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Critiquing Expansionist Orientalist Interpretations of Jihad through Qur'anic Textual Analysis

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Abstract

For a long time, scholars have read the Qur'anic verses on warfare as supporting a doctrine of expansion. This view appears in both classical jurisprudence and modern Western scholarship. On this reading, *jihād* is a permanent duty to expand Muslim rule, and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims rest, in principle, on war. Well-known Western scholars such as Bernard Lewis, Majid Khadduri, and Rudolph Peters often approach these verses through the lens of classical law, the division between *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*, and the history of Muslim conquests. As a result, they tend to read the Qur'an in the light of later doctrine. This article questions that starting point rather than their historical findings. It examines the warfare verses using two main tools: a semantic analysis of key terms, and the *uṣūlī* rule of *taqyīd al-muṭlaq*, under which an unrestricted text is limited by a qualified text on the same topic. The analysis leads to three main findings. First, in the Qur'an, *jihād* refers to many types of striving (moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social), and *qitāl* (fighting) is only one of them. *Al-Furqān* (25): 52, a Meccan verse revealed before fighting was permitted, shows this clearly. Second, *fitnah*, which the Qur'an gives as the reason for fighting in *al-Baqarah* (2): 191–193 and *al-Anfāl* (8): 39, means persecution, coercion, and expulsion, not unbelief itself. Third, verses that seem unconditional, such as *al-Tawbah* (9): 5, are limited by qualifying verses: *al-Baqarah* (2): 190 on aggression, and the neighboring verses *al-Tawbah* (9): 4 on honoring treaties and *al-Tawbah* (9): 6 on granting asylum. Read in this way, the Qur'an sets conditions on warfare and does not make war the default rule in relations between communities.

Keywords: *jihād*; *fitnah*; Qur'anic hermeneutics; *taqyīd al-muṭlaq*; abrogation (*naskh*); Qur'anic warfare; Orientalism.

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Introduction

Jihād remains one of the most debated concepts in Islamic studies, attracting attention not only from jurists and exegetes but also from political theorists, international relations scholars, and historians of religion. Since the nineteenth century, a significant portion of Western scholarship has primarily associated the term with expansion and conquest, with some works presenting *jihād* as the principal framework governing Muslim relations with non-Muslims (Lewis, 1988: 72–79; Lewis, 2003: 23–29; Peters, 1996: 1–7). This interpretation has influenced both academic discourse and broader public perceptions of Islam.

This perspective rests on a methodological choice that is seldom made explicit: should the meaning of *jihād* come from the legal and political systems of later Muslim empires or from the Qur'an in its original context? When scholars start with later legal traditions, they often overlook the early Muslim community's experiences, such as persecution in Mecca, the *hijrah*, loss of property, repeated broken treaties, and the struggle to survive (Donner, 2010: 39–50; Watt, 1956: 1–17). Expansion is then taken to be the primary meaning of *jihād* rather than one historical outcome among others. Western scholarship on this issue is not uniform. Goldziher and Schacht, for example, treated Islamic law as the product of gradual development, and later scholars accordingly paid more attention to juristic writings than to the earliest sources (Goldziher, 1971: vol. 2: 17–37; Schacht, 1950: 138–189). Lewis took the discussion further by presenting *jihād* as a key idea in Muslim political thinking and relations with non-Muslims (Lewis, 1988: 72–79; Lewis, 2003: 23–29). Watt, by contrast, examined the Qur'anic rules of war in relation to the politics of Medina, and Hodgson resisted reducing Islamic civilization to conquest (Watt, 1956: 1–17, 142–150; Watt, 1961: 93–124; Hodgson, 1974: 172–230). Schimmel's work on piety and mysticism also brings out aspects of Islamic religious life that military history leaves out (Schimmel, 1975).

The persistence of the expansionist view can be explained in part by the broader intellectual context that Edward Said described. Within it, the Islamic world was often cast as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, the West, and was frequently portrayed as irrational or despotic (Said, 1978: 1–3, 31–33, 40–42). Said's critique has been contested, and the argument of this article does not depend on it. His central point nonetheless stands: interpretations of Islamic texts have often been shaped by assumptions brought from outside. One consequence was that *jihād* came to stand for Islam as a whole, overshadowing the limits set by Qur'anic legal reasoning. The Qur'an itself presents a more nuanced picture. Permission to fight is first given to those "who have been wronged" and "expelled from their homes without right" (*al-Ḥajj* [22]: 39–40). *Al-Baqarah* (2): 190 tells believers to "fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress," making aggression the reason for fighting and setting limits on it. Other verses, such as *al-Anfāl* (8): 61, require that genuine offers of peace be accepted; *al-Māʾidah* (5): 8 calls for justice toward opponents; and *al-Mumtaḥanah* (60): 8 encourages kindness and fairness to those who have not fought Muslims or expelled them. Together, these verses challenge the idea that war is the normal state between religious groups. They appear to stand in tension with the commands to fight, a tension that scholars have resolved in two main ways. Many exegetes resorted to abrogation

(*naskh*), treating later Medinan verses, especially *al-Tawbah* (9): 5, as cancelling earlier verses about patience and coexistence. Others applied interpretive rules from *uṣūl al-fiqh*, especially the rule that an unrestricted text should be read in light of a qualified one. The real disagreement, then, concerns how the verses are to be read together, not simply what each one means.

