

The Politico-Religious Catalyst to the Early Islamic Conquests

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Fear Tactic

“*Allahu akbar!*”—“God is greater”—is a popular Arabic slogan used by Muslims as they enter into battle in order to intimidate their opponents. This form of psychological preparation for victory is a critical component of jihad. “Soon shall we cast terror into the hearts of the Unbelievers, for that they joined companions with Allah, for which He had sent no authority; their abode will be the Fire; and evil is the home of the wrongdoers!” (Q3:151).¹ According to David Cook, foremost Islamic jihad expert, “The Prophet Muhammad further amplified this idea by noting that God had helped him with a fear (*ru‘b* or *mahaba*) that He had sent before the Muslim armies to a distance of a month’s journey.” Cook goes on to say, “According to this idea, all who lived at this distance from the Muslims would feel this fear and be defeated by it even before meeting the Muslim in battle.”² Unequivocally, this fear tactic was used in the early Islamic conquests. In al-Waqidi’s book, *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, he records one such incident: “Upon az-Zubayr’s orders the Muslims beheaded the enemy corpses and stuck the heads on their spear-points . . . their voices echoed with, ‘La ilaha illallah,’ and ‘Allahu Akbar.’ ”³ The goal of this article is to demonstrate that the politico-religious catalyst to the early Islamic conquests was a militant, “offensive jihad,” which was

¹ All qur’anic references are taken from the Abdullah Yusufali’s version.

² David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17.

³ Al-Waqidi, *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, trans. Mawlana Sulayman al-Kindi (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd., 2005), 295.

motivated by the Qur'an and corroborated by the earliest and most reliable *sira* (biography of Muhammad) and *tarikh* (history of Islam).

A Very Concise History of Jihad

To properly understand the meaning(s) of "jihad," a trek into its history and usage is warranted. Cook asserts that the conventional translation of "jihad" is "holy war." Additionally, "this definition, associated with the medieval Crusades, is usually rejected by Muslims as narrowly Christian."⁴ It is important, however, to note that the earliest Islamic scholars, such as al-Tabari, define "jihad" as "holy war": "Khalid [early Islamic military general] said to him [Adi]: 'Fighting against either of the two parties is [still] holy war (*jihad*).'"⁵ So, while this definition may be rejected on account of its association with the Christian Crusades, the term "holy war" is still a legitimate translation of "jihad." In Arabic, "jihad" literally means, "striving" in the context of one's religion.

Moreover, its primary use is militant:

"Warfare with spiritual significance" is the primary root and meaning of the term as it has been defined by classical Muslim jurists and legal scholars and as it was practiced by Muslims during the premodern period. This meaning is sustained in the standard definition given in the new definition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*: *"In law, according to general doctrine and in historical tradition, the jihad consists of military action with the object of the expansion of Islam and, if need be, of its defense."*⁶ This terse summary of Muslim law and history is the standard, scholarly one.⁷

In the glossary of *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, "jihad" is defined as

⁴ Cook, op. cit., 1.

⁵ Al-Tabari, "The Conquest of Arabia," in *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 10, trans. Fred M. Donner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 65.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., s.v. "Djihad" (E. Tayan); Cook, op. cit., 2.

⁷ Cook, op. cit., 2 (bold emphases mine).

[A]ny struggle in obedience to Allah. It may take one of these forms amongst others: 1) *Jihad bil-Lisan*: –with the tongue, e.g. speaking against evil. 2) *Jihad bil-Qalam*: -with the pen, e.g. using literature to spread the message. 3) *Jihad bis-Sayf*: **-with the sword. This is the primary usage of the word, Jihad, in this book.** 4) *Jihad ‘alan-Nafs*: -against the base human desires.⁸

Understandably, the pre-modern emphasis of jihad (as militant) has forced most western Muslims to disassociate themselves from their violent roots (especially after 9/11), embracing a more modern, politically correct form of jihad. “Many Muslims, seeking to distance themselves and their religion from associations with violence and conquest, maintain the word’s significance is exclusively spiritual.”⁹

However, this move to distance themselves from their roots and maintain *exclusive* spiritual rights to jihad is a classic example of the fallacy of selective (hermeneutical) attention or cherry-picking textual evidence. The truth is that there are violent and non-violent forms of jihad, commonly referred to as “lesser jihad” and “greater jihad.”

Greater Jihad vs. Lesser Jihad

“Greater jihad” refers to Muslims’ (non-violent) inner-struggle to obey Allah over their fleshly desires and “lesser jihad” refers to an (violent) external striving against the enemies of Allah. The Muslim advocates of a peaceful Qur’an and a peaceful Prophet of Allah (Muhammad) reject the latter for the former rewriting their own history.

