

PARTISANS  
OF ALLAH

JIHAD IN SOUTH ASIA

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## Jihad as Ethics, Jihad as War

**B**ALAKOT is in many ways the epicenter of jihad in South Asia. Blanketed by green, terraced fields and thick, dark forests, this beautiful town is situated about eighteen miles from the city of Mansehra in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. Situated on the banks of the river Kunhar, it serves as a gateway to the picturesque Kaghan Valley, which is bounded on the east and the south by Kashmir. It is also a point of entry into the history of jihad, struggle in the way of Allah, in the subcontinent. It was here that Sayyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly (1786–1831) and Shah Ismail (1779–1831), quintessential Islamic warriors in South Asian Muslim consciousness, fell in battle against the Sikhs on 6 May 1831. Considered to be the only real jihad ever fought in the subcontinent to establish the supremacy of the Islamic faith, it ended in dismal failure, owing to the treachery of some of the Pathan tribesmen, who had initially rallied to the cause with alacrity. Instead of pursuing the high ethical ideals for which the jihad had been launched, the movement became embroiled in a series of temporal compromises that led to an internecine war among Muslims.

Legends about the Islamic warriors' courageous stand against a vastly superior army of infidels have overshadowed the history of betrayal at the hands of fellow Muslims. The jihad came to be remembered in the early twentieth century as a prelude to anticolonial resistance against the British. With the cry "Allahu Akbar" ("God is Great") on his lips, Sayyid Ahmad had charged out of the mosque where he had said his final prayers, and then bravely faced death on the battlefield. It matters little to his devotees that he achieved his spiritual goal of martyrdom after his temporal ambitions had been shattered by fellow Muslims. For several decades, many believed that Sayyid Ahmad had miraculously escaped from Balakot and would return at the appointed time as their savior. To this day, pilgrims pour into the town to pay homage to the two martyrs, Sayyid Ahmad and Shah Ismail, whose graves have acquired the status of sacred sites. Balakot's association with the idea and practice of jihad in South Asia was reinforced in the 1990s, when militant groups set up training camps in its environs to prepare for their campaign against Indian security forces stationed in predominantly Muslim Kashmir. For these militants, Sayyid Ahmad and Shah Ismail are great heroes, whose jihad their admirers wish to emulate, to redress what they perceive as current injustices.

Almost 175 years after the momentous battle of Balakot, a catastrophic earthquake hit northern Pakistan on the fateful morning of 8 October 2005 and flattened the mountainous town in a flash, adding thousands of martyrs to the few that had given it prominence in the history of Islam in the subcontinent. (The victims of natural disasters like earthquakes are considered martyrs in the Islamic tradition.) Before the Pakistani state's relief operations got under way, young men belonging to radical Islamic groups like the Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (Army of the Righteous) rushed to assist men, women, and children trapped under the rubble. The Lashkar, which appeared on the American list of banned terrorist

organizations, has assumed the name Jamaat-ud-Dawa (Party That Propagates the Faith). Instead of the guns and grenades they had learned to use in training camps in and around Balakot to achieve martyrdom in the killing fields of Kashmir, they showed their mettle in the wake of the earthquake, with their bare hands saving the lives of hundreds of people and digging out scores of decomposing bodies and severed limbs. If not for the zealous work done by these young men, the fatalities might have been higher, the despair of Balakot's hapless residents more hellish. Acknowledging the efficacy of their relief efforts, foreign aid agencies joined forces with militant organizations to extend a helping hand to the unfortunates living out under the open sky in what had once been a town of legendary beauty.