The present study contends that classical juristic and modern Orientalist expansionist interpretations share a basic methodological flaw. They focus on a small group of verses that seem unrestricted and pay too little attention to other Qur'anic passages that set limits. That the Qur'an addresses warfare is not in question; the key issue is how these verses relate to one another. Using a Qur'an-centered approach grounded in classical legal theory, this study argues that *jihād* in the Qur'an is best understood as a morally limited response to aggression, persecution, and broken treaties, not as a doctrine of religious or territorial expansion.

1. Literature Review: Reassessing Orientalist Interpretations of *Jihād*

Modern scholarship on *jihād* has repeatedly returned to a central question: is it essentially a doctrine of military expansion, or does it belong within the Qur'an's wider moral and legal order? Earlier Orientalist work mostly approached the subject through imperial history and classical law. Lewis and Khadduri, for example, discussed *jihād* chiefly in connection with sovereignty, the territorial division of the world, and the spread of Muslim rule. Their studies made substantial contributions to the history of classical jurisprudence. They also made it easier to read later legal and political formulations back into the Qur'an, so that the expansionist doctrine came to look like the scriptural conception itself.

Criticism of this tendency grew from the late twentieth century onward. Said's "Orientalism" (1978) says little about *jihād* as a legal concept, but it changed the terms on which Western representations of Islam could be discussed. Once it had been shown that knowledge of the Islamic world was often bound up with political power and civilizational contrast, the image of *jihād* as an inherently aggressive and peculiarly Islamic kind of violence became considerably more difficult to sustain. *Talal Asad* extended this critique. Categories such as "religion," "violence," and "secularity," he argued, are historically contingent rather than universal. To translate *jihād* directly into the modern Western idea of religious violence is to lose the conceptual world in which the Qur'an spoke of armed struggle (Asad, 1993; 2003).

A second body of work has tried to recover the ethical and historical complexity of *jihād* itself. Kelsay shows that Muslim thinking about war took place within traditions of moral reasoning, not under an open-ended duty to fight (Kelsay, 1993: 29–76; 2007: 43–124). Hashmi places *jihād* within Islamic political ethics, where justice, restraint, legitimate authority, and the regulation of armed conflict take precedence over warfare as an end in itself (Hashmi, 2002: 194–216). These studies shifted attention from military history to the norms that governed Muslim reflection on the use of force.

Others have stressed that the meaning of *jihād* was never fixed. According to Firestone, the Qur'anic sanction of war emerged within a few years of the *hijrah*, amid disagreement among factions of the early community; the divergent positions preserved in scripture were

harmonized only later by exegetes and jurists, so the doctrine did not appear fully formed (Firestone, 1999: 47–98, 127–133). Cook traces how the concept took on different emphases in different political and theological settings, from the early conquests to modern radical movements, although he holds that warfare with spiritual significance remained its primary classical meaning (Cook, 2005: 1–4, 163–164). The most thorough recent treatment is probably Asma Afsaruddin's "Striving in the Path of God" (2013). She distinguishes four layers that are often conflated: the Qur'anic vocabulary of striving, early exegesis, classical jurisprudence, and modern ideological uses. She concludes that the later military sense of *jihād* cannot be projected onto the Qur'an without erasing the variety of its earliest meanings.

Wael Hallaq's work is also relevant here, although he does not write on warfare as such. He describes Islamic law as the product of historically situated juristic reasoning rather than a fixed code (Hallaq, 2009), a view that bears directly on the study of *jihād*: it cautions against treating any medieval legal doctrine as a straightforward statement of the Qur'an, and it requires a clear line between scripture and later juristic elaboration.

This literature has done much to challenge essentialist representations of Islam, to historicize Islamic legal thought, and to show how variously *jihād* has been understood across periods. One methodological question, however, has received less attention than it deserves. Most studies either criticize Orientalist discourse or trace the history of Islamic law; few ask which hermeneutical principles should be used to read the Qur'an's warfare verses in relation to one another. As a result, expansionist readings are usually tested against history or legal development, and seldom against the interpretive method internal to the Qur'anic discourse.

This article seeks to fill that gap. An earlier study took a step in this direction, reading the general verses of *jihād* in light of the conditional ones and their context as an alternative to abrogation (Hasanzadeh & Abedi Renani, 2021: 2–3, 9–10, 17). The present article builds on that approach, grounds it explicitly in the *uṣūlī* rule of *taqyīd al-muṭlaq*, and uses it to test the Orientalist readings of Lewis, Khadduri, and Peters. Its approach is Qur'an-centered and grounded in the established principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. It does not ask whether Islam is fundamentally a religion of war or of peace; that question is too general to admit a meaningful answer. It asks instead what interpretive assumptions lie behind the influential expansionist readings. The answer proposed here is that these readings isolate a few verses that appear unrestricted and overlook the means the Qur'an itself provides for reading related passages as one normative discourse. Seen this way, the relationship between the Qur'anic conception of *jihād* and the legal and political doctrines that later grew up around it becomes clearer.

