Tension between the Qur’an and the Hadith: The Case of Offensive Jihad

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the palpable tension between the Qur’anic worldview and the corpus of Hadith literature related to initiating an offensive jihad (jihad al-talab) to either proselytize or forcibly convert non-Muslims. I argue that the expansionist theology that could be gleaned from the intolerant hadiths was informed by the Muslim community’s existing sociopolitical situation and formulated within its concrete experiences during a time when both its territory and hegemony were on the rise. A holistic reading of the Qur’an completely undermines such a position; however, a case can be made for this type of war if one decontextualizes certain verses and then imposes a particular hermeneutics upon them. Given that the Qur’an views freedom of religion and conscience as an inalienable and fundamental right, initiating a war to spread Islam or extend the abode of Islam cannot be justified. Even the sole Qur’anic allowance for war, self-defense, is cancelled once the enemy agrees to a truce and a cessation of hostilities. In other words, non-Muslims cannot be attacked just because of their disbelief (kufr). Evaluating the juridical and Hadith literature by the standard of the Qur’an often produces results that are diametrically opposed to existing legal judgments not only in the matter of offensive war, but also in such areas as gender equity, apostasy, penal provisions, and minority rights.

KEYWORDS: jihad; offensive war; just war; proselytization; dar al-Islam; dar al-kufr; dar al-harb; freedom of religion; Shahrur, Muhammad; al-Shafi’i, Muhammad ibn Idris.

The term jihad conjures up visual images of wild-eyed Muslim zealots
riding out of the desert on thundering horses, wielding a sword in one hand and the Qur’an in the other, and enthusiastically seeking to expand the abode of Islam (dar al-Islam) by presenting all non-Muslims with the same ultimatum: convert to Islam by reciting the dual testimony of faith contained in the creedal formula or face instant death. The Prophet is reported to have said: ‘I am ordered to fight people until they say: “There is no god but Allah”’\(^1\) and ‘Every community has a form of asceticism (rabbanīyyah), and the asceticism of this community is jihad in the path of Allah.’\(^2\) So deeply ingrained is this stereotype that it prompted Godfrey Jansen to assert that ‘the image of the Muslim armies converting as they advance has sunk so deeply into the Western mind that no amount of repetition of the truth is likely to dislodge [it].’\(^3\) To counter this stereotypical image, some scholars have advanced the claim that Islam advocates non-violence even in the face of persecution, as this was the norm during the Meccan period of the Prophet’s ministry (610-22), when Islam’s universal and essential core values were being laid out. During these years he did not resort to warfare, but exercised patience and perseverance. Eventually, he sent some of his followers to Abyssinia and later on migrated (hijrah) to Medina.\(^4\)

To further buttress this position, attention is paid to the lexical and etymological meaning of jihad: any effort or exertion in a holistic sense – intellectual, religious, physical, spiritual, moral, economical, and psychological – that promotes the public good.\(^5\) Further support is found in those hadith reports attributed to the Prophet in which he defines the greater jihad (al-jihad al-akbar) as a moral and spiritual striving, an internal jihad in which one combats the moral vices and evil tendencies present within one’s soul.\(^6\) In contrast other scholars, basing their conclusions on a different set of hadiths, proclaim that an offensive jihad (jihad al-talab) launched to extend the abode of Islam is valid on religious grounds and, moreover, that it is a collective responsibility (fard kifayah) devolving upon all Muslims. If it remains unfulfilled, all of them would be guilty of violating a divine injunction. Undertaking this religious obligation is mandated at least once every year and cannot be neglected, as its importance is equal to observing the obligatory prayers, the Ramadan fast, pilgrimage, and giving alms. This suggests that it is incumbent upon every adult male.\(^7\)

These polarized positions are the result of a selective retrieval of textual evidence from the corpus of Islamic literature: the Qur’an, the Hadith (or Sunnah), and the juridical precedents set by eminent
historical scholars. In other words, the texts support both theses because they are by their very nature prone to multiple readings, as is the case with practically any scripture. Given the Islamic tradition’s inherent vibrancy and elasticity on account of being a living tradition, the texts on jihad lend themselves to conflicting interpretations, as is the case with other revelatory texts that mention such issues as the freedom of religion and conscience, apostasy, free will and divine determinism, gender justice, the status of the ‘People of the Book’ (e.g., Jews, Christians, and Sabean), the rights of the minorities, religious pluralism, and the Islamic penal code (hudud).

