

LANGUAGE

from the author

To many of us in the western world, Islam and its beliefs remain a vast, shrouded, mystery. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent War on Terror have helped to ingrain Americans with the image of a religion whose sole belief is violence in the name of God. The Muslim term associated with that violence is Jihad, narrowly interpreted by our American media as "holy war." I attempted to circumvent this definition by exploring the rich and often beautiful aspects of this complex word, suggesting that there is more to the term- and Islam- than what we currently understand.

from the professor

"Understanding Jihad" was written for an assignment, in WRT 105, that asked students to analyze a single word and to look at the stories certain words tell- when we use them and when we hear them. John's paper is a quest to understand this word that has become so important in contemporary discourse. I was impressed with the energy of his research, the way he positioned himself in an academic inquiry, and the way he constantly prodded at his sources as he strove to make some kind of sense out of all the rhetoric surrounding "Jihad." - Jeff Simmons

Understanding Jihad

Asghar Ali Engineer, commonly referred to as Dr. Engineer, once said, "The greatest Jihad is to conquer ones greed and selfishness." This often controversial word can mean many things to many people

by John Jedzinak

the it. factor

In the first paragraph the author clearly defines the background of the issue. It is important to explicitly state the issue at hand at the beginning of the paper. The quote that inspired this essay was said by Asghar Ali Engineer, more commonly known as "Dr. Engineer," who is seen below.



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Great use of a primary source (the Qu'ran). Going to an original text rather than another author's work gives a writer the opportunity to formulate their own analysis and connect it back to their thesis.

the it. factor

Stuck on a topic to write about? Try thinking of some new ideas: watch the news, read a magazine, open up today's newspaper. That is what John did, and it works.

The concept of Jihad was not widely known in the western world before the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Since then, the word has been woven into what our media and government feed us along with notions of Terrorism, Suicide Bombings, Hamas, Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, and now, Jihad. Our society hears exhortations resounding from the Middle East calling the people to rise up in Jihad and beat back the imperialist Americans. Yet, if we try to peel back all of these complex layers of information we can we attempt to find out what Jihad really means. Webster's Dictionary defines Jihad as "a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty or a crusade for a principle or belief" (1). Often, media depicts Jihad in the same manner—as a vicious clash between two very different peoples, each of whom believes that righteousness, and in many cases God, is on their side. From this interpretation and our daily media intake, one may reasonably assume that Jihad refers to nothing more than violent acts, or "holy wars."

While there is no precise definition of the term, the meaning of Jihad is far more complex. In fact, the term Jihad generally refers to the struggle one must undertake as one "strive[s] in the path of God" (Church 110). That struggle is defined both externally and internally. As so, they are classified in terms of an external struggle with enemies or non believers, or an internal struggle with oneself to reject greed and temptation. While popular opinion has been misconstrued to see Jihad as a malevolent, violent action; a serious investigation of the term's historical and religious background reveals a multi-defined word.

An examination of the Jihad's etymological context will lend a keener insight into why the word is often associated with violence. Pre-Islamic Arabia was populated with tribes that often engaged in civil warfare because it was the tradition and norm to settle disputes violently rather than through peaceful means. Commenting on this, Asghar Engineer, a learned western Muslim wrote:

Violent Jihad as a struggle against one's enemies has its root in [these] situations. When the Islamic religion spread over the region, Jihad became a religious tenet and assumed the form of a peaceful, internal struggle to strive for the good and reject the evil in one's action. Violent, external conflict was never rejected from the definition; it merely became one interpretation.

Thus, the term was essentially divided into an internal and external struggle. The internal struggle was, however, always meant to be the nobler, finer action. It was more in line with peaceful mainstream Muslim practice, including "observing the Five Pillars of Islam and seeing the internal struggle as a complete way of life that should pervade and individuals day to day affairs" (Engineer). The great importance of this inner struggle led to its being dubbed

as the “greater Jihad” (Church 111).

However, Jihad’s age old association with violence was nearly unavoidable. Struggle can rather easily be translated into a call to conduct an external Jihad for the Islamic faith. For example, a verse in the Qu’ran states, “go forth, light armed and heavy armed, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the way of Allah” (Church 111). This verse clearly pairs Jihad (“strive”) with external violence (“go forth, light armed and heavy armed”) (Church 111). Indeed, violent Jihad was an obvious necessity because the Muslim community had always been a religious and political faction. Many lost their lives to spread and defend the newfound faith in Arabia and eventually to locations far beyond. Jihad’s association with violence and religious duty made it an ideal expression for Muslims to justify “lesser Jihad,” or the notion of external conflict, centered on the idea of spreading the faith (Church 112).