Where men had failed, could an act of God change the form of jihad in Pakistan? Had these young radicals found a new way to struggle in the way of Allah? The Lashkar-i-Tayyiba leader, Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, did not see this as waging jihad, but rather as doing relief work. Working to alleviate human suffering might be construed as *jihad-o-jihad*, a derivative of *jihad* used in speaking of everyday struggles. Saeed allowed as much, but in his view the results could not compare with the benefits of the military jihad he and his men were waging in Afghanistan and Kashmir.<sup>1</sup>

An attempt to unravel the multiple meanings of *jihad* in shifting historical contexts is long overdue. Few concepts have been subjected to more consistent distortion than the Arabic word *jihad*—whose literal meaning is “striving for a worthy and ennobling cause” but which is commonly thought today to mean “holy war” against non-Muslims. It is paradoxical that Islam, whose very meaning is *salam*, or peace, has come to be seen as a belligerent religion with fanatical adherents determined to wage perpetual war against unbelievers. This enduring perception stems from an insistence on defining jihad as ideological warfare against non-Muslims, a hopeless distortion of a concept that is the core

principle of Islamic faith and ethics. People have lost sight of the ethical connotations of *jihad* in the turmoil of political battles within the Muslim community, as well as the historical imperatives of conquest that temporal rulers have pursued in the name of Islam. A critical analysis of the theory and practice of jihad over the centuries in South Asia can help retrieve its ethical meanings by throwing light on how Muslims interpreted this essential idea as they negotiated relations with members of other religious communities.

Often overlooked in discussions about Islam, South Asia is home to one out of every three of the 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. The region has played a crucial role, politically, economically, culturally, and intellectually, in the history of Islam for over a millennium. Only by identifying some of the key dynamics in Muslim interactions with predominantly non-Muslim populations is it possible to see how legal concepts of jihad in South Asia departed from their West Asian and Central Asian roots to lend fresh nuance to its meaning within the religious framework of Islam. These adaptations over time continue to inform the ideological disputes among Muslims in South Asia. This is true not only of militant groups in contemporary Pakistan but also of anticolonial nationalists who waged jihad against the British.

Alas, not all things in life are easy;  
Even man struggles to be human.<sup>2</sup>

This deceptively simple couplet by the great Urdu poet of north India Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869) on the face of it bears no relation to jihad, popularly construed as holy war. But it lends itself well to a discussion of jihad as a spiritual and ethical struggle that is meaningless without faith (*iman*). The assertion that nothing is achievable in life without concerted effort is based on the observation that while being human comes

tions. This great poet was ensconced in the cultural milieu of Hindustan—India, if one gives the term its most expansive spatial interpretation; or in its more restrictive sense, northern India with Delhi as its center. At the same time, he identified himself with the Muslim community and within it, despite his Sunni background, with the Shia sect. Wary of all forms of religious orthodoxy, Ghalib defied social conventions and rejected cultural rituals that set one community apart from the other. True faith for him was not about mundane controversies over belief but about commitment to the unity of God. Never a stickler for external religious rituals, he confessed:

I know the virtues of devotion and prayer,  
But my temperament leads me to neither.

...

With what face will you go to the *Kaaba*, Ghalib?  
But then, you are quite shameless.<sup>3</sup>

His poetic evocation of the struggle to be human points to the complexity of ethical issues in the history of Islam in South Asia. Without a heightened awareness of Islamic ethics and of the distinction between the temporal and the sacred aspects of jihad, there can be little understanding of jihad as a key correlate of Islamic faith. Most works on jihad, while nodding in the direction of its spiritual significance, have treated it as the Muslim practice of war, whether of the aggressive or the defensive kind. Relying on historical, legal, and literary sources, this book instead focuses on the development of the idea and practice of jihad over several centuries and across the space that connects West Asia to South Asia. The Indian social and political scene before, during, and after British colonial rule forms the main locus for the unfolding of the history of Islam.

Ghalib's conception of the struggle to be human drew on

the original meaning of *jihad* in the Quran. The word *jihad* is derived etymologically from the Arabic root meaning to strive against an undesirable opponent—an external enemy, Satan, or the base inner self. Pre-Islamic Arab society interpreted it as any endeavor in the service of a worthy cause; other words were more commonly used for warfare. The opening sentence of the Prophet's agreement with the different tribes and religious communities of Medina after the migration (*hijrat*) from Mecca mentions *jahada* as striving for the collective well-being of the whole community consisting of believers and nonbelievers. Fighting for God was incumbent upon all Muslims, whereas the defense of Medina was the responsibility of all signatories to the document.<sup>4</sup> Semantically, *jahada* cannot be interpreted as armed struggle, much less holy war, without twisting its Quranic meaning.