This paper argues that the ensuing tension between these two sources, i.e. the Qur’an and the Hadith, at least in the case of jihad, has apparently been resolved in favour of the Hadith literature’s overall support for and approval of aggressive jihad. In addition, in my estimation, a cogent case can be made that both Sunni and Shi’a jurists – starting from Imam Shafi’i – relied heavily on the Hadith corpus to formulate their theology of expansionism which, is difficult to sustain based upon the Qur’anic ethos. However, the purview of this paper is confined to the tension between the Qur’an and Hadith, excluding the juridical literature. In this regard, Muhammad Shahrur, a leading Syrian reformist, comments:

We then realized that the ‘ulama’s interpretations of apostasy, al-jihad, and al-qital were in fact not too different from the Islamists’ positions and that the deviation from the spirit of Allah’s Book did not just come with the Islamist movement but that it had occurred much earlier in history, namely during the formative period of Islamic scholarship!8

No Compulsion in the Matter of Faith

Muslim jurists of the classical era divided the world into two spheres: the abode of Islam9 and the abode of unbelief (dar al-kufri), war (dar al-barb), or polytheism (dar al-shirk).10 The ultimate aim of converting the world to Islam provides an impetus for the Muslim community to remain in a state of ongoing, perpetual, and active state of warfare as it attempts to expand Islam’s territory through propagation (da’wah) and defeating the unbelievers, for: ‘It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, to show that it is above all [other] religions, however much the polytheists may hate this’ (9:33).11
As such, one could argue that the community’s normative state vis-à-vis ‘others’ is not one of peace treaties and covenants (sulh), but of a permanent state of universal war. This transforms war into an essential (rather than accidental) state of the human condition, and peace into a negative peace that is temporary and valued for its instrumental value only to preserve short-term interests. Hostilities can be temporarily suspended, if warranted, out of a serious need or exigency so long as doing so promotes public welfare under the rubric of maqasid al-shari’ah (the aims and objectives of Islamic law). Even forced conversion could be regarded as a meritorious act for those stubborn and arrogant unbelievers who either cannot or refuse to discern Islam’s truth. As such, at least according to one hadith, it is imperative that they be ‘dragged to Paradise in shackles.’

Although this form of offensive jihad can be convincingly sustained by citing those hadiths that praise jihad in the most extravagant terms, it is in direct tension and opposition with the Qur’anic message as regards the freedom of religion and conscience, not to mention those verses that call upon Muslims to stop fighting once the enemy inclines toward peace. Moreover, any faith accepted under duress is without merit and does not entitle the individual to any reward because it would be incompatible with moral responsibility (taklif). Abdulaziz Sachedina persuasively argues that his ‘categorization of the Qur’anic jihad as a “defensive” one is based on the complete absence of any reference in the Qur’an that would justify an “offensive” jihad, i.e., a jihad undertaken in order to “convert” all of humanity to Islam.’

The Qur’an is categorical that any attempt to impose Islam would be foolhardy and irrational, for one’s faith is a matter of one’s heart and intellect and thus has to be embraced voluntarily and with conviction. It severely reprimands the nomadic Arabs for their hollow claim that Islam had become anchored in their hearts: ‘The desert Arabs say, “We have faith.” [O Prophet], tell them, “You do not have faith”. What you should say instead is, “We have submitted”, for faith has not yet entered your hearts’ (49:14). In other words, one’s wholehearted acceptance and commitment to Islam is a process that requires full agency and is quite different from the superficial verbal declaration of belief in one God and the Prophet’s messengership. Furthermore, the Qur’an censures people who resort to emulation, blind imitation, and sentimental affinity instead of engaging in reflection and proper discernment. It also condemns the Arabs for failing to pay heed to Muhammad’s message because of their blind adherence to tribal customs and
practices, regardless of their merit or value: ‘They say, “We saw our fathers following this tradition, we are guided by their footsteps”’ (43:22). Abraham faced a similar impediment during his ministry. When he asked his people what they were worshipping, they replied,

‘We worship idols, and are constantly in attendance to them.’

