

ESSAYS ON FAITH: ISLAM'S CENTRAL CONCEPT: PEACE

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This is the third in a series of sermons by Imam Mohammad Jamal Daoudi that explains misunderstandings about Islam. The previous sermons were published July 17 and Aug. 14 in the Sunday Gazette-Mail.

In the last two articles published in this paper, I clarified some of the misunderstood verses in the Quran, the holy book of the Muslims, relating to war and violence. We have spent much time talking about war, fighting, battles and bloodshed. Today, I would like to share with you the ideas of jihad as they relate to the greater concept of peace in Islam — the very essence and core of the religion.

Let me first recap and reiterate certain basic concepts inherent in the term most often misquoted and misunderstood — jihad — specifically as it relates to the wider concept of Islam.

“Islam,” literally and linguistically in Arabic, is derived from a root which means “submission” and “peace.” This means that by submitting one’s individual will and self to the will of God, one enters into a state of peace, tranquility and security.

“Jihad” in Arabic means making extra effort and struggling to aspire for all that is best.

For example, jihad is applicable when you work hard to raise your kids in a good way, struggling to provide for them a better life.

It is there when you are at work trying to do your job as perfectly and efficiently as you can the while extending your hand to assist others.

It means working hard on your relationship with your creator and fulfilling and living up to his teachings and responding to his call as best as you can.

It means to study hard and acquire the highest level of grades and education to overcome ignorance and incompetence in order to spread the light of knowledge in this world.

At last, and as an absolute last resort of defense, the jihad concept in Islam incorporates the idea of defending yourself, your country, family, wealth, intellect and religion — for, in Islam, to bear oppression is worse than fighting.

Islam also includes the strong belief that peace cannot be achieved without justice, and justice may require going into battle to defend one’s basic human rights of freedom of life, opportunity, dignity and religion.

Jihad is classified in Islam on three levels. First and highest is the constant jihad of struggling to live a moral and spiritual life by resisting one's own temptations and the whispering insinuations of the satanic forces calling one to commit evil and uphold that which is clearly wrong.

This type of jihad has no conditions or circumstance, for everyone must carry on this internal fight to liberate one's soul from all that may distance it from God in order to transform one's being into all that is good. In Islam, the Prophet calls this type of jihad "jihad al-akbar" or the greater jihad.

The next level is the jihad of acquiring and spreading useful knowledge. The knowledge by which human beings can enlighten their minds and hearts and understand their maker and creator, as well as develop keener insight of the created universe. This includes both the religious/sacred and the "secular" or mundane knowledge.

The third level of jihad is self-defense, which is misrepresented as "holy war." War can never, in itself, be holy. It is always the byproduct of oppressive corruption which necessitates the use of physical exertion to free mankind from enslavement.

Islam is innocent from such descriptions ("holy war"), as it firmly believes that the only true being that can be holy is God, and God alone and all that emanates from him. This term had never been used until after the crusade campaign, when it was retranslated from the crusaders' Holy War.

Self-defense jihad has very strict guidelines and restrictive conditions. If such a necessity arose, then only the highest authority or body of power within a given Muslim state can declare or initiate such an action, which must not be for a self-created purpose or "offensive" in nature. It must only be undertaken as a way of course when people's lives, their safety, and/or religious freedom is threatened or forbidden — barring no other options existing to bringing about a peaceful resolution. Vigilante-type or an individual's or a group's declaration of "jihad of war" is not acceptable in Islamic law and is considered null and void!

The above different levels of jihad have been described in different parts of the Quran and in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Now turning to "peace," confirming that the true meaning and focus of the religion of Islam is peace, as I stated earlier, the name itself is derived from the Arabic root word for peace: "salam." Below are other illustrative examples of how deeply rooted and embedded is the idea of "peace" in Islam and in the Muslim psyche.

- The greeting to be used by Muslims has been mandated by God in the Quran to be "peace be unto you" — "as-salam alaikum." Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said that Allah (God) has selected this kind of greeting as a compliment to the Muslims and as a protection to the non-Muslim citizens for it ensures by its statement a declaration and expectation of security, harmony and goodwill.