The root word appears forty-one times in eighteen chapters of the Quran—and not always in the sense of sacred war—while prohibitions against warring occur more than seventy times.<sup>5</sup> Apart from verses specifically linking *jahada* to fighting on behalf of God, all its derivative terms are most often used in relation to striving in the cause of faith.<sup>6</sup> The preferred word for fighting in general is *qital* or *harb*,<sup>7</sup> though there are instances of verses prescribing fighting for God.<sup>8</sup> The only form of *jahada* mentioned in the Quran as legitimate armed struggle is *jihad fi sabil Allah*—that is, jihad in the way of God. But even verses employing that term are typically followed by exhortations to patience in adversity and leniency in strength, the essence of being of gentle disposition.

If the Quran does not lend itself well to the notion of jihad as holy war, and far less to the idea of continuous warfare against infidels, how did the discrepancy between the text and the later, legally based interpretations of the concept arise? To understand why jihad was effectively stripped of its role as the moving principle of Muslim faith and ethics, we need to broaden the scope of



our enquiry from the specific question of warfare to other equally important political and intellectual debates that vexed the early community of Islam. In the first century of Islam, the extremist Kharajite sect defined jihad as legitimate violence against the enemies of Islam, both internal and external, and declared it a pillar of the faith. In the Kharajite view, Muslims deviating from the Quran and practice as prescribed by the Prophet could not remain part of the community. A jihad had to be waged against nonbelievers and those associating other beings with God. Such a radical solution to the problem of true faith met with stiff resistance from those who later assumed the mantle of Sunni orthodoxy. The Kharajites were roundly rejected and none of the early Muslim legal schools endorsed their position.<sup>9</sup>

Although the Kharajite challenge had been thwarted, the debate it had unleashed on the relationship between ethical actions and faith would continue to preoccupy the leading minds of the Muslim community.<sup>10</sup> With the exception of the Kharajites, none of the other participants in the debate considered evidence of moral wrong to be justification for excommunication. Immorality was to be checked through preaching good and forbidding wrong. Some considered this to be jihad of the tongue instead of the sword.<sup>11</sup> Pragmatic accommodation to the problem of immorality left the domain of inner conscience to the individual, while the guardians of the community, religious or lay, concentrated on monitoring external actions. An emphasis on Islamic ritual gave believers a formal unity and served the cause of an expanding religious community. But it was a unity achieved by obfuscating faith (*iman*) and virtuous conduct (*ihsan*) as substantive elements of *islam* and making the performance of ritual practices the primary focus of religious life. The suspension of moral judgment by the Muslim community had grave consequences for an ethics based on the Quran.<sup>12</sup>

In counteracting the extremist Kharajite position, the more influential among the spokesmen of the Muslim community

tended to sideline ethics as an intrinsic element of the Muslim faith. The implications of this became even more pronounced once Islamic law (*fiqh*)—the main source of both the Muslim and the Western understanding of jihad—detached itself from the ethical considerations spelled out in the Quran. The expansive Quranic conception of jihad was lost, and it assumed a reductive meaning in the Islamic legal tradition. What had given Islamic law its distinctive character and dynamism during the lifetimes of the Prophet and the first four caliphs was precisely the incorporation of ethical motivations into legal norms based on interpretations of the revelation.<sup>13</sup>

The need for an ideology to legitimate the wars of conquest fought by the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258) dynasties induced Muslim legists to define jihad as armed struggle and to divorce law from ethics. Classical juridical texts skirted around the moral and spiritual meanings of jihad to concentrate on the material facets of warfare—the division of spoils, the treatment of non-Muslims, and the rules of conduct for the Muslim army. Such stipulations were matched by the invention of traditions (hadith) extolling jihad as armed struggle. Some Muslims questioned the application of the concept of jihad to wars fought by temporal rulers that had nothing to do with struggle for the cause of God. One popular tradition justified the reservation. Upon returning from one of the early wars in defense of the newly established community, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have told his companions that they had come back from waging *jihad al-asghar*, or the lesser war, to fight the *jihad al-akbar*, or the greater war, against those base inner forces which prevent man from becoming human in accordance with his primordial and God-given nature.<sup>14</sup> This tradition was not included in any of the authoritative collections of hadith during the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, an omission that in itself reveals the mindset of the compilers and the political climate of the times.