He asked, ‘Do they hear you when you call? Do they help or harm you?’ They replied, ‘No, but this is what we saw our fathers doing’. (26:72-73)

Various Qur’anic passages point out to Muhammad that human beings have been endowed with the prerogative to either surrender to God and worship Him voluntarily, which is in keeping with their primordial disposition (fitrah), or to rise in active rebellion against this inherent tendency in human nature. Rebellion does not impair divine omnipotence, lordship, or sovereignty: ‘Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [O Prophet] compel people to believe?’ (10:99).18 Muhammad is advised not to feel disillusioned and despondent at Islam’s slow spread in the early years of his prophetic ministry, for he was not entrusted with the forced conversion of his people; instead,

Your only task is to give warning. You are not there to control them. As for those who turn away and disbelieve, God will inflict the greatest torment upon them. They will finally come to Us, and We shall call them to account. (88:22)

And,

See how We explain Our revelation in various ways, so that they may understand. Yet your people still reject it, even though it is the truth. Say, ‘I have not been put in charge of you. Every prophecy has its fixed time to be fulfilled. You will come to realize this.’ (6:66)

Moreover, their mocking of the Qur’an and doubting its divine origin also should not worry him:

[O Prophet] are you going to worry yourself to death because they will not believe? If We had wished, We could have sent them down a sign from heaven, at which they would bow their heads in utter humility. (26:3-4)

Imposing Islam would contradict many Qur’anic passages and
violate the principles of human agency and free volition, both of which are pervasive Qur’anic themes. Some exegetes have argued that God elevated humanity above the angels because of this free will and designated humanity His deputy and vicegerent (khalifah) on Earth to actualize the divine purpose. This freedom of choice provides a basis for the Day of Judgment, at which point God will evaluate every person’s actions. The Qur’an reminds everyone that they voluntarily accepted the divine trust, a truly onerous responsibility, after others had shied away from it: ‘We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it. Humanity undertook it — they have always been inept and foolish’ (33:72). In addition, they had entered into a primordial covenant with God before they were even born:

[O Prophet,] when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam [and Eve] and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness’ (7:172).

Ultimately, the decision to accept or reject Islam rests upon each individual, because God does no more than provide guidance; He does not coerce anyone: ‘We gave him hearing and sight. We guided him to the right path, whether he was grateful or not’ (76:2-3).

The ‘No Compulsion’ Verse

An unconditional and explicit verse bestows full autonomy and discretion upon the individual when it comes to choosing one’s faith: ‘There is no compulsion in religion; true guidance has become distinct from error’ (2:256). As such, one cannot be forced to adopt Islam through intimidation or offensive warfare; nor can one be deprived of human dignity and equal rights on the basis of his/her religious faith and conviction. The choice of religion is a matter of conscience, primordial nature (fitrah), and rational deliberation and thus falls outside the orbit of compulsion. Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i (d. 1981), an eminent Shi‘a exegete, represented the general Shi‘a position established from the classical age when he rejected the use of coercion in the matter of faith and the abrogation of this verse, which provides for freedom of religion and conscience:

In short, religion is belief and faith. It is a matter of
conscience, and such a thing cannot be created by coercion and compulsion. One may force someone to do a certain physical action against his will, but he cannot be forced to believe against his will. Belief follows reason and understanding, and nothing but reason and understanding can create it.\textsuperscript{20}

Sunni exegete, Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), concurs that the ‘no compulsion verse’ has remained operative and could not be abrogated by later verses, however, he limits the applicability of this verse to only the People of the Book.\textsuperscript{21} Mahmud al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), another Sunni exegete with rationalist proclivities who ascribes to a Mu‘tazili theology, universalizes the applicability of the ‘no compulsion verse’ to be inclusive of all human beings because it is part of divine wisdom to endow everyone with human agency and if He desired otherwise, He could have forced everyone to become a believer: ‘Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?’ (10:99).\textsuperscript{22}

This verse is generally advanced to refute the claim and dispel the negative stereotypical image that Islam was spread by the sword, although many hadiths do in fact call for offensive jihad for the sole purpose of converting non-Muslims. Advocates of this policy have attempted to blunt the forcefulness of Qur’an 2:256 by asserting that later (and less accommodating) verses abrogated and rescinded it; that it applies only to the protected minorities (dhimmis); or that while it remains operative, the prohibition pertains only to the forcible imposition of inner conviction at the esoteric (batini) level, as opposed to coercion as regards the outward observances of Islam in the public domain at the exoteric (zahiri) level.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, the more intolerant Qur’anic verses are given universal currency with general applicability under normal circumstances, while the accommodating verses are circumscribed to be applicable only in exceptional or rare circumstances.