Cook notes the most commonly cited tradition for “greater jihad”:

A number of fighters came to the Messenger of Allah [Muhammad], and he said: “You have done well in coming from the ‘lesser jihad’ to the ‘greater jihad.’ ” They said: “What

⁸ Al-Waqidi, op. cit., 582 (bold emphasis mine).

⁹ Cook, op. cit., 2.

is the ‘greater jihad’?” He said: “For the servant [of God] to fight his passions.”¹⁰

But is not this tradition simply “an attempt to radically reinterpret the originally aggressive intent of the Qur’an and the *hadith* literature [sayings of Muhammad] in order to focus on the waging of spiritual warfare”?¹¹ If Muslims desire to uphold the abrogation (repealing and replacing) of some their sacred texts (from which they elicit religious doctrine) with newer revelations, then the burden of proof is on them to warrant this *convenient* truth. The inconvenient truth is that the “lesser (violent) jihad” of the Qur’an comes in two modes—aggressive and defensive—commonly referred to as “offensive jihad” and “defensive jihad.”

Offensive Jihad vs. Defensive Jihad

A distinction must be made between “defensive jihad” and “offensive jihad” in light of the doctrine of abrogation: the hermeneutical (textual interpretation) practice of replacing an older revelation from Allah with a more recent revelation in order to avoid contradictions. For instance, Q9:29 (a.k.a. the “sword verse”) is said to abrogate Q2:256, which says, “Let there be no compulsion [forced conversions] in religion....” Therefore, Muslims are commanded to “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book [Jews, Sabians, and Christians], until they pay the *Jizyah* [humiliation tax] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued” (Q9:29).¹²

¹⁰ Al-Bayhaqi, *Zuhd*, p. 165 (no. 373); *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹ Cook, *op. cit.*, 35. “The Qur’an does not support a completely nonviolent interpretation of jihad. Nonetheless, as the conquests ceased in the eighth and ninth centuries, we begin to find evidence for a somewhat demilitarized conception of jihad. It is most likely that those who first began to explore the possibilities of jihad’s spiritual interpretation were the early Muslim ascetics.” *Ibid.*, 32-3.

¹² In comparison to the New Testament (NT), there is not one example of compulsion in religion (“forced conversions”) by Jesus or His disciples. This also is true of a just cause for waging war during the Christian Crusades (AD 1095 to 1291): “It was not legitimate to wage a war of aggrandizement or conversion.” Jonathan Riley-Smith, *What Were the Crusades?*, 4th ed.

Cook comments on the relationship between the “aggressiveness” of the early Islamic conquests and *sura* 9 by saying, “This *sura* was probably revealed toward the end of Muhammad’s life, just a few years before the conquests (making the final revelation a declaration of war), explains the aggressiveness of the early Muslims.”¹³

Also responding to the relationship between the Qur’an and jihad, Nick Chatrath, an expert on Islamic jihad, writes,

In his *Tafsir* [commentary on the Qur’an], al-Tabari views Q 9.29 as addressing believers and speaking against Jews and Christians, who are those who “do not obey as the people of Islam obey and do not follow what the people of Islam follow” (Tabari 1999, 6: 349). *According to al-Tabari, the verse was revealed to Muhammad during war against the Byzantines and led to preparations for a battle at Tabuk, on the Arab-Byzantine frontier. Again, there is no mention of self-defence.... In their descriptions of what happened before the raid on Tabuk, none of Ibn Ishaq (in his Sira) Muslim or al-Bukhari (in*

(San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 9. (It is also of interest to note that the concept of “holy war” never seemed to interest Jesus or His disciples. As Thomas F. Madden put it, “Christ had no armies at his disposal, nor did his early followers.” Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1. Christ kept no retinue or *coup d’état* at least not until the *parousia*, Christ’s second coming, and “the war of the great day of God” (Armageddon), as described in Revelation 16. In the meanwhile, Christians are commanded to live by a righteous and peaceful set of moral standards preached and lived by Christ, Himself. See Mt 5-7, 26. In the latter reference, Christ is betrayed by Judas and arrested by the Roman soldiers and the officers of the Jews at the Garden of Gethsemane. During this event, Simon Peter struck and cut off the right ear of the high priest’s slave. Jesus reprimands Peter: “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword” (26:52, NASB).)

Even if the doctrine of abrogation was not in effect, Ibn Ishaq records the disturbing proposition that Muhammad believed that Allah sent him “with this religion and he strove for it until men accepted it voluntarily or *by force*.” Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (New York: Oxford, 2002), 669 (bold emphasis mine). The manipulation of forced conversions is also made explicitly clear in the following testimonial account: *If you refuse we will fight doggedly.... We shall fight as long as we live till you turn to Islam.... We will fight not caring who we meet.... They came to us thinking they had no equal and we cut off their noses and ears with our fine polished Indian swords, driving them violently before us to the command of God and Islam until religion is established, just and straight.*” Ibid., 587-8 (bold emphases mine).