Proclamations of jihad against dissenting co-religionists elic-

ited skepticism from many Muslims. Those with a mystical bent deplored the overemphasis on legal and external aspects of religion, deeming it to be an inadequate expression of the spirit of Islam, which required a jihad to purify the heart, in order to make human conduct truly moral. They contested the reduction of the notion of jihad to armed struggle alone. The Quran itself defines jihad in terms that are much broader than the political uses made of it in response to the exigencies attendant on Arab expansion. What was spread by the sword was not the religion of Islam but “the *political dominion* of Islam.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of paving the way for an egalitarian and just order, the expansion of Islam was a secular process that, even when drawing upon religious ideology, rarely managed to achieve the ideals prescribed in the Quran and underscored in the practice of the Prophet.

Notwithstanding changes in Islamic jurisprudence and theology in response to political developments from the end of the seventh century on, mystical, ethical, poetic, and philosophical Muslim literature attest to the indissoluble connection between jihad and the quality of a believer’s faith and actions. Sufism in particular contributed in important measure to the development of a humanistic ethics in Islam. Indeed, Muslim ethics has been described as an “ethics of mysticism” because of its inherent spirituality and asceticism.<sup>16</sup> The prominence that the ethical writings of Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) achieved, to say nothing of the widespread appeal of the mystical poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), make it plain that members of the community never quite lost sight of the ideal of a balance between inner conscience and external adherence to Islamic rituals.<sup>17</sup> By the eleventh century, Muslim writings on ethics (*akhlaq*) bore the imprint of creative borrowings from Greek philosophy. Miskawayh’s *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*, which is marked by Platonic and Neoplatonic influences, has served as a model for all subsequent Muslim writings

on ethics. Significantly enough, it begins with the author's description of his ongoing personal struggle for restraint, courage, and discernment.<sup>18</sup> Writing against the backdrop of the Crusades, Ghazali in his magnum opus does not take a glorified view of jihad against infidels. Like the Sufis, he focuses on the inner spiritual jihad, which he likens to a battle between the armies of good and evil. Good conduct based on self-control and sincere effort in the way of God is described as constituting half of religion, and being of greater merit than ritual worship. In addition to including the famous tradition in which the Prophet makes a distinction between the greater and the lesser jihad, Ghazali quotes him as saying: "Fight your passion with hunger and thirst. Its merits are equal to those gained by Jihad in the way of God."<sup>19</sup> In similar vein, Rumi noted that not everyone killed in battle was a martyr.<sup>20</sup>

The prominence given to legal and theological writings in modern scholarship have had the result that jihad is unquestioningly linked with ideological warfare against the enemies of Islam. In more recent times, it has on the one hand been described as an article of Muslim faith, and on the other equated with terrorism. Shorn of its inner dimensions and reduced to perpetual holy war against non-Muslims, jihad is a recipe for disequilibrium and an inversion of a key concept in Islam. Having uncovered textual evidence of the Muslim preoccupation in the early centuries of Islam with war, a strand of Orientalist scholarship has done much to lend credence to simplistic divisions between the Islamic and the non-Islamic traditions.<sup>21</sup> As in any of the other great religious traditions—Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism—in Islam the ultimate goal for political and moral philosophy is to create a just and equitable social order. Not only did Islam build on preexisting tribal traditions of kingship in the Arabian peninsula, but it also borrowed from those of the ancient Near East and the Indian subcontinent, as well as the Hellenistic

and Roman world.<sup>22</sup> The concept of a just war in Hinduism, as well as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, echoes the interpretation by Muslims of jihad as armed struggle.<sup>23</sup>

An exclusive reliance on the works of legal scholars and theologians would be far too limited to provide a measured view of jihad in Muslim history.<sup>24</sup> Legists and theologians with ties to state power tailored the concept of jihad to fit the shifting requirements of temporal rulers, who even while paying lip service to Islamic law (*sharia*) administered their domains on the basis of secular law. Not a creed or religion in the narrow sense of the word, Islam is often deemed to be an all-encompassing way of life (*din*) whose precepts are unchanging in nature. This has become a pretext for drawing an unjustified stark distinction between Islam and concepts of the secular.<sup>25</sup> Ignoring the passage of time and a constantly changing tradition has skewed understanding of Islam, to the detriment of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Notions of the religious and the secular borrowed from historical experience of other religious traditions cannot explain the subtle overlap between the spiritual and the secular in Islam. In Christendom, the clash between the authority of the church and that of the state established the contours of so-called religious and secular space. In the absence of a church in Islam, secular state authority had no need to separate itself from the religious.