In contrast, ‘Allamah Tabataba’i states that this verse cannot be abrogated by the ‘sword verse’ (9:5) due to its unconditional nature and the fact that the reason cited for the freedom to choose one’s religion will always remain valid (i.e., Islam’s explicit and clear-cut superiority over all other religions can be rationally ascertained without any force or coercion).\textsuperscript{24} Surprisingly, his commentary on the ‘jihad verse’ in 2:191 explicitly sanctions the use of force against polytheists, which includes
the People of the Book, who, in his opinion, are only feigning their belief in monotheism (based on 9:29). He sees no logical inconsistency in claiming that Islam accepts only defensive war while simultaneously championing the cause of conversion not through wisdom, sound proofs, and exhortation, but merely through calling upon the people to convert or face military confrontation. If they accept the invitation there will be no hostilities; but if they decline they will be fought and forcibly converted. This is, after all, not problematic and quite defensible because:

The compulsion will remain for one generation only. Coming generations will be so taught and trained that they will gladly accept the Religion of Nature and the creed of the Oneness of God. It is not objectionable if one generation is compelled to see reason, if by that action all coming generations will gladly follow the right path till the end of the world.

Contemporary Muslims can argue that there is little evidence of this expansionist theology in the Qur’an other than general appeals to establish an egalitarian, just, and ethically based public order by commanding the good and forbidding the abominable (amr bil-ma’ruf wa al-nahy ‘an al-munkar) and providing assistance to those who are suffering under the yoke of oppression. Shafi‘i, however, cites such ‘unconditional’ verses as invitations to engage in offensive wars and elects not to enumerate the conditional verses because, in his estimation, the latter were all abrogated by ‘[O Believers,] fight them until there is no more persecution’ (8:39). If this were the case, then the Prophet’s behaviour after his successful conquest of Mecca in 630 would be quite perplexing: he gave immunity to all non-Muslim Meccans who confined themselves to their houses or at mosques and even added the residence of Abu Sufyan, his archenemy, as a place of refuge and protection. It would be nonsensical to provide guarantees of safety if the Meccans had already converted to Islam. No evidence suggests that he forced anyone to convert at the point of a sword. On the contrary, there is overwhelming evidence that he told them that they were all free (tulaqa’) and bore no responsibility for their past hostility toward the Muslims: ‘Go your way for you are the freed ones’.

If the ‘no compulsion verse’ is considered operative and not superseded by the ‘sword verse’, then both Sunnis and Shi‘as will have
to discard, or at least radically reinterpret, the extensive Hadith literature on the mass assault led by the Mahdi or the Messiah, along with Jesus Christ, for the sole purpose of converting everyone so that Islam will triumph over all other religions. It is ironic that many Muslims object strongly to any claim that Islam was spread by the sword, but have no qualms about accepting that these two figures will use force to convert people or about subscribing to the notion that Muslims are obliged to be in a state of permanent war with all non-Muslims. However, this obligation has been suspended until they gain enough strength to resume the campaign of forced conversion (the Sunni view) and the reappearance of the infallible messianic Imam (the Shi’a view).31

One also comes across hadiths that these figures, who will emerge toward the end of earthly life, will break the cross, kill the swine, demolish churches, and severely reprimand the Christians for deifying Jesus and, as such, will abolish Christianity and summon its followers to embrace Islam: ‘By Him in whose Hands my soul is, the son of Mary [Jesus] will shortly descend among you people [Muslims] as a just ruler and will break the cross and kill the pig and abolish the jizyah.’32 Interestingly, these traditions are in direct conflict with those narratives that portray the Mahdi as exhibiting his mastery over all revealed scriptures by judging the adherents of each religion according to their own book: ‘He will judge the people of the Torah according to the Torah; the people of the Gospel according to the Gospel; the people of the Psalms in accordance with the Psalms; the people of the Qur’an in accordance with the Qur’an.’33