- One of the 99 attributes of Allah (God) which we are asked to make mention of and recite is “As-Salam” — God, The Source of All Peace. This specific word (salam) has been repeated 42 times in the Quran.
- The closest to Allah (God) on the Day of Judgment is the one who always initiated peace by his or her word or action.
- The Prophet (Muhammad) of Islam is described in the Quran as the Messenger of Peace and Mercy: “We [Allah-God] have not sent you Muhammad but as mercy to the worlds.”
- “Peace” will be the greeting of the inhabitants of Paradise who will hear nothing but the language and terms of peace and endearment.
- The angels will greet the people of Paradise as they are being received with salutations of peace.
- Paradise itself is called in the Quran “Dar Al-Salam” the Abode of Peace.
- The great mosque of Mecca has many gates — one of them is called the gate of peace, “Bab Al-Salam.”
- The mosque of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Medina has many gates; one of them is also called the door of peace.
- In every formal prayer that is obligated upon a believing Muslim in a given day (five in number spread throughout), Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught us to conclude each prayer with the greeting of peace, said twice to each side (right and left) and then to say the following supplication: “O Allah [God]! You are Peace; from you [alone] comes peace. You are the Blessed, O Lord of All Majesty and Bounty.”
- Islam, in all its teachings, mandates justice and forbids injustice and respects the human intellect — and requires of us to make it the means to gaining conviction in matters of religion and faith. The Quran firmly states in all clarity: “There is no compulsion in religion — truth is clear from falsehood” (chapter 2, verse 256).
- The Quran similarly requires building normal and good relationships with those of other beliefs and to do so upon understanding, cooperation, justice and peace. All those meanings and even more are concisely put in the Quranic term “birr” (pure goodness or righteousness) — the Quran reads: “Allah [God] does not forbid you to deal with birr with those who fought not against you on account of religion nor drove you out of your homes. Verily, Allah [God] loves those who deal with equity.”
- A learning point for us today is how the Prophet interacted with People of the Book, in this case a man of Jewish faith. His armor was found (after he had passed away) pawned with a Jewish citizen in Medina — clearly indicating that the Prophet had not hesitated in working and dealing with Jewish people in economic matters with goodwill and trust.
- For the sake of good neighborly conduct and a gesture of peace, a disciple of the Prophet would distribute freshly slaughtered meat among his neighbors and would begin first with his Jewish neighbor who lived next door.
- Even in situations of outright war, the Prophet maintained as much of the peaceful spirit as feasible. For instance, in one battle he chose to encounter his enemies outside the city perimeters so as to secure the residents of the city from undue harm. Similarly, in order to limit the number of possible civilian casualties in another battle, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) dug a trench around his city of Medina when he was attacked by a huge pagan army. It is extremely noteworthy that whenever Prophet Muhammad was invited to a peaceful initiative, he would be the first to join.

- Amongst the most beautiful and time-honored moments of utter human humility before the presence of the divine and a visible and exemplary proclamation of peace — the intent of Islam — was when and how Prophet Muhammad entered the city of Mecca. After having successfully secured and conquered Mecca, without the spilling of a single drop of blood — the place whose inhabitants had been his and Islam's most ardent and arch enemies — while commandeering an awesome army of 10,000 — he had it openly declared that none shall be harmed and no vengeance will be sought, nor shall any property be destroyed. All were free and safe (in peace) that day. And so, as he entered, his head was seen bowed before God, so much so that his beard was touching the neck of the camel he was on. He faced the holy sanctuary of the Kaaba — the sacred sanctuary built by Abraham and Ishmael for the worship of one God under instructions from Archangel Gabriel. Neither the pomp nor the roar of a conqueror was seen — but only the image of a humble man before his maker.

This is the Islam that is so much misunderstood.

Daoudi is imam (spiritual leader) of the Islamic Association of West Virginia.