity. (This has been made clear, for instance, in 4:92, where legal restitution for unintentional homicide is dealt with.) Read in conjunction with the term "just retribution" which introduces this passage, it is clear that the stipulation "the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the woman for the woman" cannot—and has not been intended to—be taken in its literal, restrictive sense; for this would preclude its application to many cases of homicide, e.g., the killing of a free man by a slave, or of a woman by a man, or vice-versa. Thus, the above stipulation must be regarded as an example of the elliptical mode of expression (*ijaz*) so frequently employed in the Qur'an, and can have but one meaning, namely: 'if a free man has committed the crime, the free man must be punished; if a slave has committed the crime ...', etc.—in other words, whatever the status of the guilty person, he or she (and he or she alone) is to be punished in a

manner appropriate to the crime.<sup>[46]</sup>

This then is the classic example of an extremist device of quoting verses completely out of context to suit a jihadist ideology; incompletely rendered verses sit comfortably with unrelated contexts. In this case, a verse about the punishment for homicide within a legal framework in a society is distorted to imply that the Qur'an is enjoining a *jihad* for Muslims being killed in conflicts, which is nothing but a grave travesty of the Qur'anic word.

**“But if they break their solemn pledges after having concluded a covenant, and revile your religion, then fight against these archetypes of faithlessness who, behold, have no [regard for their own] pledges, so that they might desist [from aggression].” (Sura 9:12)**

The linchpin in the interpretation of this verse is the “covenant.” This refers to the peace agreement concluded in Hudaibiya in 6 AH/627 CE between the prophet and the Meccan Quraysh, who went back on their promises. This is a verse that was revealed in response to a specific, temporal reference point, the Hudaibiya agreement, and cannot be construed as a blanket sanction to justify misplaced, violent, retributive actions against any entity the jihadist project perceives as the enemy.

## Conclusions

Many scholars have put forward the hypothesis that the fundamentalist project is more a pursuit of totalitarianism than a struggle to merge the spiritual with the temporal.<sup>[47]</sup> It has been said that fundamentalism is “first and foremost an ideological and moral challenge to liberal democracy,”<sup>[48]</sup> thus making it a contemporary phenomenon “thoroughly at odds with Islamic traditions and ethics.”<sup>[49]</sup> Not only has *ijtihad* remained static due to deliberate down-playing by ultra-orthodox religious authorities and institutions, the whole institution of *ijtihad* has been eroded.<sup>[50]</sup> This has created an imbalance between the two concepts of *jihad*—the violent version, which has become more dogmatic and public, while the softer variant has been relegated to the realm of the personal. The problem also lies in the fact that the Islamic fundamentalist seems to be rather better at manipulating hermeneutics than his other counterparts. That is a huge part of the jihadist appeal: a selective reading or distortion of fact will garb the message in the respectability and irrefutability of religious sanction. As can be seen from above, the argument for armed *jihad* claims its lineage from the Qur'an, a

stronger source than the weak chain of *ahadith* supporting greater *jihad*. A complicating factor is that the *sira* (biography of the prophet) and *maghazi* (works detailing the military campaigns of the prophet) literatures, cloaked in the abstract language of the Qur'an (purportedly to enable it to be transhistorical) and *ahadiths* with weak lineages, do not strongly support the hermeneutical contexts of greater *jihad*. The hermeneutical distortion of the Qur'anic verses, bolstered by *ahadiths* about armed *jihad*, are much more tangible and can be designed into discourse that ignites the fires of passion in the target lay audience, using predominantly emotive narrative to put the message across.

Salwa Isma'il makes the case that fundamentalist Islamic discourse challenges the political power structures in this manner, thereby essentially mobilizing religious sentiment to deconstruct existing normative boundaries. Essentially, fundamentalist discourse has redefined the parameters of the discord between culture and politics. Thus, the legitimacy of political power springs only from the fundamentalist version of *shari'a*, since any other strain will not suffice. A decline of interest in Muslim scholarship has meant that the jihadist message can pretty much get away with what it wants to say by mixing rhetoric with divine sanction. There could be various modalities that impact upon this message to increase its efficacy: culture, decline of juristic traditions, decline of Sufism, organizational deficiency, socio-economic causes or even the assertion that this was a particularly harsh transitional century for the Islamic world, which has generated the interest of a susceptible target audience. However, I would like to stress that in order to counteract the appeal of fundamentalism, scholars need to take another hard look at the fundamentalist message.

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4. 4. Rahman, *Islam*, 98.
5. 5. Rahman, *Islam*, 246.
6. 6. Rahman, *Islam*, 245.
7. 7. Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

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Routledge, 1992).

8. 8. Michael Gilsenan, "Some Factors in the Decline of Sufi Orders in Modern Egypt," *The Muslim World* 57 (1967). Also Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
9. 9. Sarah F. D. Ansari, "The Islamic World in the Era of Western Domination, 1800 to the Present," in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, edited by Francis Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 90-121. Also John O. Voll, "Sufi Orders," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, vol. 4, edited by John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 109-117.
10. 10. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949).
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12. 12. R. S. O'Fahey and Bernd Radtke, "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered," *Der Islam* 70 (1993): 52-87. See also Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke, eds., *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999).
13. 13. Julian Johansen, *Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also Itzhak Weismann, *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000).
14. 14. M. Khaled and Abou El Fadl, *Conference of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam* (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: University Press of America, 2001), xvii.
15. 15. Micheal Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History; Doctrines and Practice* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2006), 165.
16. 16. Ronald Reagan, "State of the Union Address, 1985," United States Department of State website, Office of the Historian, "Reagan Doctrine," <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1981-1989/ReaganDoctrine>.
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<http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa074.html>.

