

Islam – Shi‘a

The article will examine the origins of the Shi‘as and discuss their distinctive perspective on war. The term Shi‘a refers to the party of ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad. The Shi‘as claimed that ‘Ali was the only legitimate successor (imam) to the Prophet Muhammad having been explicitly designated by him at Ghadir Khum and other occasions. The Shi‘as further restricted leadership of the community to the family (*ahl al-bayt*) of the Prophet. Such leadership was designated by the term imam and is passed on from father to blood successor through a mode of conferring titled *nass*.

With the coming of ‘Ali to power in 656 CE, Shi‘ism emerged as an effective religious movement. The massacre of Husayn, the son of ‘Ali, and his forces at Kerbala during his uprising against the Caliph Yazid in 681 was an important milestone in Shi‘i history as it affirmed notions of injustices endured by the progeny of the Prophet and exacerbated a passion for martyrdom. Husayn’s activist movement was followed by other militant movements like those of Mukhtar b. ‘Ubayd al-Thaqafi (d. 687) and Zayd b. ‘Ali (d. 740), the grandson of Husayn.

Shi‘i Theology and Jurisprudence

Shi‘i theology and jurisprudence took definitive shape in the times of the fifth and sixth imams, Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 733-737) and Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 765). The later, in particular, was largely responsible for the construction of a Shi‘i legal edifice and the formulation of the Shi‘i doctrine of the imamate. The true imam, al-Sadiq stated, had to be divinely appointed. The imam was also believed to be infallible hence empowered to provide authoritative interpretation of Islamic revelation. Designation and infallibility

were complemented by the imam's possession of special knowledge that was either transmitted from the Prophet or derived from inherited scrolls.

Since they realized the futility of armed revolts against the political authority, the imams, starting with al-Sadiq, taught the doctrine of dissimulation (*taqiyya*) rather than jihad. Henceforth, Shi'as were to conceive of jihad in terms of keeping their faith intact and paying allegiance to the imam rather than staging armed revolts against political authorities. Jihad was declared to be in abeyance until the time of the Mahdi, the promised messiah. He was expected to establish the kingdom of justice and equality and to eliminate injustice and tyranny. This belief was predicated on numerous apocalyptic traditions on the events that will unfold when he re-appears. Henceforth, Shi'i political theory taught co-existence with rather than opposition to tyrannical rulers. Dissimulation itself was construed as a form of defensive jihad since it protected the Shi'as from tyrannical Muslim powers.

A turning point in Shi'i history came in the year 874 CE when the eleventh imam, al-Hasan al-'Askari, died. Amidst competing claims for succession, his infant son Muhammad was proclaimed to be the twelfth imam and promised messiah. This group formed the backbone of the Twelver Shi'as, the largest of the Shi'i factions. It is with this group that the rest of the article will be concerned.

The twelfth imam was believed to have entered a 'minor' occultation from 874 to 940 CE. During this time, he reportedly communicated with agents, four of whom attained prominence. When the fourth agent died in 940, the imam was reported to have entered a 'major' occultation. It was believed that he would re-appear at the end of time to establish the kingdom of justice and equality.

When the Buyids (945-1055) came to power in Baghdad, Shi'i jurists filled the leadership vacuum that was created by the major occultation. Prominent scholars like Ibn Babuya (d. 991), al-Mufid (d. 1022), Sharif al-Murtada (d. 1044) and Muhammad Ja'far al-Tusi (d. 1067) composed important theological and juridical tracts. It was in this era that Shi'i jurists examined and refined the Shi'i doctrine of jihad during the occultation of the imam.

Shi'ism and Jihad

The Qur'anic rationale on jihad was to bring the world under the sway of God's guidance so as to establish a righteous order based on justice and equality. Thus jihad was envisioned as an important tool in the community's attempt to build a world order in which peace, justice, and equality prevail according to Gods' providence. Since the Qur'an stated that there was no compulsion in religion (2:256), Muslims were not to use jihad as a means to impose their beliefs on others.

Shi'i theory of jihad resonates strongly with the views enunciated by Sunni jurists. Shi'i scholars also see jihad as one of the pillars of Islam and a religious duty that is incumbent upon every Muslim who is male, free and able-bodied. Many traditions in Shi'i literature speak on the virtues of *jihad*. It is reported to be one of the gates to Paradise; rich heavenly rewards are guaranteed for those who devote themselves to it. Due to the martyr's eminent status, his body does not have to be washed or shrouded. It can be buried in the same clothes that he was killed.

Like the Sunni jurists of the classical period (570-1258 CE), Shi'i jurists divided the world into the abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and the abode of infidels. The former was seen as a political entity that upholds Islamic values and the *shari'a* (Islamic law). It

was also supposedly the territory of peace and justice. *Dar al-kufr*, on the other hand, was the land of infidels, the epitome of heedlessness and ignorance that posed a threat to the Islamic moral order.

Both Shi'i and Sunnis jurists linked the universal ideals of Islam with jihad so as to justify the extension of the boundaries of *dar al-Islam*. This was contrary to the Qur'anic view which sanctioned jihad only in defence or to fight oppression. The jurists' vision of the world also allowed for the existence of the "the people of the book" (Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians) within the Islamic community. If they agreed to submit to the political authority of Islam and to pay the poll tax (*jizya*), jihad against them was not required. Jihad could also be directed against polytheists, apostates, and rebels or dissenters.

The Shi'is also considered jihad as a collective duty of the community. It only became obligatory for each individual when his presence was necessary for the realization of the purpose envisaged by the law. Thus, when there was a group of Muslims whose number was sufficient to fulfill the needs of a particular conflict, the obligation of jihad no longer rested on others.

