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The Concept of *Jihad* in Islam According to Ali Abuzurayk's *Man between Nature and Religions*

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of jihad in the thought of 'Alī Abū Zurayk (Abuzurayk) as presented in his book Man Between Nature and Religions (2022). In this paper, I summarize and evaluate Abuzurayk's account of jihad and its role in Islam, including the different types of jihad and their relationship to principles of justice and human rights. Abuzurayk's book argues that the role of Islamic jihad is intended only for defensive purposes and for the protection of the weak and oppressed and that it rejects any form of aggression and violence towards others for any reason other than protection and defense. Abuzurayk's account of the centrality of community to religions is supplement by his account of the nature of jihad as it was practiced by Prophet Muḥammad and his first two successors, Abū Bakr and 'Umar. During the time of the Prophet and the first two Caliphs, jihad was authorized for specific purposes. These purposes included the liberation of Arab lands that were under Roman and Persian occupation, as well as the establishment of a state for the Arabs as a united nation which is able to defend itself. In contrast, Abuzurayk argues that the third Caliph, 'Uthmān, had a different understanding of the nature of jihad. During the era of 'Uthmān and his successors, jihad took on an expansive political meaning known as fatih or 'conquest' for the spread of Islam. This led to a departure from the defensive nature of jihad as initially practiced by Prophet Muhammad and his early successors.

Keywords: Jihad, Abuzurayk, Islam, Religion, Arabs

Introduction

Religions are now making a stronger comeback on the global social and political stage, with Islam as one of the major religions that occupies a wide space in the world and receives noticeable attention. However, this attention has led to a misunderstanding of the spirit and essence of Islam, particularly with regards to the concept of jihad, which has remained confusing and unclear among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Some Muslims believe that jihad is a duty to convert the world to Islam, while others view it as a criticism of Muslims, and the concept of jihad has become mixed with politics

The Meaning of the Concept of Jihad

We shed light on the concept of *jihad* linguistically and technically: *Jihad* comes from the word “*Jahada*,” which means to exert effort and endure hardship. *Jihad*, on the other hand, means to exert effort in repelling the enemy (Al-Asfahani, p.98). According to Al-Qurtubi (vol.2 p.99), the general meaning of *jihad* is to comply with everything that God commanded and to refrain from everything that He prohibited, whether through struggling against oneself, Satan, darkness, or unbelievers.

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Hence, *jihad* here is broader than just fighting, in this sense, Allah Almighty says in *Surah Al-Furqan*, chapter 25, verse 52: “So do not yield to those who deny the truth, but strive with the utmost strenuousness by means of the (Qur’an, to convey its message to them)”. This means striving with the Qur’an until they hear the word of Allah.

Similarly, Allah Almighty says, “And whoever strives, strives only for himself — Allah is independent of all His creation.” (Quran 29:6). The meaning of *jihad* in this verse refers to the general meaning of *jihad*, not just the specific meaning of fighting. Therefore, the meaning of *jihad* is self-struggle and promoting good behavior in obedience to Allah (Al-Bouti, p.19).

This is also mentioned in the *Hadith*: “You have presented the lesser *jihad* (fighting) before the greater *jihad*, which is the struggle of the servant against his desires” (Al-Bayhaqi, vol. 2, p.165). This *hadith* highlights the concept of *jihad* in the general sense, which is to restrain oneself from desires and to engage in good behavior, and to rid oneself of the evils of the self that commands to do evil. *Jihad* here is to promote good moral behavior, which is the goal of the prophets and messengers.

Therefore, the religious connotations of the word *jihad* carry various degrees of meaning, from restraining oneself from desires (which is the greater *jihad*) to standing up against oppressors (which is the lesser *jihad*).

Transformation in the Concept of Jihad

Here, I try to focus on the intellectual jurisprudential environment to highlight the differences between muslim thinkers and the subject of jihad. Abul A’la Maududi (1903-1969) viewed *jihad* as a liberation movement against colonialists and tyrannical rulers aimed at achieving honor and justice throughout the Islamic world (Maududi, p.19).

Meanwhile, Sayyid Qutb emphasized the importance of resisting corrupt and oppressive rulers, or what he called opposition to the “ignorant state” (Qutb, p.5).

However, it is widely known that there are two fundamental theories about *jihad* in Islam. The first one sees that Allah has held Muslims with a message to spread Islam by conquering those who have not embraced Islam, based on the ideology of conquest, under the assumption that they are polytheists or disbelievers, dividing the world into *Dar al-Islam* (the House of Islam) and *Dar al-Kufr* (the House of Disbelief).