Conditional and Unconditional Verses

There are two types of verses on the issue of jihad: conditional and unconditional. The former establish the limits and conditions for their actualization, whereas the latter are of an absolute nature and thus have no prerequisites or conditions for them to take effect. An example of a conditional verse is: ‘Fight in God’s cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits. God does not love those who overstep the limits’ (2:190) that stands upon its generality. Several of the points made in this verse are worthy of close attention: jihad should be conducted solely with the right intention and for God’s pleasure, and not because of any personal or communal desire for vengeance, glory, power, expansion of Muslim territory, or greed for booty. Given that
this verse speaks of defending oneself against aggression and subduing
the enemy, it is inoperative if the Muslims are not attacked or if the
aggressor stops the conflict: ‘If they cease hostilities, there can be no
[further] hostility, except toward aggressors’ (2:193). Consequently, it
cannot be invoked to legitimize offensive jihad. Moreover, the
imperative form of negation on exceeding the limits (la ta‘tadu), which
is explicit and general in nature, includes using disproportionate force,
harming non-combatants, torching houses, polluting the ecosystem,
and all other such excesses. In other words, Muslims have been put on
notice not to allow their base tendencies or emotions in the heat of
battle to move them beyond the limits set by God, as doing so will
engender His displeasure and anger.

Muhammad Shahrur holds that the Qur’an contains overwhelming
evidence in support of his thesis that jihad means defending oneself
from external aggression, as opposed to offensive warfare for the
primary purpose of converting non-Muslims. Jihad has to be
distinguished from ghazwah, the pre-Islamic practice of launching
violent raids against neighboring tribes to acquire booty:

Jihad, originally expressing the notion of self-defence, was
finally linked to the offensive concept of ‘conquest’ through
raids (ghazwa). This was then retrospectively applied to
Muhammad’s military actions, which were all identified as
‘conquests,’ thus contradicting the historical evidence that
they were in fact defensive battles of survival (and this
includes the battle of Tabuk).34

One verse that conveys a similar meaning is:

A sacred month for a sacred month: violation of sanctity [calls
for] fair retribution. So if anyone commits aggression against
you, attack him as he attacked you. But be mindful of God and
know that He is with those who are mindful of Him (2:194).

This verse was revealed at Hudaybiyyah in 638, when the Meccans
prevented the Prophet and his Companions from making the minor
pilgrimage to Mecca (‘umrah) that year. Here, the Qur’an provides for a
proportionate response when fighting one’s enemy, even if it be during
the sacred month, so long as it is for self-defense. Once again the
conflict’s scope is defined by the aggressor, because the normal state is
that of peace. Proponents of an offensive and aggressive war against the
unbelievers, along with those who subscribe to an expansionist
theology, declare that this and other verses calling for tolerance were abrogated by verses in Chapter 9, especially: ‘But fight the polytheists all together, just as they fight you all together’ (9:36). It is hard to sustain this position based on Qur’anic verses and accordingly Tabari asserts that such a stance lacks any sound evidence and constitutes nothing but an illogical and oppressive stance.

Another verse of a restricted (mahdud or muqayyad) nature is:

Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution (fitnah) is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they do fight you, kill them, for this is what the disbelievers deserve. But if they stop [fighting within the sacred precincts of Mecca], then God is most forgiving and merciful. (2:191-92).

The chapter’s concluding sentence refers to the cessation of hostilities: ‘If they cease hostilities there can be no [further] hostility, except toward aggressors’ (2:193). Contrary to the interpretation provided by most exegetes, this verse is not a license to annihilate the unbelievers; rather, the context makes it clear that the reference is limited to those Arabs who were belligerent, had expelled the Muslims from Mecca, and who had persecuted them in the hope of exterminating both them and their religion, which was still in its infancy.

The conditional nature of this permission to kill is proven by the clause instructing Muslims to end the conflict as soon as the enemy camp agrees to do so. Therefore, this verse can be categorized under ‘self-defense.’ One may conjecture that the fitnah (sedition) referred to in it includes persecuting Mecca’s Muslims, driving them out of their homes, plotting and conspiring to weaken the Muslims in Medina by all possible means, and inciting others to fight against them – the sum total of which is considered to be more grievous than killing them, even if this were to take place within the sacred precincts of the Ka’bah.