¹³ Cook, op. cit., 10.

*their hadith collections) state or imply that Muhammad was responding to a military action on the part of the Byzantines. Nor do they explain Q 9.29 any further in respect of context of revelation.*¹⁴

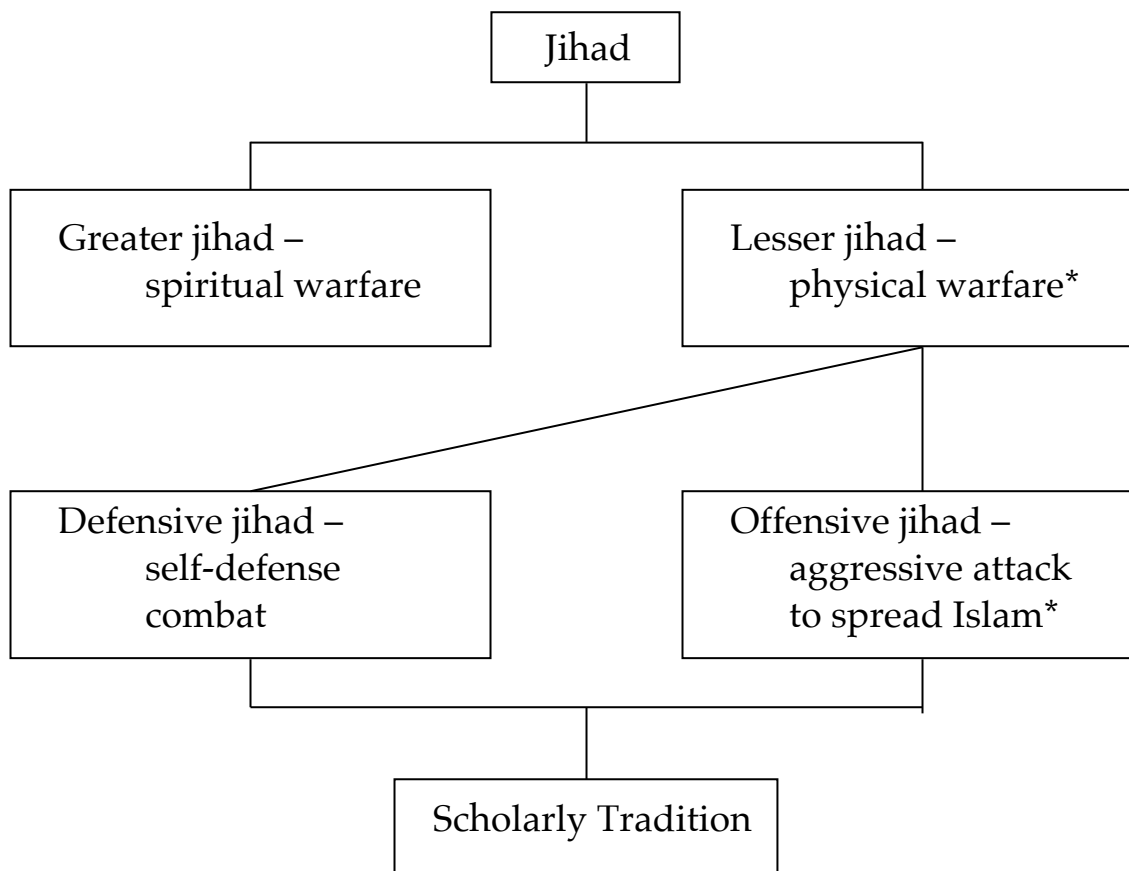
In other words, not only does al-Tabari's commentary on Q9:29 show that jihad (in this context) is not necessarily "defensive jihad" (striving in self-defense), the author of the earliest and most exhaustive biography on Muhammad, Ibn Ishaq, also remains reticent on the subject.

Moreover, the evidence that Muhammad was not "responding [in self-defense] to a military action on the part of the Byzantines" was also shared by the two great *hadith* compilers: Muslim and al-Bukhari. What Chatrath infers is that the "holy war" against the Byzantines was (deductively speaking) an aggressive attack or "offensive jihad."

When interpreting passages of violence found in the Qur'an, most modern-minded Muslims like Musharraf Hussain of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) hold to "defensive jihad," the notion that *only* when attacked by unbelievers did Muslims fight back in self-defense. This view stands in opposition to the interpretation of pre-modern-minded Muslims like Anjem Choudary, formerly of al-Muhajiroun, who hold fast to "offensive jihad," the notion that Muslims (in the name of Allah and in order to expand Islam) invaded the territory of non-aggressive unbelievers for booty. Perhaps an illustration of the various forms of jihad mentioned may be of some assistance:

¹⁴ Nick Chatrath, "Fighting the Unbeliever: Anjem Choudary, Musharraf Hussain and Premodern Sources on Sura 9.29, Abrogation and Jihad," in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21, no. 2 (March 2010), under "Religion," <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09596411003687852> (accessed July 31, 2012). Bold emphases mine.