2. Methodology

The present study examines expansionist interpretations of *jihād* through a Qur'an-centered hermeneutic. It starts with the Qur'an, not later juristic doctrine or the political history of Muslim empires, and asks how the verses on war are to be read in relation to one another. The underlying assumption is that the meaning of a Qur'anic ruling cannot be fixed from a single verse taken on its own, but only from the relevant verses read together as a coherent normative discourse.

For this purpose, the study draws on *uṣūl al-fiqh*, which has long supplied the rules for reconciling passages that at first sight point in different directions. The most relevant rule here is that an unrestricted text is read in light of a qualified one when both address the same subject in the same legal context. Two related rules work in the same direction: a general text is read alongside more specific passages, and harmonization is attempted before invoking abrogation. Behind all three lies classical legal theory's commitment to the coherence of the Qur'anic text. They do not remove historical development or juristic disagreement from the picture. They provide the standard by which such disagreement has traditionally been judged.

The analysis therefore examines the main Qur'anic passages on armed conflict in their immediate textual setting. It relates them to the wider Qur'anic treatment of persecution (*fitnah*), self-defense, justice, treaties, non-compulsion in religion, and the protection of the vulnerable. It examines how the verses permitting fighting relate to those enjoining restraint, coexistence, and loyalty to covenants. It also keeps *jihād*, in the broad sense of striving, distinct from *qitāl*, armed fighting, since the two are related but not interchangeable.

Classical exegetical and juristic sources are used throughout, but as historically situated interpretations that show how Islamic legal thought developed, not as the voice of the Qur'an itself. They are read alongside the text and are not allowed to settle its meaning in advance. The distinction matters because many expansionist readings, in parts of the classical tradition and in later Orientalist scholarship alike, took later doctrinal formulations as given without asking whether they reflect the Qur'an's own hermeneutical structure.

In summary, the objective is to evaluate expansionist interpretations of *jihād* on methodological grounds, rather than from an apologetic perspective. While the Qur'anic worldview acknowledges the reality of war, the central question is whether, when interpreted according to its own hermeneutical principles, the Qur'an supports the assertion that military expansion constitutes the normative foundation of *jihād*. The following section reviews the principal trends in Western scholarship on *jihād*, distinguishing between contextual and expansionist interpretations, before turning to the expansionist school, the primary subject of this study.

3. Divergent Western Readings of *Jihād*: Contextual Approaches and Expansionist Interpretations

Western scholarship on *jihād* is not a single tradition. Much of it approaches the concept through warfare, classical jurisprudence, and the territorial expansion of Muslim rule, but other scholars offer more historically attentive, less reductive accounts of Islam. Any assessment of Orientalist interpretations has to start by acknowledging this.

W. Montgomery Watt reads the Qur'anic legislation on warfare against the social and political conditions of the early Muslim community. His account of the Medinan period gives weight to persecution, migration, intertribal relations, political insecurity, and the formation of a new community. Watt does not downplay the political and military side of Muhammad's career, but he does not treat it as the expression of an abstract, timeless command to spread Islam by force. In this, he differs from readings that take the meaning of *jihād* mainly from

later doctrines of territorial division and interstate conflict (Watt, 1956: 1–17, 142–150; Watt, 1961: 93–124).

Marshall Hodgson adopts a broader civilizational perspective. He does not explain Islamic history by a single logic of conquest; military expansion, in his account, is one strand in a process that also involved religious commitment, institution-building, social change, and cultural exchange. Nor does he accept that Islam can be summed up as a permanent opposition between a Muslim political order and a hostile non-Muslim world. His work is therefore a useful corrective to accounts that let the history of empire decide the normative meaning of Islamic concepts (Hodgson, 1974: 172–230).

Schimmel's picture of Islam is likewise not reducible to its legal and military history. Her work centers on the devotional, ethical, literary, and mystical sides of the tradition: piety, love, spiritual striving, and self-transformation. She did not set out a theory of *jihād*, and it would be wrong to present her as if she had. Her relevance here is different. She brings into view a whole area of Islamic religious life that disappears once *jihād* is treated mainly as a doctrine of war, and in doing so she shows that the field of striving in Islam reaches well beyond armed conflict (Schimmel, 1975).

None of these scholars settles the exegetical and legal disputes over *jihād*, and none of them proposes the Qur'an-centered method used in this article. Their value lies in showing that Western scholarship has produced historically careful and ethically attentive readings of Islam. Keeping them in view prevents the critique of expansionist readings from becoming a general critique of Western scholarship.