Abuzurayk believes that this theory is extreme and contradicts the texts of the Quran and the Sunnah, and that its adherents have interpreted Quranic texts outside their context and tailored them to their understanding, where Allah says: “So, (O Prophet) exhort them: your task is only to exhort, you are not their keeper.” (*Surah al-Ghashiyah*, chapter 88, verse 22-22) (Abuzurayk, p. 358).

Therefore, Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, used to call his people through persuasion, dialogue, and peaceful methods there would not have been any fighting, except that they persecuted him and his Companions and expelled them from their city, Mecca. However, the Prophet’s struggle with his Arab people only resulted in a few hundred casualties throughout his *jihad* history.

As for the second theory, which believes that war is only legitimate in the case of self-defense or resisting trials. This is what most Islamic thinkers believe, to point some of them, Al-Bouti, Al-Tha’albi, Al-Zuhili and Al-Qardawi, (Al-Sharif, p.203, p.81, p.213, p.224.), that Muslims are not

allowed to fight anyone except for self-defense and resisting seditions, relying on Allah's words: "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors" (*Surah Al-Baqarah*, chapter 2, verse 190).

The Jihad as a Project to Build a State for the Arabs

I have drawn the limits of the concept of *jihad* within the framework of my research to reach Abuzurayk's concept of *jihad* that is from the beginning, the Quran promised the Arabs two things: reforming the Arab society and building a state in which the Arabs are united, and since some Arab territories were occupied by the Romans and Persians, it was necessary to unify the Arabian Peninsula and liberate the Arab land, as explained in detail in chapters 26 and 27 of the book. The Quran was revealed under the guidance of the Prophet and the believers to respond to the aggression of their people from the Battle of Badr until the conquest of Mecca. As stated in verse 195 of *Surah Al-Baqarah*: "And fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors." It is clear from the above verse that it was revealed during the fight against the Quraysh as they expelled the Prophet (peace upon him) and his companions from their homes and persecuted others who followed Islam. Then there was the struggle against the Roman occupiers, which was exemplified by the Battle of Tabuk, Abuzurayk believes that the Prophet's messages to the foreign rulers of the Persians and Romans who were ruling over Arab peoples in Iraq, the Levant, and Egypt, as well as to the Arab rulers in the Arabian Peninsula, were an indication and preparation for the establishment of a unified Arab state with a shared belief. (Abuzurayk, p.371).

Thus, Abuzurayk believes that *jihad* is only directed towards the liberation of all Arab territories, and only the necessary fighting is allowed according to the traditions of most human societies, with justice and acceptance, it is a fight in retaliation for previous aggression or to defend against a possible attack. An example of this defensive *jihad* to protect the borders of the state is what happened in Cyprus, which was occupied by Muawiya during the time of Uthman because the Romans used it as a station to supply their armies to attack Arab land. The same applies to the Eastern front, where the Persians continued to attack Arab land, denying the Arabs their right to liberate their land. This forced Caliph Omar to order a deterrent war against them. Therefore, Abuzurayk confirms that *jihad* has always been and will remain only for the liberation of Arab land and its defense. He gives the example of his saying to Caliph Umar bin Al-Khattab, who was puzzled by those who did not understand the goal of Islam in establishing an independent Arab state: "I wish there was a mountain of fire between us and the Persians that they could not reach us nor we reach them." (Abuzurayk, p.376).

This reminds us of what At-Tahir ibn Ashur concluded, that the permissible fighting is in retaliation for previous aggression, as indicated by the saying of Allah Almighty: "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory." (*Surah Al-Hajj*, chapter 22, verse 39).

However, Abuzurayk believes that the liberation of Arab lands made people forget the goals of *jihad*, and the vision for *jihad* became blurred. As a result, there was no distinction between religious and political aspects in the early Islamic wars. In other words, people failed to differentiate between the religious part that God ordered and which was almost completed by the end of the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, and the political part which is a human nature and began during the time of Uthman. However, both types of *jihad*, defensive and offensive, are well-known among nations and have been used in the past and at present. (Abuzurayk, p.377).

Meanwhile, this similar to what Ibn al-Qayyim believed that defensive *jihad* is more difficult than offensive *jihad*, which is to resist the aggressor (Ibn Al-Qayyim, p.22). On the other hand, Ali Abuzurayk believes that misunderstanding the orders of *Jihad* began when politics overshadowed religion among the Arabs, leading to a wrong understanding of *jihad* in some of their wars, such as the occupation of Andalusia. Thus, Abuzurayk believes that some fighting was necessary just to protect the borders of the Arab state. However, he emphasizes that the mistake was in understanding *jihad* as a religious issue beyond the historical Arab borders. Nevertheless, he attributes this to the fact that throughout history, humanity has used religion to encourage soldiers to fight, and leaders have used religion to lie and distort the facts. (Abuzurayk, p.378).