Figure 1. Different forms of jihad. (An asterisk delineates qur’anic emphases.)¹⁵



Bat Ye’or, religious and political commentator, acknowledges that there are two means by which a Muslim wages jihad—by force and by peace:

Jihad can be waged by military means, as occurred during the period of the great Arab expansion (seventh to eighth century), and later by the Islamized Turks in Europe. The strategy of war provides for the destabilization at the frontiers of the *dar al-harb* [“house of war”]¹⁶ by irregular forces—burn villages, take hostages, or pillage and massacre in order to drive out the

¹⁵ I am indebted to my former professor Joshua Lingel for clarifying the distinctions between the different forms of jihad.

¹⁶ *Dar al-harb* is named after regions where Islam does not dominate. Conversely, *dar al-Islam*, “house of peace,” is named after regions where Islam does dominate.

inhabitants and facilitate the army's advance by gradual territorial encroachment.... *Jihad* can also be waged by peaceful means: proselytism, propaganda, and corruption which consists of gratuities "to win over hearts" (*ta'lif al-qulub*).¹⁷

Teleology of Jihad

One of the goals (*telos*) of jihad, according to Cook, is to "conquer and dominate non-Muslims."¹⁸ Ye'or concurs, but makes an even stronger statement.

She goes as far as saying that *the* goal of jihad is to ultimately rule the world:

The aim of *jihad* is to subjugate the peoples of the world to the law of Allah, decreed by his prophet Muhammad. Mankind is divided into two groups, Muslims and non-Muslims. The former compose the Islamic community, the *umma*, who own the territories of the *dar al-Islam* governed by Islamic law. Non-Muslims are *harbis*, inhabitants of the *dar al-harb*, the lands of war, so called because they are destined to come under Islamic jurisdiction, either by war (*harb*), or by the conversion of their inhabitants.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (London: Associated University Press, 1996), 40.

Madden adds, "*Dar al-Harb*, which included the Christian world, was the place in which Muslims were enjoined to wage *jihad* against unbelievers, capturing their lands and subjecting their peoples. In this way it was believed that the *Dar al-Harb* would shrink and the *Dar al-Islam* would correspondingly increase until it covered the entire world." Madden, *op. cit.*, 3.

¹⁸ Cook, *op. cit.*, 10.

¹⁹ Ye'or, *op. cit.*, 40. According to al-Waqidi, Muhammad believed he was commissioned by Allah to conquer the world and spread Islam: "**Know that Rasulullah** [Messenger of Allah—Muhammad] **intended to wage Jihad in Syria and desired that effort should be made in that direction but then Allah recalled him to Himself.** So be clear on this point, that I intend sending a Muslim army together with their families and dependents to Syria. **Rasulullah told me before his demise, "I was shown the Earth and saw its East and West and that my Ummah would soon conquer whatever I was shown."** Al-Waqidi, *op. cit.*, 7-8 (bold emphases mine).

Naturally, when the topic of waging war in the name of God comes up the question regarding the textual similarities between qur'anic violence and Old Testament (OT) violence also arises. Without having to engage in an exhaustive excursus on the subject, the main

Moreover, the notion of peace is merely temporary in Islam: “As the *jihad* is a permanent war, it excludes the idea of peace but authorizes temporary truces related to the political situation (*muhadana*).”²⁰

Muhammad’s Violence

Before we get to the topic of Islamic conquests via “offensive jihad,” it is imperative to investigate acts of violence vis-à-vis the life of the prophet of Allah in order to better understand Islam. According to the oldest and most exhaustive *sira* (biography of Muhammad), Ibn Ishaq writes that the Prophet of Allah mandated the murder of an old man just because he was critical of him. The prophet asked, “ ‘Who will deal with this rascal for

distinction between the two is that the purpose of the conquests of the OT were two-fold: (1) to judge the religious recalcitrants (e.g., the Canaanite clans, Dt 7:1-4), and (2) to keep Israel—God’s chosen people—holy (“set apart,” Lv 20:26), as well as fostering their national well-being (Dt 5:33; 10:13). Also, keep in mind that Israel was meant to be a missional presence to the world. In other words, because the Lord loves His creation, including unbelievers, He chose the Hebrew prophets and Israel to be a moral and spiritual “light” to the people around them, so He could woo them via Israel into His family. Conversely, the purpose of the conquests of Islam—enforced by Allah, the Qur’an, and the prophet Muhammad—was to propagate the Muslim faith in order to expand *dar al-Islam*. “The real problem with Islam, then,” according to William Lane Craig, “is not that it has got the wrong moral theory; it’s that it has got the wrong God. If the Muslim thinks that our moral duties are constituted by God’s commands, then I agree with him. But Muslims and Christians differ radically over God’s nature. Christians believe that God is all-loving, while Muslims believe that God loves only Muslims. Allah has no love for unbelievers and sinners. Therefore, they can be killed indiscriminately.” William Lane Craig, “Slaughter of the Canaanites,” Writings: Q & A #16, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/slaughter-of-the-canaanites> (accessed July 31, 2012).