Interpretations of Jihad have fluctuated greatly through history, widening the rift between its internal and external components. Civil wars among Muslim communities over doctrinal disputes saw violent Jihad used on both sides. The external, violent side of Jihad steadily took on a more pronounced role. This role became all the more desirable with the onset of the European imperialism. From the time of the Crusades to our modern era, internal Jihad has been overshadowed by the ever present violent Jihad to purge the Muslim domain of intruding, evil, elements. Instances of military Jihad during this time represent efforts to “defend the faith” against perceived foreign threats. The actions of September 11th can be seen as the height of violent Jihad and how it has gone so far as to completely overshadow the beauty behind the real word. External Jihad, as an Islamic religious concept, was always meant to be defensive, recognized as a struggle to overcome an invading evil (Juergensmeyer 81). In this case, the fine lines in this logic become very blurred. At what point does the external struggle to “overcome” non-believers become a vicious, calculated terror attack that does not in and of itself overcome its enemies? This extreme sense of violent Jihad has eclipsed the inner struggle that Jihad truly represents and has become, for those with misguided information about Islam, its sole definition.

So far, we have seen the roots and evolution of “Jihad” through history but the grounds for its present usage must still be discovered. My understanding of Jihad has itself fluctuated greatly since I originally heard and spoke the word. As a student who loves history, I first came to know of the word Jihad, in my studies of the rise and expansion of Islam in the seventh century. Central in Islam’s military success, Jihad was clearly portrayed in my (western) textbooks as a term for a violent holy war—a righteous crusade against all those who did not accept the faith of Islam. Jihad took an assuredly aggressive tone as judged from my classes and texts. Each and every successful campaign the Muslims made against their hostile neighbors were labeled as just wars aimed at liberating their populations of heathenism and spreading the true religion. Reading some histories of the Crusades, I was given the biased image that the noble Crusaders were struggling to contain the ravenous, violent Muslim Jihad. As a westerner, reading from a western textbook, I was convinced from an early age that Jihad was nothing but an evil force that compelled Muslims to fight not just against each other but against us as well.

This early inception of us versus them foreshadows our present confusion with the term Jihad. After the September 11th attacks, the media was quick to perceive Jihad as the violent conflict that we have, as a culture, been schooled to accept (Juergensmeyer 82). Through direct means, the media plays off this distorted understanding of Jihad and feeds us more of



the **it.** factor

“So far”= good use of transition phrases. Transition words help to move from one idea to the next or recap old material before moving on to another concept.



the **it.** factor

Using personal perspective can place yourself in the heart of the issue. By doing so, it allows readers to relate or at least gain a sense of where the writer is coming from when they wrote the piece.



the it. factor

In addition, bringing in other peoples' perspectives can further enhance your proposition. Here the author used Bill O'Reilly and Mark Juergensmeyer to reinforce his previous analysis, in which he gained credibility for his argument.



the it. factor

Again, great use of quotes. Make sure that you pick meaningful quotes from authors that reinforce your argument. This is crucial to how the piece will read and how readers will interpret it.

these repetitive images. Not even the government is spared from the cloak of cultural bias, as President George W. Bush inadvertently likened the terrorist actions to a crusade, a truly violent and holy war. In addition, the famed Fox News speaker Bill O' Reilly announced that he was going to launch a "fierce Jihad" against media executives he disliked (Rogers-Melnick). These confused applications of the word have helped to ingrain society's own misconceptions of Jihad, making violence and distrust its only definition.

While their mistaken interpretations are prevalent amongst non-Muslim westerners, many Muslims who live outside the Arab world often have a drastically different notion of what Jihad means. To them, external struggle is important, but violent struggle is very much a pointless deviation from what external Jihad can mean. They place a huge emphasis on declaring external Jihad for social justice:

Thus any one striving for social justice and working for ameliorating the plight of the poor is like a warrior in the way of Allah. Money is to be spent on poor, widows, needy, and paying off the debt of the indebted. These are all weaker sections of society. It is thus a great merit to help these poorer and weaker sections and to work for them in as meritorious a manner as is waging Jihad in the way of Allah.

It is important to remember that much of the conflict in the world, notably the Middle East, is because of poverty, hunger and unemployment. This approach to external Jihad would appear to be on the right track in solving these issues without violence and terror. It is interesting to note that the first indication of violent external Jihad occurred in Qur'anic verse 4:77, as a way of defending the rights of the weak, the old men, women and children. Engineer adds, "Terrorism which involves the shedding of innocent blood can never be elevated to the category of Jihad in any sense of the Qur'anic term" (4:77). These Muslims note that peace is far more fundamental to Islam than war. Therefore, the "struggle" of the Jihad should not be a violent one, but one that asserts peace through social justice.

Always eager to gain a full perspective, I conducted an interview among the Muslim college student community to shed further light on Jihad and get more interpretations. Nina Husaq, an upperclassman, proved immensely helpful in providing additional input in clarifying Jihad. Husaq stated her feelings about Jihad by writing:

[Jihad] is a term that is misunderstood by both Muslims and non-Muslims throughout much of the world. It is misunderstood by non-Muslims in the West as a strictly violent, unjust, religious warfare—which is far from the truth. ...[G]eneral ignorance, media, and the lack of Muslim participation in society, media and politics has contributed to this problem. (1)

It is clear that many Americans immediately accept certain charged words as being inherently "good," or "bad," without even knowing much about the word or concept. In the same way that words like "capitalism" and "democracy" are automatically assumed to be universally justified principles, while terms like "Jihad" have been crafted by the media and our cultural bias to stand for distrust and blind violence. Husaq also noted that Muslims view Jihad "innocently" as one would view prayer or charity. She related a story of two American Muslim girls whose parents named them Jihad. From our western perspective, we would seriously question the notion of these Muslim American parents naming their children after what we see to be violent, unjust warfare. It turns out that the parents named them after the

real meaning of the word: inner struggle. Clearly, the implications of our misunderstanding of Jihad are striking (Husaq).