4. Western Expansionist Readings of *Jihād*: Lewis, Khadduri, and Peters

The analysis now turns to Bernard Lewis, Majid Khadduri, and Rudolph Peters. They are chosen for analytical reasons, not as representatives of Western scholarship as a whole: each has been widely influential, and each sets out, in a different form, the legal, political, and historical assumptions on which expansionist readings rest. Their conclusions differ, but their point of departure is the same. All three approach *jihād* mainly through the historical development of Islamic legal and political institutions, and only secondarily through Qur'anic hermeneutics. Lewis treats it as a key term in the political vocabulary of Islam and in the long history of relations between Muslim and non-Muslim societies. Khadduri places it within classical Islamic international law, with particular attention to *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* and the juristic rules governing relations between polities. Peters follows its development through classical jurisprudence and its reinterpretation in the modern period.

The aim here is not to dispute their historical findings or the value of their work on Islamic law, but to ask a prior question: how far do interpretations drawn mainly from later juristic doctrine match the normative framework the Qur'an itself sets up? Reading the three authors with that question in mind makes it possible to separate the scriptural foundations of *jihād* more clearly from the legal and political doctrines that took shape later.

5. Bernard Lewis: *Jihād* as Political Language and Civilizational Conflict

Few Western scholars have done more than Bernard Lewis to establish *jihād* as a central term in Islam's political vocabulary. In "The Political Language of Islam," he places it among the

concepts through which classical Muslim scholars thought about authority, law, community, war, and relations with non-Muslims. For Lewis, *jihād* was never only a personal or spiritual ideal. It became part of the legal and political order of classical Islam, bound up with the community's collective obligations and the preservation of Islamic rule (Lewis, 1988: 72–79).

The juristic distinction between *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* is central to his reading. Lewis takes it to be more than a geographical label: it is a legal framework for relations between Muslim and non-Muslim polities, and *jihād* is one of the main concepts through which that framework deals with war, peace, truces, and authority. On this basis, he argues that classical jurisprudence did not, as a rule, envisage permanent peace with non-Muslim powers in the sense that modern international law does. Treaties and truces were legally recognized, yet they were situated within a juridical order in which *jihād* kept its normative force (Lewis, 1988: 73, 78).

"The Crisis of Islam" takes the argument further. Lewis grants that *jihād* literally means "striving" and that the tradition has long recognized moral and spiritual forms of it. He holds, however, that in the dominant classical legal tradition the term took on a mainly military sense, tied to the expansion and defense of Muslim political authority. He situates this within a long narrative spanning the formative period, encounters with Christendom, the Ottoman Empire, European colonialism, and modern Islamist movements (Lewis, 2003: 23–29).

Lewis's analysis is more nuanced than popular portrayals that equate *jihād* with forced conversion or indiscriminate violence. He explicitly acknowledges the protected legal status of Jews, Christians, and other non-Muslim communities under Islamic rule. Even so, he consistently locates *jihād* within the political and legal structures of the classical state and the history of Muslim empires, and the Qur'anic material is consequently read through that later doctrine and history.

This methodological orientation, rather than Lewis's historical claims, is what the present study challenges. Much of what he says about classical juristic doctrine is well documented. The question is whether those later formulations should fix the normative meaning of the Qur'anic concept. Because he starts from the mature structure of classical law, Lewis largely assumes that later juristic developments faithfully represent their scriptural basis. That assumption is examined below. Read through the principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, and in particular the relation between unrestricted and qualified texts, the Qur'anic verses on armed conflict yield a more differentiated conception of *jihād* than expansionist readings allow.

6. Majid Khadduri: *Jihād* and the Classical Islamic Law of Nations

Khadduri's "War and Peace in the Law of Islam" is among the most systematic juridical treatments of *jihād* in Western scholarship. He treats *jihād* not as an isolated religious idea but as a central institution of the classical Islamic law of nations, alongside war and peace, sovereignty, territorial organization, treaties, diplomacy, and the legal status of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Where Lewis embeds *jihād* in a civilizational narrative, Khadduri works mainly from the structure and internal logic of classical jurisprudence (Khadduri, 1955).

In Khadduri's account, classical Islamic international law rested on the belief that Islam had a universal religious and legal mission. Islam was understood as a revealed order meant

for all humanity, so the Muslim community was not simply one polity among others; it was the bearer of a universal normative order. *Jihād* was the institution by which that order was defended and preserved and, where the juristic tradition required it, extended beyond existing Muslim territory. Khadduri therefore presents *jihād* mainly as a collective obligation tied to maintaining and expanding the Islamic legal-political order (Khadduri, 1955: 51–53, 63–64).

Here too the distinction between *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* is central. The first denotes lands under Muslim rule where Islamic law is publicly established; the second, lands outside Muslim sovereignty. Classical jurists, Khadduri argues, did not conceive of international relations as a community of legally equal sovereign states. Instead, they built a legal-theological framework in which relations between Muslim and non-Muslim polities were governed by rules on war, truces, diplomacy, and authority, with *jihād* at its center (Khadduri, 1955: 43–44, 51–53, 62–65).

