



Jihad al-Nafs: the Greater Struggle

SURKHEEL (ABU AALIYAH) SHARIF

JIHAD AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The subject of jihad (vocalised as *jibād*, lit. “striving”) is one of the most loaded and misunderstood terms in the public discourse today. Writings on the subject abound; each attempting to unravel the complexities inherent in the issue. Some are extremely apologetic in their tone. Others are disingenuous and fly in the face of a normative and nuanced juristic reading (essentially scaremongering or sensationalising). Few are actually balanced or contextualised.

Muslim jurists, as per the classical schema, identify two categories of jihad: an inner form of jihad, and an outer one. Al-Rāghib al-Asfahānī, a notable grammarian of the fifth Islamic century, explained: “Jihad is of three types: striving against the apparent enemy; striving against the Devil; and striving against the ego (*nafs*). All three types are included in Allah’s words, Exalted is He: *And strive hard in Allah’s cause with all the striving that is due to Him*.^{1,2}

Ibn al-Qayyim offers a similar abstract: “Jihad is of four types: jihad against one’s ego; against Satan; against the disbelievers; and against the hypocrites.”³

Jihad against the apparent enemy; which is to say, jihad against the disbelievers, finds its equivalence in another Qur’anic term: *qitāl* (“fighting” or “armed combat”). It is in this sense that the Qur’an enjoins: *Fight for the sake of Allah those who fight against you, but do not initiate hostilities. Allah does not love the aggressors*.⁴ The rules of jihad as warfare; military engagement, are stipulated in the manuals of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, but it is not within the scope of this paper to dwell on this facet of jihad in any further detail.

The other dimension of jihad is striving against the ego and against the Devil - the inner jihad; which many refer to as *jibād al-akbar*, “the greater jihad.” Far from being a baseless notion (as some falsely claim), the inner jihad being the “greater” or “most obligatory” form of jihad is something rooted in the texts of the Revelation, and in the normative reading of the scholars.

WHAT IS THE INNER JIHAD?

It refers to the personal struggle against one’s *nafs*; the lower self or ego, wherein a person strives to overcome temptations, carnal desires and the devil’s whisperings; striving also to internalize the Islamic teachings through acts of worship and devotion: like prayer, fasting, *dhikr* and almsgiving.

Many passages in the Qur’an extol the significance of the soul. One group of verses says: *By the soul and Him that formed it, then inspired it with its wickedness and God-fearingness. He is indeed successful who purifies it, and he is indeed ruined who corrupts it*.⁵ Another of the Quranic passages offers these tidings: *But those who feared the standing before their Lord and curbed their soul’s passions, the Garden is their abode*.⁶ Also in this context comes the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him: “The fighter in Allah’s path is the one who strives against his lower self in obedience to Allah - *al-mujābid man jābada nafsabū fi ṭā’ati’LLāh*.”⁷ Other proof-texts also corroborate the centrality of jihad of the *nafs*.

IBN RAJAB ON THE INNER JIHAD

In his commentary to the prophetic dictum: “And know that victory comes with patience,”⁸ and while discussing the pivotal role of patience when battling an enemy, Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbali writes:

“This concerns jihad against the open enemy, which is jihad against the disbelievers. This also applies to jihad against the inner enemy, which is striving against one’s ego and carnal desires. Jihad against these two is one of the greatest acts of jihad, as the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “The fighter in Allah’s path is one who strives against his lower self in [obedience to] Allah.”

‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar said, when asked about jihad: “Start with your ego and wage jihad against it. Start with your ego and do battle with it.”

Baqiyah b. al-Walid relates: Ibrāhīm b. Adham informed us; from a reliable and trustworthy person who related to us; that ‘Alī b. Abī Tālib stated: “The first thing you will object to from your jihad is jihad against your lower selves.”