The word *secular* has a dual meaning, for it refers to both location and time. Secularization is an historical process through which human beings abandon otherworldly concerns and focus on the here and now. During the European Enlightenment, religion came to be seen as an impersonal system of beliefs and practices, rather than a matter of personal faith. Without denying the existence of a Creator, Enlightenment thought rejected the notion of the cruel and punishing God who threatened mankind with eternal damnation. It was the consolidation of the modern nation-state in the nineteenth century that established

the separation between religion on the one hand and law, science, rationality, and politics on the other. According to the confident assumptions of this particular brand of modernism, the increasing secularization of daily life would ultimately marginalize religion or relegate it to the private sphere. The long historical process of secularization had been an open-ended one, in which values and worldviews were subject to revision. The secularism of the modern nation-state, by contrast, became a closed ideology, which projected its values as absolute, superior, and final. The certitude underpinning the secularism of modern states must not be confused with the relativity of values and vibrant debates that marked the more ecumenical process of secularization.<sup>26</sup>

Despite widespread unease among Muslims with what is perceived as the hubris of secularism in modern nation-states, the history of Islam could not have escaped the process of secularization. Islamic theocentrism, on the face of it, is antithetical to secularization based on human assumption of the responsibility to reformulate ethical values. Yet Muslims throughout history have resorted to the right of rational interpretation (*ijtihad*) to question values not strictly embodied in the Quran. This questioning is in keeping with the Islamic aim of effecting a revolutionary change in human consciousness through ethical social development. The Islamic conception of religion has been explained by stressing: submission (*islam*), or obedience relating to external acts, faith (*iman*) pertaining to the believer's inner thoughts, and virtuous intentions (*ihsan*) aimed at doing what is beneficial for the individual and the community.<sup>27</sup> In the hierarchy of importance spelled out in the Quran, faith in one God and the unity of creation (*tawhid*) precedes submission, whether individual or collective. Virtuous intentions expand and deepen faith, so that it becomes a lived certitude, thereby ensuring that *islam*, instead of being restricted to specific rituals and attitudes, touches every aspect of a believer's life.<sup>28</sup> Living according to the

teachings of the Quran and the Prophet requires not only submission but also faith and good intentions. If the triad of submission, faith, and good conduct is constitutive of Islam, its moving principle is the notion of jihad as a spiritual, intellectual, and moral struggle. To isolate jihad from faith and virtuous intentions is to lose sight of the high ethical standards that distinguish mere mortals from human beings, and to reduce the sacred to the profane and the transcendental to the purely worldly.

Intrinsic to faith in the unity of creation, and to the moving principle of Islamic ethics in political, economic, and social activity, jihad has been susceptible to consistent misunderstanding and misuse. Confusing God's will with the practical and logistical imperatives of an expanding Muslim community, and conflating the sacred and the profane, Muslim exegetes, legists, theologians, and historians in different times and places have distorted the meaning of jihad in the Quran. Without restoring the historical dimension and the distinction between the temporal and the sacred, there can be no understanding of jihad as a key correlate of Islamic faith and ethics. A multilayered concept like jihad is best understood with reference to the historical evolution of the idea in response to the shifting requirements of the Muslim community, especially in the South Asian context.