²⁰ Ye’or, op. cit., 40. What is also unknown to most non-Muslims, and even some Muslims, is that jihad is a central tenet of the Islamic faith (regardless of whether Shia or Sunni Muslims hold to jihad as a major pillar of Islam). Al-Waqidi records the list of obligations [besides *shahadah*] made by Khalid: “You must establish Salah [prayers], pay Zakah [giving of alms], perform Hajj to the Sacred House [pilgrimage to Ka’ba in Mecca], *wage Jihad against those who deny Allah*, order the good, forbid the evil, befriend for the sake of Allah and make enemies for the sake of Allah.” (Al-Waqidi, op. cit., 304. Bold emphasis mine.) One may argue that to use “jihad” in this context would be to commit the fallacy of equivocation, since “jihad” has multiple meanings, thus it may refer to using literature to spread the message of Islam. However, I reiterate that *jihad bis-Sayf*, striving with the sword, is the primary usage of “jihad” in al-Waqidi’s book, *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*, which is the germane text under discussion. In other words, to “wage Jihad against those who deny Allah” means to forcefully attack non-Muslims.

me?' . . . whereupon Salim b. 'Umayr . . . went forth and killed him."²¹ But this act of aggression was not an isolated incident. Ibn Ishaq also records the killing of a female poet who was critical of Muhammad. When Muhammad discovered what she had said about him, he ordered her execution: " 'Who will rid me of Marwan's daughter?' 'Umayr b. 'Adiy al-Khatmi who was with him heard him, and that very night he went to her house and killed her."²²

Muhammad was also no stranger to assassinations: "The apostle said, 'Kill any Jews that fall into your power.' Thereupon Muhayyisa b. Mas'ud leapt upon Ibn Sunayna, a Jewish merchant with whom they had social and business relations, and killed him."²³ One of the most macabre of the murders (tortures?) was of an old woman, Umma Qirfa, who was cruelly killed by "putting a rope to her two legs and to two camels and driving them until they rent her in two."²⁴ Another gruesome assassination was of a blind man (in one eye): "As soon as the *badu* [one who lives in the desert] was asleep and snoring I got up and killed him in a most horrible way than any man has been killed. I put the end of my bow in his sound eye, then I bore down on it until I forced it out at the back of his neck."²⁵ Upon returning to Medina, Muhammad asked him his news. When Abu 'Ubayda b. al-Jarrah told the prophet what happened, Muhammad *blessed* him.²⁶

Muhammad also brutally beheaded 600 to 900 unarmed Jewish captives after the battle of the Trench. What is telling is that this heinous act was done *after* the Jews had surrendered. The ultimatum before them was to submit or to be slaughtered.

By now, one ought to have a better understanding of how Muhammad's violence has shaped Islam's "offensive jihad," and how Islam's "offensive jihad" has shaped the Qur'an.

Early Islamic Conquests

²¹ Ibn Ishaq, op. cit., 675.

²² Ibid., 676.

²³ Ibid., 369.

²⁴ Ibid., 665.

²⁵ Ibid., 674.

²⁶ Ibid., 675.

The (pre-modern) Islamic conquests lasted 100 years, from AD 632–732. These conquests are also known as the Arab conquests of non-Arab peoples, which began the year Muhammad died. Due to space constraints, I will only discuss the *early* Islamic conquests under the first two caliphs—“successors”—Abu Bakr and Umar ibn Khattab.

Furthermore, I will be scrutinizing the evidence for the early Islamic conquests with what many Muslims consider to be the most reliable multivolume set of *tarikhs* (history of Islam), *The History of al-Tabari*, and al-Waqidi’s tome, *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*. The four primary texts I have chosen to interact with include al-Tabari’s *The Conquest of Arabia* (vol. 10), *The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine* (vol. 12), *The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt* (vol. 13), as well as al-Waqidi’s *The Islamic Conquest of Syria*. I commence with volume 10.

The Conquest of Arabia

Al-Tabari reports the first year of Islamic despotism, from AD 632 to 633, under the reign of Abu Bakr, the first caliph (political successor to Muhammad). Abu Bakr was set on quelling an insurrection of *riddah*, apostasy.