Offensive and Defensive Jihad

In contrast to the Sunnis, the Shi'as restrict the expansionist dimension of war. Whereas for the Sunnis the caliph was empowered to declare and lead the jihad, the Shi'as declared that the functions of calling people to respond to God's guidance and fighting those who undermine the creation of a just order was restricted to the figure of an infallible imam or his deputy. In the absence of the imam, offensive jihad was suspended until he re-appeared. This juridical ruling was based on the premise that infallibility

protects the imam from destroying or commanding to destroy any life without proper justification.

Thus the Shi‘as did not see it as incumbent to participate in a jihad that was declared by a caliph to extend the boundaries of Islam. Shi‘i jurists even declared that to fight for an illegitimate ruler was a sin. The Zaydis, a sect among the Shi‘as, did not recognize this dogma and followed the same teaching as that of the Sunni doctrine.

Although jihad has principally an offensive character it assumes a defensive posture when Muslims have to defend their territory against aggression. Under the Buyids, the Shi‘i doctrine of jihad was revised by scholars like Tusi to state that during the occultation of the twelfth imam, defensive jihad was permitted. This form of jihad was understood as an attack by infidels on *dar al-Islam*. Due to this Shi‘is were allowed join a tyrannical ruler to defend the interests of the Muslim community and their territory. However, this was not to be construed as joining hands with an unjust caliph. Rather, Shi‘i jurists ruled that the permission of the imam was not essential under such circumstances since defense of the self was a moral requirement.

Before the establishment of the Safawids in Iran in 1501, Shi‘i jurists were not in a position to advocate a military struggle against the numerically superior forces of the Sunni caliphs. Even after the Safawids came to power and declared a Shi‘i state, the jurists did not sanction any expansionist jihad. Using various types of hermeneutics that were based on rational grounds or traditions reported from the imams, scholars (‘*ulama*’) like ‘Ali b. al-Husayn al-Karaki (d. 1533) and Zayn al-Din al-‘Amili (d. 1558) argued that, in the absence of the imam, greater religious authority was to be assumed by the *faqih* or jurist. The jurists could now occupy judicial and political offices. They could, for

example, serve as judges, collect religious taxes and enforce legal penalties on behalf of the imam. Gradually, the Shi'i '*ulama*' exercised greater control over the populace as they were incorporated into the state apparatus.

Subsequent jurists like Ja'far Kashif al-Ghita' (d. 1813) played prominent roles in influencing the state's military decisions. He led a defensive war during the siege of Najaf by the Wahhabis in 1805. Kashif al-Ghita' also maintained that a jurist could permit the monarch to engage in a jihad against the enemies of Islam or even to lead one himself. The '*ulama*' declared jihad during the Perso-Russian wars of 1808-13 and 1826-28 and authorized Fath 'Ali Shah to fight the Russians. Due to the dangers confronting the community, some juridical tracts written at this time even proclaimed that jihad was a personal rather a collective responsibility. Khumayni also declared jihad against the invading Iraqi forces in 1980 even though Iran was fighting against fellow Muslims many of whom were Shi'as.

Jihad against Rebels

Shi'i jurists maintained that jihad was to be waged against both unbelievers and believers. In the latter category were rebels (*baghy*) and those who reject the authority of the imam (*muharibin*). The Shi'i view of war against rebels is distinguished by the view that the rebels are defined as those who wage war against the just imams, not against the caliphs. Thus the wars of 'Ali against 'A'isha, Mu'awiya, and the Kharijites are all regarded as jihad against those opposing the imam of the time. In fact, in Shi'i legal tracts, those who fight against the imams are regarded as unbelievers even if they formally accept Islam.

The struggle against the *bughat*, those Muslims who rebelled against the imam, is applicable only when there was opposition to an imam exercising political authority.

Thus jihad against rebels was seen as void during the protracted occultation of the imam.

As in Sunnism, Shi'i rules of engagement in a war with rebels are different from jihad against idolaters. Even though they are a threat to the territory of Islam, rebels are not to be killed as they remain Muslims. No war can be fought until the rebels initiate hostilities. Jihad against them can only be waged when they break allegiance with the imam and attack or pose a danger to Muslims. Their property cannot be confiscated and those rebels who are taken as prisoners of war must not be killed. They can only be exterminated in self-defense. The rules of war against rebels are different since it is hoped that they will return to the fold of the community. The goal against fighting rebels is to bring them back to the fold of submission, not to kill them.

Shi'i jurists did not encourage their followers to rebel against Sunni governments. Rather, they were to obey the rulers and acquiesce in the face of an unjust government during the occultation of the imam. Rebellion by other groups against an unjust ruler was not to be fought or joined in.

Believers were allowed to fight against robbers and brigands in self-defense. Brigands and highway robbers are treated like rebels with some exceptions to the rules of combat. The punishment against a thief is contingent on whether he stole property or killed people. Highway robbers and brigands are also to be fought and punished either by execution or amputation of hands or feet.

The Shi'ī view on jihad is distinguished by its insistence on the need for the imam to declare and lead the jihad. Later on, it was accepted that a jurist could authorize a defensive jihad in the absence of an infallible imam.

Liyakat Takim

Further Reading

Esposito, J. (2002). *Unholy war*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Firestone R. (1999). *Jihad: The origin of holy war in Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kelsay, J. (1993). *Islam and war: A study in comparative ethics*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Khomeini, I. (1981). *Islam and revolution*. Berkeley, CA: Mizan Press. (trans. Algar, H.).

Kohlberg, E. (1970). The development of the imami shi'ī doctrine of Jihad. *Zeitschrift der deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft*.

Lambton, A. (1981). *State and government in medieval Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sachedina, A. (1988). *The just ruler in Shi'ite Islam: the comprehensive authority of the jurist in imamite jurisprudence*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Tyan, E. Jihad. *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

Williams, A. (1971). *Themes of Islamic civilization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.