Two interesting verses on fighting, revealed four years after the first verse that sanctioned jihad, employ the same apparently inflammatory, absolute, unrestricted, and unconditional directive found in the ‘sword verse’ (9:5). However, here the reference is to the hypocrites (munafiqun) who feigned belief in Islam but in actuality had reverted back to polytheism: ‘seize [the hypocrites] and kill them wherever you encounter them (fa-khudhu-hum wa-'qtulu-hum hayth wajadtumu-hum)’
(4:89) and a similar expression in 4:91 with the final phrase ‘wajadtumu-hum’ being replaced by ‘thaqiftumu-hum’. Regardless of this difference, it conveys the same meaning. It was revealed in response to the intra-Muslim bickering and dissent on the merits of interceding for those considered to be hypocrites. The Qur’an, which censures Muslims for this rancour and divisiveness, advises them to be firm and steadfast in fighting this group. But ‘if they withdraw and do not fight you and offer you peace, then God gives you no way against them’ (4:90). The unconditional permission to fight is, in actuality, conditional upon the enemy initiating and continuing the attack.

The Evolving Concept of Jihad

Many classical-era Muslim scholars who supported the abrogation of verses dealing with jihad argued in favour of a gradual evolution of this concept – from instructions to exercise patience and perseverance in Mecca via pacifism and non-violent resistance (‘[O Prophet], bear everything they say with patience’ [50:39]) in the face of oppression and brutality to the culminating unconditional command, revealed in Medina, to ‘kill them [the unbelievers] wherever you encounter them’ (9:5) to ensure that Islam will triumph over all other religions. One exponent, the eminent Hanafi scholar Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Sahl al-Sarakhsi (d. 1090), divided this asserted evolution into four stages:

1. to spread the Islamic Message and Faith peacefully (early Meccan period);
2. to confront and argue with unbelievers in a wise and fair manner (mainly pre-Hijra and early Medinan period);
3. to fight the umma’s enemies if Muslims were unjustly wronged, and such fighting was not to be undertaken in the sacred months; and
4. to wage war against unbelievers unconditionally and constantly to bring about the victory of Islam.38

As mentioned earlier, a common strategy employed by some who wished to dispense with the validity of the Qur’an’s tolerant and accommodating verses was to argue on the basis of hadiths that were in favour of combating disbelief in order to circumscribe the terms of toleration and/or assert that those verses revealed later on, which are of
a more belligerent nature and seem to encourage the expansion of Islamdom, superseded the earlier verses. Robert Spencer avers:

Suras 16, 29, 52, 73, and 109 – the sources of most of the verses of peace and tolerance above – are all Meccan. That means that anything they teach must be considered in light of what was revealed later in Medina (The sole exception to this is the ‘no compulsion in religion’ verse from the Medinan Sura 2, discussed below.) On the other hand, the last sura revealed, Sura 9, is Medinan. Thus it is in effect the Qur’an’s last word on jihad, and all the rest of the book – including the ‘tolerant verses’ – must be read in its light.39

A principle employed to reconcile apparently conflicting verses is that the ‘unconditional verses’ must be governed and regulated by the restrictions laid out in the ‘conditional’ verses, instead of arguing that the ‘sword verse’ abrogated all other verses that deal with jihad. As an illustration, the verse ‘So if anyone commits aggression against you, attack him as he attacked you, but be mindful of God’ (2:194) reigns over the supposed ‘unconditional’ verse of ‘fight the polytheists all together, just as they fight you all together’ (9:36).40 Thus, initiating an offensive war solely for the sake of converting unbelievers or expanding Islam’s territory would be prohibited. In some sense, the conditional verses explain and comment upon the apparently unconditional verses, and the latter are interpreted under the rubric of the former:

There is a scholastic rule that when both a conditional and an unconditional commandment exist, that is, when there is an instruction that in one place is unconditional but in another place has a condition attached to it, then in the language of the scholars, the unconditional must be interpreted as the conditional.41

If this were not the case, many of the verses that have universal applicability and are not subject to abrogation, such as the ‘no compulsion’ verse and those that instruct Muslims to invite people toward Islam with wisdom, goodly exhortation, and logical arguments (16:125 and 29:46), would be rendered meaningless and irrelevant.

**Conclusion**

There is tension between the Qur’anic worldview and the Hadith
literature as well as between the thematic (mawdū‘i) and sequential or the verse-by-verse (musalsal) reading of the Qur’an in isolation. Those who subscribe to the notion that the corpus of Hadith literature related to initiating offensive jihad gives them a mandate to either proselytize or forcibly convert non-Muslims envision a state of permanent war as a norm until all unbelievers are reduced to non-existence due to conversion to Islam, which implicitly renders Islam a political ideology. Although this position can perhaps be sustained by various hadiths, it cannot but be in direct opposition to the Qur’anic worldview, which explicitly and unconditionally prohibits compulsion in the matter of faith and contains verses that permit fighting only in the case of self-defense, verses that are both restrictive in nature and lack universal applicability. Of additional interest for me is to examine how the juridical literature and the hadiths intersect with, are influenced by, and in turn influence the so-called notion of offensive jihad in the Qur’an.