According to Fred Donner, Abu Bakr’s purpose for the *Riddah Wars* was to gain complete control of Arabia for Allah under Islam:

Abu Bakr’s objective was very simple: to extend the hegemony of the Islamic state over the entire population of Arabia and, in particular, over all the nomadic tribal groups—for we can be fairly certain that he understood the importance of maintaining firm control over powerful nomadic groups if the state was to survive. His response to the various ridda movements was, in part to send troops to subdue them.... In addition to these military measures, Abu Bakr also resorted to diplomacy to accomplish his aim of bringing all of Arabia under Islamic control.... The careers of Muhammad and of Abu Bakr thus

*together form a single phase in the continuing story of the rise of the Islamic state to power in Arabia.*²⁷

In other words, Abu Bakr was faithfully continuing what Muhammad started—the global domination of Islam.

Al-Tabari records the horrific events regarding the apostasy of Hawazin, Sulaym, and Amir: “He [Banu ‘Amir] mutilated those who had waged aggression against Islam by burning them with fire, smashing them with rocks, throwing them down from mountains, casting them headlong into wells, and piercing them with arrows.”²⁸ Notice that “waging war against Islam” is presumptuously interpreted as not only a physical rebellion, but also a politico-religious insurrection in the form of, say, opposing Allah or, in this case, apostasy. This formal fallacy of presumption, which conveniently reinterprets the evidence in order to wage (physical) war against those who wage war against Islam (by denouncing their faith), fails to acquit Muslims of a greater fallacy—the moral fallacy of “offensive jihad.”

Al-Tabari also chronicles the directives from Abu Bakr to Khalid to kill those who oppose Allah, as well as the gruesome results of the massacre:

Take seriously the command of God and be not remiss; for you shall not be victorious over anyone who fought the Muslims unless you fight him and, by punishing him as an example, warn another. *So kill whomever you like of those who showed enmity to God or who opposed Him, [if] you think there will be some benefit in doing so.* Hence [Khalid] remained in al-Buzakhah for a month, going round about it and returning to it in pursuit of those [evildoers]; *so that some of them were burned and some cut to pieces and some smashed with rocks and some thrown from mountaintops.*²⁹

²⁷ Fred M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 86-7 (bold emphases mine).

²⁸ Al-Tabari, “The Conquest of Arabia,” 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76-7 (bold emphases mine).

What is even more disturbing is that the Battle of Hadramawt (AD 633), against apostates, was one of the cruelest battles recorded in Islamic history:

According to Abu Ishaq: After (al-Ash'ath) opened the gate, the Muslims rushed upon [al-Nujayr], not letting any combatant go, but rather *killing them by cutting off their heads while in captivity. One thousand women of al-Nujayr and al-Khandaq were counted up*, and guards were placed among the captives and booty.³⁰

It is typically the case that what is proposed in theory is not always practiced (on the battlefield). Al-Tabari says that Abu Bakr's proclamation vis-à-vis rules of war included the sanction to "not indulge in mutilation . . . [and] kill neither a young child nor an old man nor a woman...."³¹ Al-Tabari also says,

There arrived before al-Muhajir two singing women. One of them sang reviling the Apostle of God, *so he cut off her hand and pulled her front tooth*. Then Abu Bakr wrote to him: "I have learned what you did regarding the woman who sang and piped with abuse of the Apostle of God. *If you had not beaten me to (punish her), I would have ordered you to kill her, for the punishment [for abuse] of prophets is not like [other] punishments.*"³²

Not only does Abu Bakr—the first caliph to continue Muhammad's legacy—violate his own proclamation against killing women, he is also guilty of promoting mutilation (viz. cutting off limbs and pulling teeth).

The scholarly evidence is overwhelming that the early Islamic conquest of Arabia was spread via "offensive jihad." Thus, one is justified in believing with *evidential* certainty that Islam is not a religion of peace.

³⁰ Ibid., 186 (bold emphasis mine).

³¹ Ibid., 16.

³² Ibid., 191-2 (bold emphases mine).

Now I move to briefly examine the evidence for the early Islamic conquest of Syria via al-Waqidi and the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah via al-Tabari. I commence with the latter.

The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah

In volume twelve of *The History of al-Tabari*, al-Tabari writes that thousands of men were mercilessly slaughtered at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah for simply being “polytheists”:

The polytheists lost heart and were defeated. Al-Jalnus stood on the barrier and called upon the Persians to cross it.... As for those who were chained together, they panicked and threw themselves, one after the other, into al-'Atiq. *The Muslims stabbed them with their spears, and none of them escaped to tell the story. They numbered thirty thousand.* Dirar b. al-Kattab seized the royal flag and was given thirty thousand [dirhams] in exchange for it; its value was one million and two hundred thousand. *The Muslims killed in the battle ten thousand men, over and above those whom they had killed on the previous day.*³³

The Islamic Conquest of Syria

The Islamic conquest of Syria refers to the region of Greater Syria. Arab Muslim (militant) forces pressed on the southern borders of Syria prior to the death of the Muhammad. They began their invasion in AD 634 under the first caliph, Abu Bakr, and ended their last invasion in AD 638 under the second caliph, Umar b. Khattab.