Khadduri stresses the military and political side of *jihād*, but he does not describe it as a doctrine of unlimited violence. He points to the detailed rules the jurists developed on legitimate authority, the conduct of war, truces and peace agreements, safe-conduct, prisoners, and the treatment of non-Muslim populations. He also separates the extension of Muslim political authority from forced conversion. In his reading, the aim of classical *jihād* was not to convert all non-Muslims but to establish or preserve an Islamic political order in which protected communities, Jews and Christians above all, kept their religion and had a recognized legal status (Khadduri, 1955: 53, 64, 175–201).

Khadduri's "The Islamic Law of Nations: *Shaybānī's Siyar*" extends this legal perspective. Here Khadduri translates and introduces the Siyar of al-*Shaybānī,* one of the chief architects of *siyar*, the branch of jurisprudence that governs relations between the Islamic polity and non-Muslim communities, including war, peace, diplomacy, and treaties. The book shows how sophisticated the early jurists were in regulating prisoners of war, spoils, diplomatic relations, treaties, and armed conflict (Khadduri, 1966: 38–56, 75–194). Across his writings, then, *jihād* appears as one part of a comprehensive legal system for the external relations of the Islamic polity, not as an isolated theological or military idea.

7. Rudolph Peters: *Jihād* between Classical Doctrine and Modern Reinterpretation

Rudolph Peters gives one of the more historically nuanced accounts of *jihād* among contemporary Western scholars. He does not treat it as a fixed doctrine. Instead, he follows its development through successive stages of Islamic intellectual and political history. He distinguishes three levels of analysis: the Qur'anic concept of striving, the elaboration of *jihād* in classical jurisprudence, and its many modern reinterpretations. The result is a picture of a concept whose legal and political weight changed with historical circumstances (Peters, 1996: 1–8).

For the classical period, Peters shows how jurists built a detailed doctrine of warfare and relations with non-Muslims. They asked who had authority to declare *jihād*; when it was a collective and when an individual duty; how truces and treaties were to be concluded; and how prisoners, spoils, and protected communities were to be treated. Like Lewis and Khadduri, Peters accepts that the military dimension of *jihād* came to the fore in classical law.

Unlike more generalized accounts, however, he insists that the doctrine was neither uniform nor static. The legal schools differed, circumstances varied, and juristic debate continued, so the tradition was more differentiated than is often supposed (Peters, 1996: 1–8, 27–42).

Peters is especially interested in the modern transformation of *jihād*. Colonial expansion, the decline of the Muslim empires, the rise of the nation-state, and new political ideologies all, in his view, reshaped how Muslims understood the concept. In many twentieth-century settings, *jihād* came to mean, above all, defensive resistance to occupation and colonial rule; elsewhere it was attached to reformist, revivalist, or Islamist movements. Modern appeals to *jihād*, he concludes, are not simply continuations of medieval doctrine and have to be read in their own political, social, and ideological context (Peters, 1996: 103–148).

He also separates legal doctrine from historical practice. Beyond the juristic texts, he examines how rulers, scholars, and movements invoked *jihād* in different periods. This lets him treat *jihād* at once as a legal institution, a source of political legitimacy, a language of resistance, and an expression of religious commitment. What emerges is a layered tradition, repeatedly reformulated as intellectual and political conditions changed. Both the interpretation and the practice of *jihād*, on his account, owe as much to history as to legal reasoning.

8. Comparative Significance

The three scholars thus represent distinct approaches. Lewis reads *jihād* through politics, sovereignty, and the long relationship between Islamic and non-Islamic civilizations. Khadduri treats it as an institution of the classical law of nations and concentrates on its juridical structure. Peters, who also takes classical jurisprudence seriously, traces the doctrine across periods and closely examines its modern reinterpretation.

They nonetheless converge on one point. For all three, the classical juristic tradition is the indispensable framework for understanding *jihād*, and each places the concept within questions of political authority, legal order, relations with non-Muslims, and the external organization of the Islamic polity. This shared framework helps explain why their work remains a standard reference in Islamic studies, international law, and political thought.

9. Beyond Juridical Reduction: Recovering the Qur'anic Framework of *Jihād*

Lewis, Khadduri, and Peters thus approach *jihād* chiefly through the history of Islamic jurisprudence and political institutions, and their work has shed considerable light on the doctrine's legal and historical dimensions. What it leaves open is the question this article has posed from the start: should later juristic formulations determine what the Qur'anic concept means? Answering it means going back to the Qur'an as the primary source, read with attention to the circumstances in which its teaching on armed conflict was revealed: persecution, forced migration, aggression, the vulnerability of the early community, and its treaty relations.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. Section 10.1 examines the semantics of *jihād* and shows that the Qur'an uses the term for moral, spiritual, and discursive striving as well as for fighting. Section 10.2 turns to *fitnah* and argues that the Qur'an means by it persecution and coercion, not unbelief. Section 10.3 then applies the rule of *taqyīd al-muṭlaq* to the verses that

seem to command fighting without condition, taking *al-Baqarah* (2): 193 and the Sword Verse, *al-Tawbah* (9): 5, as test cases. The conclusion returns to the relationship between this Qur'anic discourse and the later juristic doctrine.