Both Shi’a and Sunni scholars tried to resolve the ensuing tensions and contradictions by resorting to the device of abrogation (naskh) or by invoking hadiths that had an exclusivistic tone. All verses that are accommodating and tolerant of other faiths and traditions were viewed as having been superseded by the intolerant and exclusive verses, despite the fact this violates a fundamental principle: unconditional verses cannot be abrogated by particularistic ones. Moreover, abrogation pertains only to legal injunctions and thus does not cover such non-legal issues as the freedom of religion and conscience. This profitless undertaking has resulted in ‘intellectual dishonesty’ or the depiction of a ‘new-found politically correct’ Islam that resorts to apologetics and polemics, especially in the aftermath of 9-11, when Islam has been negatively stereotyped as a religion that has a propensity for violence and bloodshed. Such a message pervades the work of Daniel Pipes, Martin Kramer, Robert Spencer, and other scholars.

The process of re-examining the human understanding of Islam’s so-called normative and immutable stand on war and peace may be described as a move from a given text to a specific socio-historical context to obtain contextual exegesis. As an extension, the complexity of interpreting a scripture is astutely captured by Vincent Wimbush, who observes that scriptures signify and are signified upon as we make them do what we would like them to do in pursuit of our desired gains in power relations. As such, it would be a fruitful exercise not to confine our analysis to ‘what “scriptures” mean (in terms of content),
but [extend our analysis to] how “scriptures” mean (in terms of psychosocial-cultural performances and politics).145

In the search for a contextual Islam and an acknowledgment that scriptures signify and are signified upon, Hadith compilations and historical scholarly works should be regarded as tentative and therefore open to scrutiny and reappraisal to prevent time and place-bound human theories and interpretations from being ‘absolutized’ or given the status of normativity. In other words, these works should not be endowed with an aura of infallibility and timelessness, as if they were somehow formulated in a vacuum and thus immune from any socio-historical, political, economic, and cultural influences. Failing to do so would likely allow the Qur’anic worldview on war and peace to be overwhelmed by enabling these all-too-human (and thus limited) works to attain the status of infallibility and sanctification. This would constitute a form of idolatry (shirk) and injustice.

The ethos of disputat ion and difference (iḥktīlaftype) that was so prevalent in historical Muslim scholarship is acutely needed today in order to cultivate cultures of positive and substantive peace, justice, mutual respect and coexistence, harmony, and dialogue. Or, in the words of the Qur’an, a culture of ta’arafu (mutual appreciation) and enrichment is needed to create a just and ethically sound social order characterized by inner peace at the individual level and communal peace46: ‘O people, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes so that you should get to know one another (ta’arafu)’ (49:13).

Notes

1 Muhammad ibn Isma’il, al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan IV (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1980), bk. 52 (‘Jihad’), no. 196; IX, bk. 84 (‘Dealing with Apostates’), no. 59; and IX, bk. 92 (‘Holding Steadfast’), no. 388.

2 Rahbanyyayt ummati: al-jihad fi sabil Allah. This hadith is mentioned in both Sunni and Shi’a sources: Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Musnad Ahmad (Beirut: Dar al-Sadir, n.d.), 266 and Shaykh Saduq, al-Amali (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Bi’thah, 1996), 123. See David Cook, Understanding Jihad (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 33. Tabataba’i and others have recorded a hadith in which asceticism (rahbanyyah) has been equated to migration, jihad, prayers, fasting, hajj, and ‘umrah. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba’i, al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islami, n.d.), 19:175.


Tension between the Qur’an and the Hadith


6 John L. Esposito, Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26-8. J. Cook argues on the contrary that the normative expression of jihad is offensive war and the spiritual jihad against one’s self (nafs) was derived from the former and not the reverse (Cook, Understanding Jihad, 41). The hadith on the dichotomy of lesser jihad (military warfare) and larger jihad (nafs) was not in circulation until the first half of the ninth century and even then it was found only in the section dealing with asceticism (zuhd). In addition, this hadith does not appear in the major canonical collections of Hadith (Cook, Understanding Jihad, 35). Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini views the jihad against the self as a preparatory step to engaging in social activism and transformation in the place of passivity and quietism. Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini, ‘Lecture on Supreme Jihad’ in Islam and Revolution, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 349-62.