The relation between the normative theory of jihad and its actual historical practice followed a somewhat different trajectory in the South Asian subcontinent than it did in West Asia. In the Arab lands tensions between Islamic law (*fiqh*) and religion in the broadest sense (*din*) that were caused by the imperatives of the wars of conquest had made the extrinsic features of being a Muslim more important than the spiritual and ethical struggle to be human. Some of the debates between legists (*fuqaha*) and philosophers (*falsuf*) in West and Central Asia were replicated in South Asia. But there was a crucial difference. The subcontinent, where the Islamic faithful are in the minority, is an interesting labora-

tory for a study of the multiple, less reductive meanings of jihad. India under Muslim rule was deemed to be a *Dar-ul-Islam*, an abode of peace. According to the jurists, jihad could only be waged against a *Dar-ul-Harb*, an abode of war. The legal discourse on jihad and *aman*, or the granting of peace to non-Muslims, developed by the dominant Sunni school of Hanafi law in the subcontinent, featured pragmatic adjustments to the Indian environment. Sufis and freethinking philosophers contested the narrow interpretations of the Arab and Arab-influenced legists and theologians throughout India's precolonial history. The accommodative tendencies were in the ascendant during much of the Sultanate and the Mughal era stretching from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries. These attitudes gained their fullest expression during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605), who enunciated a policy of peace for all. Akbar's attempts to build bridges with non-Muslims in his empire did, however, provoke a withering critique from the Muslim theologian Sheikh Ahmad Sirhandi (1564–1624). War and peace, faith and ethics were matters of constant debate in precolonial India.

Many of the key innovations in modern Islamic thought were fashioned in South Asia rather than West Asia. Muslim rulers in the subcontinent were not indifferent to the sharia, as is best illustrated by the *Fatawa-i-Alamgiri*, a late seventeenth-century compendium of Hanafi law, commissioned by Akbar's great-grandson Aurangzeb. Yet it was not until the eighteenth century that fears about the loss of Muslim sovereignty triggered a redefinition of jihad as the obverse of *aman*. The writings of the redoubtable Delhi-based scholar Shah Waliullah (1703–1762), known for his enunciation of the most systematic theory of jihad in South Asia, must be read in this historical context. His career bridged the precolonial and colonial eras of South Asian history. Hailed as being at once a Muslim modernist and the architect of Sunni orthodoxy, Waliullah left an intellectual legacy that casts a



long shadow over all subsequent explications of jihad in theory and attempts to translate it into practice.

It was Waliullah's theory that Sayyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly sought to implement between 1826 and 1831. His endeavor illustrates how the high ethical values associated with jihad were diluted by the confusion between religion as faith and religion as a demarcator of difference as well as of pragmatic compromise. The geographic focal point of the jihad of 1826 to 1831 on the northwest frontier of the subcontinent corresponds to the nerve center of the current confrontation between Islamic radicals and the West. The jihad movement directed primarily against the Sikhs was transmuted in the course of the war into a conflict pitting Muslim against Muslim. This feature of intrafaith conflict in a jihad as armed struggle has not diminished its appeal for contemporary militants, who evidence many of the same failings that undermined Sayyid Ahmad's high ideals. The martyrdom of those who fell at Balakot continues to weave its spell, making it imperative to investigate the myth in its making.

If Sayyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly's early nineteenth-century jihad was seen as a precursor to an anticolonial war, his namesake Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) of Aligarh tried in the late nineteenth century to reinterpret jihad in terms other than those of armed struggle. He and other Muslim modernists like Maulvi Chiragh Ali (1844–1895) and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (ca. 1839–1908)—the controversial founder of the heterodox Ahmadi community—made concerted attempts to rethink jihad in the light of British colonial rule. The historical context of the decisive suppression of the great rebellion in 1857 is of great importance for understanding the reformulation of the idea of jihad. Yet the texts need to be read on their own terms, not least because of the intellectual caliber of those who were responding to colonial strictures on Islam as a religion of the sword and perceptions of Muslim disloyalty. Various dismissed as apologists of Islam and colonial

collaborators, these men tried in their different ways to bring the concept of jihad closer to the expansive, spiritual meanings it has in the Quran. They also played a major role in constructing a communitarian view in late nineteenth-century India of a distinctive Muslim identity. It is thus useful to trace the extent to which efforts to revive the role of jihad, both in theory and in practice, as a core principle of Islamic ethics reflected their notion of jihad as defensive warfare.