10. The Semantic Horizon of *Jihād* in the Qur'an

10.1. *Jihād* as a Comprehensive Qur'anic Concept

Before turning to the rules on armed conflict, it is necessary to establish the semantic range of *jihād* in the Qur'an. Lexically, the root (*j-h-d*) refers to exerting oneself to the utmost under hardship, not to military action as such. The classical lexicographers define *jihād* as expending one's full capacity (*badhl al-wusʿ wa al-ṭāqah*) in pursuit of a difficult aim (Rāghib Iṣfahānī, 1992 AD/1412 AH: 208; Ibn Manẓūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: vol. 3: 133). The term thus encompasses every form of strenuous effort and does not inherently denote warfare.

The Qur'an keeps this breadth. Armed conflict usually has its own, narrower term, *qitāl*, while *jihād* covers many kinds of striving in the cause of God. *Qitāl* can be a form of *jihād*, but the two words are not synonyms.

In several verses, *jihād* refers to moral, spiritual, and religious effort with no military sense at all:

"Whoever strives, strives only for his own benefit. Indeed, Allah is Free of need from all creation." (*al-ʿAnkabūt* [29]: 6)

Likewise:

"As for those who strive in Our cause, We shall surely guide them to Our ways. Indeed, Allah is with those who excel in goodness." (*al-ʿAnkabūt* [29]: 69)

Ṭabarī himself reads both verses in a combative sense: in verse 6 the one who strives is the one who fights "his enemy among the polytheists," and in verse 69 those who strive are those who fought the polytheists of Quraysh (Ṭabarī, n.d.: vol. 20: 10, 63). Other exegetes widened the scope. Qurṭubī, on verse 69, records Ibn ʿAṭiyyah's remark that the verse predates the command to fight and refers to striving in God's religion in general, along with views that extend it to devotion, acting on one's knowledge, and upholding the Sunnah (Qurṭubī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: vol. 13: 364–365; see also Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: vol. 25: 77–78). Ibn ʿĀshūr goes further, observing that at the time of this Meccan verse there was as yet no *jihād* in the sense of fighting (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984 AD/1404 AH: vol. 21: 36). Because the verses name no object for the striving, the wording leaves the concept open; the narrower reading is an exegetical choice rather than a requirement of the text.

The same understanding appears in the Qur'an's general commands:

"Strive for Allah with the striving due to Him" (*al-Ḥajj* [22]: 78) and "Strive in His way so that you may prosper." (*al-Māʾidah* [5]: 35)

Neither verse appears in a context of war; both sit within passages on worship, piety, and fidelity to the covenant. Several commentators accordingly take them to cover every legitimate form of striving for God, with armed combat as only one possibility (Qurṭubī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: vol. 12: 99–100; Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: vol. 5: 328, although he also allows the narrower sense of fighting). Ibn ʿĀshūr, by contrast, treats fighting as the

conventional primary sense of the word in *al-Ḥajj* [22]: 78 and regards the wider meaning as an extension of it (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984 AD/1404 AH: vol. 17: 347).

The term's breadth is clearest in passages where military action was historically or contextually impossible. In the Meccan verse "So do not obey the disbelievers, but strive against them by means of it with a great striving" (*al-Furqān* [25]: 52), Ṭabarī and Qurṭubī take the pronoun *bihi ("by means of it")* to refer to the Qur'an itself, and Ibn ʿĀshūr gives this as one of two possible readings. Rāzī, noting that the surah is Meccan and that the command to fight came only after the *hijrah*, prefers to read the striving as effort in conveying the message. Surah *al-Furqān* was revealed before fighting had been permitted, so the striving commanded here can only be striving by means of revelation, argument, and moral persuasion, not military confrontation (Ṭabarī, n.d.: vol. 19: 281; Qurṭubī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: vol. 13: 58; Rāzī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: vol. 24: 474; Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984 AD/1404 AH: vol. 19: 52).

The same root is used for parents who try to force their children to give up their faith:

"But if they strive to make you associate with Me that of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them." (*Luqmān* [31]: 15; cf. *al-ʿAnkabūt* [29]: 8)

Here *jihād* plainly means sustained pressure and coercive persuasion, not combat. Context determines what the word means; it has no inherent connection with warfare (Ṭabarī, n.d.: vol. 20: 139; Zamakhsharī, 1987 AD/1407 AH: vol. 3: 494).

The same pattern holds for believers who endured persecution before they migrated:

"Then they strove and remained patient" (*al-Naḥl* [16]: 110). Set beside migration and patient endurance, *jihād* here denotes perseverance under oppression rather than armed engagement. Ṭabāṭabāʾī ties the verse to believers who had been tortured in Mecca, then migrated, strove, and endured (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: vol. 12: 347).

In these passages, then, *jihād* is a broad ethical and religious concept that covers any sincere effort made in God's cause. Its range includes worship, moral discipline, intellectual engagement, proclaiming revelation, resisting religious coercion, patient endurance, and, where the law allows it, armed combat. Fighting is one form of *jihād* among others. This distinction underpins the reading of the verses on *qitāl* that follows and helps determine when armed struggle is legitimately prescribed.