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20. 20. David S. Powers, “The Exegetical Genre nasikh al Quran wa mansukhuhu,” in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Quran*, edited by Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).
21. 21. al Shafi’i, *Al Risalah* (Cairo, 1321), 123-24.
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25. 25. Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Furqan , 44-45.
26. 26. Sh. G. F. Haddad, “Documentation of ‘Greater Jihad’ Hadith,” Living Islam website, 2005, [http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh_e.html).
27. 27. Sh. G. F. Haddad, “Documentation of ‘Greater Jihad’ Hadith,” Living Islam website, 2005, [http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh_e.html).
28. 28. Sh. G. F. Haddad, “Documentation of ‘Greater Jihad’ Hadith,” Living Islam website, 2005, [http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/n/dgjh_e.html).
29. 29. *Fitna* has the basic definition of “testing,” as in testing gold by putting it into fire to separate the pure from the impure. 'Abdallah b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wil mashakil al-Qur'an* (Cairo: Ahmad Saqr, 1973), 362; Muhammad Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al- 'Arab*, vol. 13 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1375/1956), 317). Its meanings, however, are quite diverse. See Jamal al-Din 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn al-awzi, *Nuzhatal-a'yun al-nawazirfi 'Urn al-wujuh wal-naza'ir* (n.p., n.d.), 477-480).
30. 30. *Tanwir al-Miqbas*, 27, 30, 148; *Tafsir Mujdhid*, 223, 232; *Tafsir Muqatil*, vol. 1:168, 187, vol. 2:215; Ma'mar b. al-Muthanna Abu 'Ubayda, *Majaz al-Qur'an*, vol. 1

(Cairo, 1374/1954), 68; Qumml, *Tafsir*, vol. 1:180; *Tabari*, book 2:191-192,194, 347, book 9:248-249; *Nasafi*, vol. 1:124,138; Ibn Kathlr, *Tafsir*, vol. 1: 318.

31. 31. Ibn Kathlr, *Tafsir*, vol. 1:402-403, vol. 3:317.
32. 32. *Tabari*, book 8:249-250.
33. 33. *Al Tabari*, vol. 2:258. It should be noted that there is another group of verses, 22:39-40, considered to have been the first group of verses to speak about the military jihad.
34. 34. See *Tabari* and *Ibn Kathir* in their commentaries on 22:39.
35. 35. Cf. *Al-Lisanu'l-Arab* or *The Dictionary of the Arabic Lexicon*.
36. 36. *Tabari*, vol. 2:258
37. 37. *Tabari*, vol. 2:258.
38. 38. *Tabari*, vol. 2:259.
39. 39. In addition, al-*Tabari* reports a second narration of these words of Umar ibn Abd al-'Aziz with only slight changes in phrasing, *Tabari*, vol. 2:259.
40. 40. See *Muwatta' Malik ibn Anas*, translated by M. Rahimuddin (New Delhi: Taj, 1985), 200 (Kitdb al-jihdd, hadith n. 957). See also *Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 4 (Kitab al-jihdd, hadith n. 257-258), 159-160; *Abu Dawud, Sunan Abi Dawud*, vol. 2 (Beirut, Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1996), 258 (Kitab al-jihdd, hadith n. 2668); and *Sahih Muslim*, vol. 5 (Kitdb al-jihdd), 56.
41. 41. *Muwatta' Malik*, 200; *Kitab al-jihad*, hadith n. 958. Other similar instructions are also given to the Muslim armies, prohibiting the killing of children and the mutilating of bodies. See *Muslim, Sahih*, vol. 5 (Kitdb al-jihdd), 46-50.
42. 42. *Al-Manar* 10, 332. Muhammad `Abduh gave a series of lectures on the Qur'an, and Muhammad Rashid Rida took notes, which Rida later expanded. These lectures appeared in the periodical *Al-Manar* 3, 1900, as "Tafsir Manar of `Abduh." After `Abduh's death in 1905, Rashid Rida continued *Tafsir al-Manar* from Q. 4:125 to Q. 12:107, indicating those parts (in posthumous portions) that were the result of `Abduh's lectures and his own additions. Eventually, *Tafsir al-Manar* was published in twelve volumes in 1927; a later edition with indices is *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim al-Mustahir bi Tafsir al-Manar*, 12 vols. (Cairo, 1954-1961).
43. 43. *Al-Manar* 10:333, 337.
44. 44. See Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Redwood Books, 1980), for an explanation of surah 9:29.

45. 45. Al Tabari, *Jami' Al Bayan*, vol 4:220; Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir*, vol. 1:698.
46. 46. Asad, *The Message of the Quran* (1980), 37.
47. 47. Ladan Boroumand and Roya Boroumand, "Terror, Islam, and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002): 7-8.
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49. 49. Boroumand and Boroumand, "Terror, Islam, and Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002):6.
50. 50. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 84.