With the start of a new Western offensive against the Muslim world in the late nineteenth century, jihad entered another historical era, one that created the conditions for articulating an Islamic universalism that could be squared with the competing ideal of territorial nationalism. The universalist dreams of Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839–1897), the magnetic Iranian who initiated the campaign against Western imperialism in the Muslim world, may have been somewhat ahead of his time. But his ideas found a welcoming niche in the thought and politics of such pro-Indian National Congress Muslims as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958) and Obaidullah Sindhi (1872–1944). Even as they espoused their own versions of Islamic humanism and sought common ground with non-Muslims, these two anti-colonial nationalists saw jihad as a legitimate means to wage a transnational struggle against British imperialism. Azad, a key voice in the field of Islamic law and ethics, was the preeminent Muslim leader of the Congress, not just in preindependence India but also in the first decade after independence. Paradoxically, he is best remembered today as a “secular nationalist,” having served as education minister in India’s first independent government led by Jawaharlal Nehru. Azad’s less successful contemporary, Obaidullah Sindhi, was a Sikh convert to Islam who tried giving practical shape to Waliullah’s ideas by starting a transnational jihad during World War I with the help of Afghans, Germans, Russians, and Turks. His own writings and the mem-

oires of some of his close associates offer a welter of insights into the complex mindset of anticolonial nationalists, for whom jihad was a powerful weapon against the British as well as a means to combat injustices in their own society. Even the great poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), not an anticolonial radical by any stretch of the imagination, dwelled at length on the virtues of jihad as struggle against Western imperialism. His poem “Jihad” lamented that Muslims in the face of colonial subjugation had lost all delight in death.

The history of jihad in postcolonial South Asia spotlights the relationship between the modern nation-state and the ulema, or religious scholars trained in madrassas. The end of British colonial rule brought the partition of the subcontinent, ostensibly along religious lines, and the transfer of power to two nation-states—one avowedly secular, the other created as a Muslim homeland. Contrary to the perception that modernity had eclipsed the role of religious scholars, managers of modern states like Pakistan gave the ulema greater prominence, by letting them pose as guardians of public morality, if not Islamic ethics, so long as they did not undermine state authority. The thought of Islamic ideologues like Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979) and the politics of contemporary self-styled “jihadis” need to be studied in this context. The renewed interest in jihad by Mawdudi and, through him, by such West Asian radicals as Sayyid Qutb—the two authors most frequently cited by Western “experts” on so-called Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism—had more to do with the internal dynamics of Muslim society than with an outright rejection of modernity under Western colonialism. In a sense, jihad in the postcolonial era has been a more effective instrument of political opposition to the secular modernity promoted by Muslim nation-states than of resistance to Western domination. Mawdudi advocated waging jihad against faithless and unethical Muslims as a means toward achieving an Islamic

society as he conceived it. The irony in proclaiming jihad against co-religionists has been lost on those who adopted Mawdudi's reformulation of the concept. Yet with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Iran, Muslim nation-states have desisted from formally declaring a jihad, even as they have selectively implemented parts of the sharia that do not undermine their claims to temporal power. This is a judicious response, to be sure, which in such states as Pakistan has resulted on the one hand in efforts to enforce punitive aspects of the sharia, in the guise of Islamization, and on the other in support for so-called jihadis waging war to liberate co-religionists in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Muslim nation-states have been more eager to manipulate and control religion than to correct the acts of omission and commission committed during the early centuries of Islam. These, in separating law from the ethical teachings of the Quran, led to external rituals' replacing virtuous actions as the predominant concern of the community. The result has been not just the secularization of Islamic law but the diminishment of the ideal of jihad from the spiritual to the profane. Armed struggle in the way of God is a contradiction in terms, without reference to the ethical values outlined in the Quran. Jihad today is a pliable instrument in the hands of a few who are more politically motivated than ethically grounded. Their version of jihad has in turn nourished ill-informed denunciations of Islam, most notably among commentators and policy makers in the West. The bias and suspicion pervading these administrative circles have historical roots in the age of modern imperialism, when the theme of jihad was interwoven with the anticolonial struggle. By teasing out the shifting interpretations of jihad in different historical phases, I aim to restore its essential meaning as an ethical struggle to be human and thereby more effectively combat the forces of disequilibrium that plague the contemporary world.