10.2. The Semantic Field of *Fitnah*

The verses on armed conflict cannot be read properly without first settling what the Qur'an means by *fitnah*. Several passages authorize fighting until *fitnah* comes to an end:

"Fight them until there is no more *fitnah* and religion is devoted to Allah. But if they cease, then there is to be no aggression except against the wrongdoers." (*al-Baqarah* [2]: 193)

A similar formulation appears elsewhere:

"Fight them until there is no more *fitnah* and all religion belongs to Allah. If they cease, Allah sees all they do." (*al-Anfāl* [8]: 39)

The Qur'an also declares:

"*Fitnah* is more grievous than killing." (*al-Baqarah* [2]: 191)

If *fitnah* meant unbelief or polytheism, these verses could easily be taken to authorize war until disbelief itself is eliminated. Polemical critics of Islam and extremist readers of the Qur'an have both read them in this way.

Classical exegetes were divided on the term. *Ṭabarī* glosses *fitnah* in *al-Baqarah* [2]: 191 and *al-Anfāl* [8]: 39 as *shirk*, following reports from Qatādah, al-Rabīʿ, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk; yet he also preserves Mujāhid's view that it refers to a believer being turned back to idol-worship, and Ibn Jurayj's gloss that no believer should be forced away from his religion (Ṭabarī, n.d.: vol. 3: 565; vol. 13: 537–538). *Qurṭubī* records two readings of *al-Baqarah* [2]: 191: the pressure the Meccans exerted to force Muslims back into unbelief, and the polytheism of the Meccans themselves. On verse 193, however, he takes *fitnah* to mean unbelief and infers that unbelief is the cause of fighting (Qurṭubī, 1964 AD/1384 AH: vol. 2: 351, 354). *Ṭabāṭabāʾī* likewise identifies it with *shirk*, but specifically with *shirk* imposed on believers through coercion and torment, as the Meccan polytheists had done (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: vol. 2: 61–62). Among modern exegetes, Ibn ʿĀshūr reads it as the instilling of fear and the disruption of ordered life, a persecution directed against Muslims in the matter of their religion, although he still sees the end of fighting in Arabia as either conversion or defeat (Ibn ʿĀshūr, 1984 AD/1404 AH: vol. 2: 202, 208). The persecution reading, then, is not the dominant classical view. It is a minority position within the tradition, but one that the Qur'anic context itself strongly supports, as the following passage shows.

The verse that first grants permission to fight supports this reading:

"Permission [to fight] has been granted to those who are fought because they have been wronged... Had Allah not repelled some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of Allah is frequently mentioned, would surely have been destroyed." (*al-Ḥajj* [22]: 39–40)

In this passage, the purpose of fighting is to end persecution and protect religious freedom, not to remove religious diversity; monasteries, churches, and synagogues are named alongside mosques as places to be protected. Read within its Qur'anic context, then, *fitnah in these verses* means persecution, coercion, and the violent obstruction of religious life, not unbelief as such. This premise is necessary if the legal verses on fighting are to be read in line with the Qur'an's wider ethical and legal discourse.

10.3. Semantic Analysis and the Principle of Qualification (*Muṭlaq–Muqayyad*)

The semantic findings above provide the basis for applying the principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh* to the warfare verses. Islamic legal theory assumes that the Qur'an is a single coherent discourse (*kalām wāḥid*). Verses are therefore read not in isolation but in relation to other relevant texts, using established rules: *taqyīd al-muṭlaq* (qualification of unrestricted texts), *takhṣīṣ al-ʿāmm* (specification of general texts), and *al-jamʿ bayn al-adillah* (reconciliation of textual evidence).

These rules bear directly on the legislation on *qitāl*. If *jihād* is a broad ethical concept and *fitnah* means persecution and religious coercion rather than unbelief, the fighting verses cannot be detached from that framework. Verses commanding fighting have to be read

together with the verses that state its causes and limits: aggression, persecution, expulsion, breach of treaty, and the protection of religious freedom.

Commands to fight that appear unrestricted are accordingly not independent, universal injunctions. Their legal scope is set by qualifying and specifying evidence elsewhere in the Qur'an, and verses phrased in general terms are read in light of more specific passages that define when fighting is permitted. Read this way, the Qur'an maintains both semantic coherence and the integrity of its legal discourse, and no unnecessary contradictions arise between its verses.

The relation among the warfare verses is better explained by qualification (*taqyīd*) and specification (*takhṣīṣ*) than by wide-ranging abrogation. The rules on *qitāl* apply the Qur'an's broader ethical conception of *jihād* to particular circumstances. They do not override the earlier teaching on justice, treaty obligations, peaceful coexistence, and freedom of religion.