Robert Hoyland, scholar and historian of medieval history of the Middle East, argues that the northern expansion of Islam into Syria was enacted by the first two caliphs, but it was envisioned by Muhammad: “That Muhammad himself initiated this war effort, campaigning north in

³³ Al-Tabari, “The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine,” in *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 12, trans. Yohanan Friedmann (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 124 (bold emphases mine).

the direction of Syria, is clearly stated by Muslim and non-Muslim writers." Hoyland concludes that "we might envisage the first caliphs as extending this policy, effectively running a '*jihad state*,' a politico-religious entity comprising fighting men of different religious affiliations whose overriding aim was the expansion of the state in the name of God."³⁴ To put this in a slightly more polemical tone, one cannot argue that Muhammad's successors took it upon themselves to spread Islam by the sword without the consent of their leader. According to Muslim and non-Muslim sources, Muhammad, himself, was the mastermind behind global Islamic expansion via "offensive jihad."³⁵ Thus, it can only be said with *psychological* certainty, not *evidential* certainty, that Muhammad was a prophet of peace who never instigated unprovoked attacks.

Ye'or adds, "Consequently, the whole Gaza region up to Cesarea was sacked and devastated in the [Syrian] campaign of 634. Four thousand Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan peasants who defended their land were massacred."³⁶

According to al-Waqidi, Abu Bakr summoned the Yamanis for militant jihad:

All Praise to Allah alone and salutations to His Messenger. Know that I intend sending an army to Syria to expel the Disbelievers and those who do not tread the straight path from there. Whoever amongst you intends to wage Jihad should hasten to obey Allah and make preparations for Allah says: "*Go forth lightly armed or heavily armed and wage Jihad with your wealth and lives in the path of Allah . . . [9:41].*"³⁷

³⁴ Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, Inc. 1997), 554-5 (italics emphasis his).

³⁵ E.g. *Chron. Byz.-Arab* 741, §13; Hoyland, op. cit., 555.

³⁶ Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam*, 44.

³⁷ Al-Waqidi, op. cit., 8-9 (italic emphasis his). What is important to note is that "offensive jihad" *in the name of Allah* is intended as a normative practice, according to Q9:41. In comparison, Christian "holy war" (*bellum sacrum*), in the name of God, is not prescriptive in the NT. But what about the Christian Crusades? Most Protestant Christians believe that just because the Crusades were considered a "just cause" in the eyes of the Pope via *ex cathedra*, papal infallibility, that does not necessarily mean the NT condones it (even though some Protestant Christians, myself included, believe the initial Crusades were justified, not for the sake of

At what is considered The Great Victory for the early Muslims, al-Waqidi chronicles Malik's comments: "The Romans displayed great patience but lost nerve at sunset. They fled, followed by the Muslims who captured or killed as they pleased. About 100,000 Romans were killed, a similar amount were captured and a similar amount drowned in an-Naqusah Creek."³⁸

The final primary text I will succinctly explore vis-à-vis the early Islamic conquests is al-Tabari's *The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt*. However, due to space constraints I have limited my research to the conquest of Persia.

The Conquest of Persia

Al-Tabari reports on Islam's enormous victory at the Battle of Jalula' al-Waqi'ah:

The unbelievers [Persians] started fleeing right and left, away from the clearance facing their trench. They perished in (the iron stakes) which they had set up against the Muslims. Their horses were injured and they had to return on foot, pursued by the Muslims. Only an insignificant number got away. ***That day God killed one hundred thousand of them.*** The whole clearing was covered with corpses, in all directions."³⁹

As I have discussed earlier, global domination via "offensive jihad" entails the option of forced conversions or death. But conversion to Islam was not the only thing that was forced. Muslim men forced women, as part of their booty, to be their sex slaves:

penitential indulgences for the first crusaders, but for the sake of "the liberation of the people, the baptized members of the Eastern churches, and especially the Church of Jerusalem, from Muslim domination and tyranny...."). Riley-Smith, op. cit., 14.

³⁸ Al-Waqidi, op. cit., 365.

³⁹ Al-Tabari, "The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt," in *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 13, trans. Gautier H. A. Juynboll (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 39 (bold emphasis mine).

When al-Qa'qa' was dispatched by Hashim in pursuit of the Persians who had run away, he overtook Mihran in Khaniqin, where he killed him.... Al-Qa'qa' made prisoners of war and sent some of them to Hashim; so the latter and his men allocated these among themselves as part of the booty. *The women among them were taken as concubines and bore their Muslim masters' children.*⁴⁰

Islamic Conquests vs. Christian Crusades

Because of limited space I am unable to systematically enumerate all of the killings by Muslims during the conquests, which would have increased the death toll to thousands upon thousands more than I have documented. According to my calculations, Muslims killed about a half-million people in only four years, from AD 634-638. If I were to include all the *non-Muslim* deaths from all the Islamic conquests mentioned (*Conquests of Arabia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt*), the death toll jumps to over 770,000 in only 10 years, from AD 632-642. (Keep in mind I am using extremely conservative numbers.) A more precise count may put the deaths closer to 1,000,000. Furthermore, the goal of this article is an assessment of only the *early* Islamic conquests. In other words, I have only recorded the deaths of 1/10 of the Islamic conquests by "offensive jihad."