According to Ali Abuzurayk, the mistake is in raising the banner of Islam, *Jizya*, or the sword in fighting outside the historical Arab lands. However, fighting remains a legitimate and necessary action for the nation to regain usurped rights or to retaliate against aggression. The dignity, freedom, and recovery of usurped rights of a human being is a legitimate and even an obligatory matter. It is a sign of life and vitality for any society.

Therefore, Abuzurayk believes that *Jihad*, according to the Quran and the way it was practiced by the Prophet, Abu Bakr, and Umar, was to liberate the Arab lands occupied by the Romans and Persians and to establish a state for the Arabs. It was also to confirm the religion of Abraham and Ismael in its new Quranic version, not to convert Christians, Magians, or Jews from their religion to Islam. Rather, it was a fight to unify one nation. The Quran, according to Abuzurayk, was revealed with directives for national and political *jihad*, aimed at unifying the Arab lands, establishing a state for them, and nothing else.

Consequently, according to Ali Abuzurayk's perspective, *jihad* aligns with Taha Abdul Rahman's view that it was an explicit foundational action in building the Arab state, achieving its historical independence, and creating its future. Here, the concept of a fighter shifts from that of a *jihadist* to that of a builder who creates his present and future. (Abd al-Rahman, p.33-34).

Abuzurayk confirms his theory of *jihad* by presenting the Battle of *Uhud* mentioned in Surah Ali-Imran. It was a battle that was not started by the Muslims and was not intended by the Prophet, but was a defense of the city and its inhabitants. It was the Quraysh who came to attack the city with an army of 3,000 fighters, covering a distance of 450 km and approaching the city by about 5 km. Against their large army, the number of Muslim fighters was only 700. Therefore, it was a defensive battle imposed on the Muslims. (Abuzurayk, p.388).

Therefore, the essence of the relationship with others according to the Qur'an is coexistence that ensures that each group abides by its sacred book, not conflict with others, as every nation has its own law and methodology. If Allah had willed, He would have made all humans one nation, according to the Qur'an: "And if Allah had willed, He could have made you [of] one religion, but He causes to stray whom He wills and guides whom He wills. And you will surely be questioned about what you used to do" (*Surah Al-Maidah*, verse 48). Abuzurayk believes that the verse "O you who have believed, fight those adjacent to you of the disbelievers and let them find in yourself harshness. And know that Allah is with the righteous" (*Surah At-Tawbah*, verse 123) refers to the Arab.

With confidence, we can say that all the battles in the early days of Islam were battles to unify the Arab tribes and bring them back to the religion of Abraham (peace be upon him). They were

to abandon idol worship, to stop killing their daughters, and to refrain from any behavior that goes against human nature and noble character. The goal was to establish a state that would protect and organize them and elevate them to the level of other nations. This is what Islam did, and it is what other living nations, such as the United States of America and Germany, have done as well. The unification of the United States of America is similar to the unification of the Arab nation. The wars of apostasy in the seventh century AD were not different from Britain's wars to keep Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom, which lasted for decades in the twentieth century. They are also similar to Russia's violent wars to keep Chechnya part of Russia.

Conclusion

Thus, I believe that Abuzurayk has explored the purposes of the Quranic and traditional text, and has captured the purposes of Islamic *Shariah* and its representation of its spirit, human and universal dimensions. He was inspired by the grand design of the Quranic text, striving to protect it from misunderstanding and misinterpretation. He sees that the battles at the dawn of Islam were of a nationalist dimension that united the Arab nation in a unified state with a doctrine that they all agreed upon, which was the unification of the Arab land. This was a national political project specialized in the Arab national territory. It is not permissible to use religion as an excuse to invade others, but fighting was only authorized for the defense of the Islamic state and not for attacking others simply for their difference in religion.

Finally, what we witness today of violence and extremism calls for a return to self-reflection, then reliance on authentic Arab Islamic values that exclude hatred and malice, and embrace human and religious values. This requires, however, delving into the works of thought and doctrine to search for the roots of the problem, meaning that we must search for the real motives behind the culture of death, the disregard for life, and the excommunication of society. We must also investigate the concepts responsible for shaping the intellectual and cognitive structures of human aggression towards others, whether internally or externally, religiously or culturally.

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