9 Shafi’i jurist, ’Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mawardi (d. 1058), defined the abode of Islam in the most expansive manner to constitute the area in which Muslims could openly practice and manifest their religion without any obstacles or harassment. See Khaled Abou El Fadl, ‘Islamic Law and Muslim Minorities: The Juristic Discourse on Muslim Minorities from the Second/Eighth to the Eleventh/Seventeenth Centuries’, Islamic Law and Society I, no. 2 (1994), 150. In contrast, ’Abd al-Walid Muhammad (the grandfather of Ibn Rushd, d. 1122) was the most uncompromising in his stance that it is strictly prohibited for a Muslim to enter or stay in a place where the Muslims are not dominant (dar al-barb), idem, 150.

10 This worldview, conceived at a time when Muslims were the dominant power, eventually had to be modified to accommodate other scenarios, such as religious diversity or Muslims being in the minority. Thus, other intermediate categories were devised: the abode of covenant (dar al-’ahd), the abode of peace treaty (dar al-sulh), and so on. Also, the notion of safe conduct (aman) was introduced to enable the residents in the abode of war to travel into Muslim territory as traders, ambassadors, and visitors. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), some of whose writings have been removed from their original context and are exploited to legitimize religious extremism, coined the phrase ‘the abode of composites’ (murakkab) to factor in the different religions in his famous fatwa of Mardin. See, also, Yahya Michot, ‘Ibn Taymiyya’s “New Mardin Fatwa”: Is genetically modified Islam (GMI) carcinogenic?’, The Muslim World CI, no. 2 (April 2011), 130 and Muslims under Non-Muslim Rule: Ibn Taymiyya on fleeing from sin, kinds of emigration, the status of Mardin (domain of peace/war, domain composite), the conditions for challenging power. translated, annotated, and presented in relation to six modern readings of the Mardin fatwa (Oxford-London: Interface Publications, 2006).


12 Patricia Crone, God’s Rule: Government and Islam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 362. ‘The classical concept of jihad is an example, for it is not a mere
variant on the ancient Near Eastern idea, but rather a novel conception unique to Islam,’ 368. However, there is enough historical evidence to trace the concept of *dar al-sulh* back to the Prophet’s time: his signing of a peace treaty with the Christians of Najran when he was in Medina. See ‘Dar al-Sulh’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* II (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960-2005), 131a.


Ibid., 101.


Ibid., 4:171.


Ibid., 3:95-6.

Ibid., 3:89.

Ibid., 3:98.

‘Why should you not fight in God’s cause and for those oppressed men, women, and children who cry out, “Lord, rescue us from this town whose people are oppressors! By Your grace, give us a protector and helper!”?’ (4:76). The section on *amr bil-ma’ruf* and *al-nahy ‘an al-munkar* is normally classified under ‘Jihad’ in the books of law.


Ibid.
‘Fight them until there is no more fitnah’ (2:193). Some exegetes have erroneously equated fitnah to shirk (polytheism) (Tabataba’i, al-Mizan, 3:89-90) which suggests that Muslims must engage in offensive war to uproot both polytheism and its adherents. This assertion suffers from two major deficiencies: (1) it is in direct conflict with the ‘no compulsion’ verse and (2) overpowering the polytheists will not affect their convictions, for this can only be done through dialogue and providing cogent proofs.


‘I submit that it is not only possible to rethink the rationale and consequences of naskh, but that it is imperative to do so if we are to resolve the problems raised by the modern application of the public law of Shari’a.’ An-Na’im, Toward an Islamic Reformation, 21.


This tendency can be found in the publications of various contemporary al-Azhar scholars, for whom ‘jihad is a peaceful social struggle against illiteracy, poverty, and disease.’ Liyakat Takim, Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies IV, no. 1 (Winter 2011), 15.


‘But God invites [everyone] to the Home of Peace (dar al-salam), and guides whoever He will to a straight path’ (10:25) and ‘those who have faith and whose hearts find peace in the remembrance of God – truly it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace’ (13:28).