In comparison to the Christian Crusades, a high-end, estimated poll puts the death count of Jews, Muslims, and Christians at around the same number, 1,000,000. According to John S. Hittell, "In the two centuries of this warfare [Christian Crusades] one million persons had been slain..."⁴¹ So, the unprecedented destruction and domination of the *early* Islamic conquests, which lasted 10 years, vastly overshadows the damage done by the Christian Crusades, which lasted twenty times longer. And, let us not forget that the Crusades commenced with the *casus belli*, justification for war, reacting to Islamic domination of Jerusalem and the Holy Land. As it is widely understood, the Crusades were launched via Pope Urban II as a response from the Byzantine emperor Alexius I for assistance in preventing the expansion of Muslim Turks in Anatolia (Turkey).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 43 (bold emphasis mine).

⁴¹ John S. Hittell, *A Brief History of Culture* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007), 137.

Ye'or adds that Christian persecution also played a major part in instigating the Crusades: "Persecution under caliph al-Hakim (996-1021), and later under the Seljuks, provoked the Crusades and brought about the return of intolerance and fanaticism."⁴² She goes on to say that this intolerance was reinstated in Antioch, and it grew from there:

*In Antioch around 1058, Greeks and Armenians were converted by force, torture being used to persuade the recalcitrants. After the defeat of the Mongols by the Mamluks in Syria (1260), the Christians of Damascus were pillaged and slaughtered, others were reduced to slavery, and churches were destroyed and burned down.... In 1261, the slaves of Malik Salih, governor of Mosul, looted the Christians and **killed anyone who did not become a Muslim. In 1264, Jews and Christians in Cairo paid heavy ransoms to escape being burned alive....**"⁴³*

At this point an objection may be raised. Calling out Islam for its militant jihad is cherry-picking the evidence. What about the massacres, destructions, and conquests of other cultures? Ye'or gives an insightful reply to this objection:

It must be stressed, however, that massacre or slavery of the vanquished peoples, burning, pillage, destruction, and the claiming of tribute were the common practices during the period under consideration of every army whether Greek, Latin, or Slav. *Only the excess, the regular repetition and the systematization of the destruction, codified by theology, distinguishes the jihad from other wars of conquest or depredation.*⁴⁴

In other words, Islamic jihad is not like other modes of conquest. "Offensive jihad" is extreme in its destruction and despotism because it has theology (the Qur'an) to back it up. As Cook succinctly notes, "The text

⁴² Ye'or, op. cit., 89.

⁴³ Ibid., 89-90 (bold emphases mine).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 52 (bold emphasis mine).

[Qur'an] provides the religious basis for the doctrine of jihad that would result in the great Muslim conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries."⁴⁵

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that the politico-religious catalyst to the *early* Islamic conquests was in fact accomplished through "offensive jihad," which is motivated by the Qur'an and corroborated by *sira* and *tarikh*. I have also shown that the term "holy war" is still a legitimate translation of "jihad" and its primary use is militant. I have also demonstrated that the goal of jihad is to conquer and dominate non-Muslims on a global scale. That is, jihad—as a pillar of Islam—has its scope set on world-domination. Furthermore, I have shown that the *early* Islamic conquests—within a 10-year period—claimed the lives of around one million non-Muslims, according to the *tarikhs* of al-Tabari and al-Waqidi. Lastly, I have demonstrated that the gravity of "offensive jihad" is unique to Islam. The Qur'an and the *sunna* [teachings and practices] of Muhammad are the basis for "the great Muslim conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries."⁴⁶ And one is warranted in believing with *evidential* certainty that Muhammad's violence has indeed shaped Islam's jihad.

⁴⁵ Cook, op. cit., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 11.

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Questions

1. Are Muslims more obedient worshippers than Christians? In one respect they may be. Most Muslims take seriously the importance of memorizing the Scriptures. If Christians are going to “use God’s mighty weapons . . . to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning [e.g., “Allah begetteth not, nor is He begotten...” Q112:3] and to destroy false arguments [e.g., Islam is a religion of peace]” (2 Cor 10:4, NLT), we need to study and know our Bible better than our Muslim friends.
2. Are we praying that God would use us as He intended to use Israel to be a moral and spiritual “light” to the world?
3. Are we not seeing religious persecution as an opportunity for spiritual flourishing?
4. Can we name three attributes of Yahweh that make Him distinct from Allah?