Ibrāhīm b. Abī ‘Ablah said to some people who had just returned from a military campaign: “You have returned from the lesser jihad. But what have you done about the greater jihad?” They asked: What is the greater jihad? He replied: “Jihad of the heart.”⁹ This has been ascribed to the Prophet, peace be upon him, but with a weak chain of narration; its wording is: “You have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad.” They inquired: What is the greater jihad? He said: “A person’s jihad against his carnal desires.”¹⁰⁻¹¹

FURTHER TESTIMONIES

Explaining the Qur’anic passage: *As for those who strive in Us, We shall guide them to Our paths*,¹² Imam Ibn al-Qayyim wrote:

“The most compulsory form of jihad (*aḥḥād al-jihād*) is jihad against the ego (*naḥḥ*); against unbridled passions (*baḥḥ*); against the Devil (*shayḥān*); and against being worldly (*ḥūḥā*). Those who wage jihad against these four, in obedience to Allah, shall be guided by Allah to the paths of His good pleasure which, [in turn], will lead to His Paradise. Those who neglect jihad will be veiled from guidance to the degree they forsake jihad. Junayd expressed: “Those who strive against their carnal desires and repent for Allah’s sake, shall be guided to the ways of sincerity. One cannot struggle against his enemy outwardly save if he has striven against his enemies inwardly. Whoever is then given victory over them, will be victorious over his enemy; whoever is defeated by them, his enemy shall defeat him.”¹³

Ibn Taymiyyah said: “Jihad of the ego and desires is the basis for jihad against the disbelievers and hypocrites. Indeed, one cannot do jihad against them unless he first wages jihad against his ego and desires; then he goes out and fights them.”¹⁴

Al-Manāwī adds another dimension as to why this jihad is greater, or more obligatory, than the outer one: “It is the greatest form of jihad; for fighting the disbelievers is a communal duty (*farḥ kifāyah*), whereas jihad against the ego is a personal obligation (*farḥ ‘ayn*) on all those who are legally responsible, at all times. *Truly the devil is an enemy to you, so treat him as an enemy.*¹⁵ *So fight in the path of Allah. You are not responsible except for your own soul.*¹⁶⁻¹⁷

ONE SOUL, THREE POTENTIALS

The Qur’an describes the human soul, or *naḥḥ*, as having three conditions or potentials which are present within it simultaneously.¹⁸ The first, or lowest, of these is referred to by the term: “*naḥḥ al-ammārah bi’l-sū’* - the soul that constantly incites to evil.” After his attempted seduction by Potipher’s wife, the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him, declared: *The soul does indeed incite to evil, save if my Lord has mercy.*¹⁹ This unweaned soul is the abode of a multitude of incessant cravings and desires: be it for wealth, fame, power, physical gratification, exploitation of others - in short, anything that deflects one away from Allah and towards the lower, bestial possibilities of the human condition.

As a believer purges his soul of blameworthy traits and seeks to replace them by their praiseworthy opposites, through engaging in the “greater jihad” or struggle, the soul that incites to evil is gradually trained and tamed and begins to give way to the “*naḥḥ al-lawwāmah* - the reproachful soul.” Says the Qur’an: *No! I swear by the reproachful soul.*²⁰ This soul is man’s active conscience which is afflicted with regret, remorse and self-reproach whenever the Divine Will is disobeyed and elements of the lower soul resurface.

After much inner labour and discipline, the reproachful soul is further purified of any opposition to Allah’s Will and Sacred Law, and is ever receptive to the outpourings of Heaven. Here the “*naḥḥ al-muḥḥannab* - the soul at peace, or tranquil soul” then begins to predominate. It is this soul that is most worthy of divine assistance and acceptance. Of this, the Qur’an relates: *O tranquil soul!*

*Return to your Lord, pleased and well-pleasing. Enter among My servants. Enter My Paradise.*²¹

In all this, four factors are crucial in a person's seeking to purify his soul: innate or inborn disposition; upbringing; spiritual striving (*mujābadab*) and self-discipline (*riyādab*) in adulthood; and of course, Allah's *tawfiq*, or enabling grace.