Another poignant thing revealed in my dialogue with Ms. Husaq was the fact that many Muslims also misused the term throughout the world to achieve political aims. Not only is our western media and culture perpetuating violent Jihad, but Muslims themselves are partly at fault. Husaq considered the fact that Muslims in countries with repressive governments and few participatory outlets express their malcontent through one of the few channels available—religious sentiment. They base their actions on religious certainty but in most cases, it is simply a political act that is wrapped with Islamic terminology. We in the West “gobble that up.” We concluded that it is imperative that Americans be aware of their unsupported assumptions, especially on Jihad and seek out authoritative sources for information. Only then can we conceive an open minded understanding of Jihad.

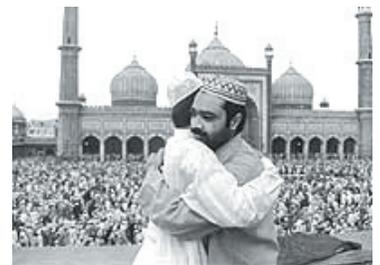
Building on my etymological research of Jihad and interview, it is easy for me to see how the noble concept of Jihad became perverted by both dishonorable Muslims and uninformed non-Muslim Westerners, notably the media. The corruption of the word into nothing but violent “holy war” came about from clearly non-religious reasons like money and power. In this spirit, our modern terrorists or resistance fighters loosely and ambiguously employ the religious justification of the Jihad to satisfy their own unreligious, ulterior motives, namely their own fierce loyalty and willing defense of their homeland. It would be beneficial to note that we ascribe a single word to this kind of behavior in the West: patriotism. Once again, we can see how misunderstanding and bias can skew noble deeds into dirty crimes.

As my understanding of Jihad adjusted from a concept of violent holy war (a comprehension that was bolstered by the terror attacks on September 11th) to a more accurate “struggle,” it became clear that the physical struggle with one’s enemies is always more appealing than the inward, reflective struggle with oneself. Thus, the violent Jihad is used far more often than any other definition of the word, misleading not only our American public but Muslims as well. External, violent Jihad has become so much of a norm in the world that it is quite easy for terrorist resistance fighters like Osama Bin Laden to commit acts of violence without facing ostracization (Witham). To a large portion of the Arab world, he is fighting an intruder who introduces sickness into the land and ensures that they remain technologically, economically, and politically backward. This kind of situation begs for a reason to engage in external Jihad and expunge the evil elements. That reason is found in people and organizations like Bin Laden who misconstrue Jihad and prolong its misconception in both the Arab world and the Western world.

Clearly then, there is an external (violent) and an internal (passive) divergence to Jihad, the most important conflict is truly the struggle with oneself. This struggle is to, as originally quoted by Engineer, curb one’s perpetual inclination towards “greed and selfishness” (Engineer). This is both the more challenging and powerful of the Jihad’s two interpretations and is subsequently the more ignored. Many so-called Islamic terrorist or resistance groups will avoid the all important struggle with oneself and one’s moral responsibility to one another and use Jihad as a vehicle for accomplishing violent acts. While they may deem these to be in the best interests of their country and their religion, they almost always bring further misunderstanding and anger for an already often misunderstood culture. The largest reason for this issue is that its definition has failed to attune to changing times. While its etymological

the it. factor

Beginning to recap on the main points and focus on the analytical aspect is great to see at this point of the piece. Also this section furthers the main thesis while adding its own concepts, truly making it an excellent example of analysis.





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This is a great way to end this kind of paper, leaving the reader with something that they have learned as well as a way to address a certain problem of society. Sometimes a writer doesn't need to restate the thesis explicitly in the conclusion, and here is a great example of how to close a piece in that manner.

origins are found in violent intertribal conflict, it's more accurately defined as our internal struggle with our lesser, destructive tendencies. This internal struggle discourages external violence against others. Yet throughout history, this word has been used to justify violent acts against others. Rigid practice of Jihad perpetuates the violence that its true definition is designed to stop.

I believe that the way out of the struggle is to break free of cultural biases and misconceptions. We must be careful not to develop a hierarchy of world superiority where Islamic culture lies beneath us lest we continue to misunderstand such an exquisite word like Jihad. We must also not consider the media at face value. As Americans, we must approach Jihad with sensitivity, an admission of our ignorance on the subject, and an earnest attempt to properly educate ourselves.

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John Jedzinak, hailing from Queens, New York, is in his first year at Syracuse with a major in Architecture. When he is not swimming or drawing, you can catch John - well, you can't, he is always busy! In his free time he likes to watch his favorite movie *Pulp Fiction*, his favorite television show *The Simpsons*, or listen to his favorite band, the one and only Pink Floyd. As for his experience at Syracuse, he loves it...especially when the hill has no snow.