CONCLUSION

These proof-texts and scholarly citations should help lay to rest the anathema some seem to have about the primacy of *jibād al-naḥs*. Yet this need not be the case. For even though the commonly-cited hadith concerning it is not authentic, other evidences testify to its centrality in a believer's overall approach to Allah. Hence the affair is as Ibn al-Jawzī decisively concludes: "I reflected over jihad against the ego (*jibād al-naḥs*) and realised it to be the greatest jihad."²²

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END NOTES

1. Qur'an 22:78.
2. *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur'ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalm, 2002), 208, under the entry, *j-b-d*.
3. *Zād al-Ma'ād fī Hady Khayr al-'Ibād* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1998), 3:9.
4. Qur'an 2:190.
5. Qur'an 91:7-10.
6. Qur'an 79:40-41.
7. Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, no.1671, after which he graded the hadith as *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*. However, he narrates it without the final phrase, "*fī ṭā'ati'llāb*: in obedience to Allah." It is recorded with the additional phrase in Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, no.4707; and Ibn Ḥanbal, *al-Musnad*, no.1234, and it is *ṣaḥīḥ*. Cf. al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1985), 2:81; no.549.
8. Al-Tirmidhī, no.2561, where he said: "The hadith is *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*."
9. Cited in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād* (Egypt: Maṭba'ah al-Sa'ādah, 1929), 13:494.
10. Al-'Irāqī stated in his *Takbrīj al-Iḥyā* (Riyadh: Maktabah Tabariyyah, 1995), 2:709, no.2584: "Al-Bayhaqī recorded it in *al-Zubd*, from the hadith of Jābir; then declares: This chain contains weakness." Ibn Ḥajr al-'Asqalānī asserts in *Takbrīj al-Kasbshāf*, no.33: "It is related via 'Īsā b. Ibrāhīm; from Yaḥyā b. Ya'lā; from Layth b. Abī Sulaym - and all three are weak. Al-Nasā'ī recorded it in *al-Kunā* as the statement of Ibrāhīm b. Abī 'Abla: a famous successor (*tābi'i*) of Syria." Al-Dhahabī also ascribes the saying to him, as per his *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1998), 6:325.

Those that have documented this hadith in their dictionary of weak and fabricated hadiths include: al-Qārī, *Asrār al-Marfū'ah* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1986), 211-12, no.211; al-Ṣuyūṭī, *al-Durar al-Muntabirah fī'l-Aḥādīth al-Mushtabarah* (Riyadh: University of Riyadh, 1983), no.245; al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ḍa'īfah wa'l-Mawḍū'ah* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'ārif, 1996), 5:478-481, no.2460.

From the above it can be seen that Ibn Taymiyyah's verdict on the hadith: "*lā aṣl labu*: it is baseless" - which, in the parlance of the hadith specialists usually refers to a narration that has no chain - is clearly erroneous. Cf. *Majmū' Fatāwā* (Riyadh: Dār al-'Ālam al-Kutub, 1991), 11:197.

11. *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wa'l-Hikam* (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Risālah, 1998), 1:489.

12. Qur'an 29:69.

13. *Al-Fawā'id* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 2001), 177. Also refer to *Zād al-Ma'ād*, 3:5-6.

14. Cited in Ibn al-Qayyim, *Rawḍat al-Muḥibbīn wa Nuḥbat al-Mushtāqīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1996), 475-6, where he precedes it with these words: "Even if jihad against one's carnal desires was not greater than jihad against the disbelievers, it is certainly not lesser than it. A person asked al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, may Allah have mercy upon him: 'O Abu Sa'id! What is the best jihad? He replied: Your jihad against your desires.' I once heard our Shaykh saying: ..." He then goes on to cite the words of Ibn Taymiyyah.

Both Ibn al-Qayyim and his Shaykh, though they accept the primacy of jihad against the ego over jihad as military combat, refrain from using the term "greater" and "lesser" jihad. Perhaps they felt it undermines the status or significance of jihad as armed warfare. And Allah knows best. Other scholars, however, seem to have no such reservation with the terms, as they are relative and are not meant to negate jihad as armed combat.

15. Qur'an 35:6.

16. Qur'an 4:84.

17. *Fayḍ al-Qadir Sharḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghir* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 4:511.

18. Cf. T.J. Winter's superb translation and annotation of al-Ghazali, *On Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), xxviii-xxix.

19. Qur'an 12:53.

20. Qur'an 75:2.

21. Qur'an 89:27-30.

22. *Ṣayd al-Kbāṭir* (Egypt: Dār al-Yaqīn, 1998), 122.