Abrogation is invoked only when genuine reconciliation is impossible (Shāṭibī, 1997 AD/1417 AH: vol. 3: 344–347; Khuʾī, n.d.: 285–286). On this point, the Shi'i tradition is notably stricter. Imāmī scholars generally accept abrogation as a legitimate part of Qur'anic hermeneutics, but many of them treat it as exceptional and demand strong evidence before applying it. *Khuʾī* holds that an apparent contradiction between verses is not enough to establish abrogation; definitive proof is required that reconciliation is impossible and that the order of revelation is certain (Khuʾī, n.d.: 284–286, 297). He also states the corollary that bears most directly on the present argument: an unrestricted (*muṭlaq*) verse cannot abrogate a qualified (*muqayyad*) one, even if it was revealed later. He makes the point in rejecting the claim that the command to fight the polytheists "all together" (*al-Tawbah* [9]: 36) abrogated the prohibition of fighting in the sacred months (Khuʾī, n.d.: 303; see also Hasanzadeh & Abedi Renani, 2021: 10). *Ṭabāṭabāʾī*, for his part, consistently prefers to resolve apparent conflicts through context and the text itself. The Qur'an, he maintains, explains itself, and tensions within it should be settled where possible through its own internal coherence rather than by declaring a verse abrogated (Ṭabāṭabāʾī, 1996 AD/1417 AH: vol. 1: 11). This is in keeping with Imāmī *uṣūl al-fiqh* more generally, where reconciling the evidence and applying qualification or specification take priority over treating a revealed ruling as inoperative.

Al-Baqarah (2): 190 and 193 offer a clear example. Read on its own, the command "Fight them until there is no more *fitnah* and religion is devoted to Allah" (*al-Baqarah* [2]: 193) may appear to be an unrestricted command to fight. The opening verse of the same passage, however, qualifies it explicitly:

"Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not love the transgressors." (*al-Baqarah* [2]: 190)

By the rule of *taqyīd al-muṭlaq*, verse 193 cannot be read independently of the qualification in 190. The earlier verse makes aggression the legal condition of fighting and so fixes the scope of the later one. Fighting "until there is no more *fitnah*" means fighting until persecution and aggression end, not until unbelief disappears.

The so-called Sword Verse, *al-Tawbah* (9): *5*, shows the same principle even more clearly. Taken by itself, it seems to issue an unrestricted command:

"When the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush." (*al-Tawbah* [9]: 5)

Its immediate context, however, supplies explicit qualifications. The verse before it exempts those polytheists who kept their treaties:

"Except those polytheists with whom you have made a treaty and who have not failed you in anything nor supported anyone against you; fulfill your treaty with them until the end of its term." (*al-Tawbah* [9]: 4)

The verse after it grants protection even to hostile polytheists who ask for asylum:

"If any of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the Word of Allah; then convey him to a place of safety." (*al-Tawbah* [9]: 6)

Under *taqyīd al-muṭlaq*, these neighboring verses define the legal scope of the command in *al-Tawbah* (9): 5. The Sword Verse is aimed not at polytheists as such but at those who violated their treaties and engaged in hostilities. It is an unrestricted (*muṭlaq*) text whose application is fixed by the qualifying (*muqayyad*) verses around it, not an unconditional command.

Conclusion

This study re-examined the expansionist readings of the Qur'anic verses on *jihād* found in the work of Lewis, Khadduri, and Peters. These readings have tended to present *jihād* as a legal instrument for the continuing expansion of Muslim rule, and so to see relations between Muslims and non-Muslims as fundamentally structured by war. The study argues that this conclusion rests on a selective reading of the warfare verses, one that pays too little attention to their semantic context and the Qur'an's own hermeneutical principles.

Combining semantic analysis with the *uṣūlī* rule of *taqyīd al-muṭlaq* yields a different framework. The semantics of *jihād* shows a concept that reaches well beyond combat, to moral, spiritual, intellectual, and social striving. Read in its Qur'anic context, the semantics of *fitnah* indicates that the fighting the Qur'an authorizes is directed not at unbelief or religious diversity but at persecution, coercion, expulsion, and the violent denial of religious freedom. And *taqyīd al-muṭlaq* requires that apparently unrestricted commands to fight be read in light of the verses that name aggression, breach of treaty, persecution, and oppression as the legal conditions for using force.

These findings bear differently on each of the three authors examined. In Lewis's case, they indicate that the division of the world into *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*, and the assumption of a standing state of war between them, belong to the juristic elaboration of later centuries rather than to the Qur'anic text; the verses on which that elaboration drew are themselves qualified by the conditions of aggression and treaty-breaking. In Khadduri's case, the universal mission he ascribes to the classical law of nations cannot be read back into Qur'anic rules that tie force to specific wrongs, not to the expansion of Muslim rule. With Peters the disagreement is narrower. He himself observes that the Qur'an can be read as permitting fighting only in response to aggression, and that classical exegesis reached the opposite conclusion largely by treating the Sword Verses as abrogating earlier verses (Peters,

1996: 2–3). The present study takes up exactly that point and argues that the qualification of unrestricted texts gives the first reading a firmer basis than abrogation gives the second.

The variety of the warfare verses is thus better explained by the Qur'an's own semantic and hermeneutical framework than by broad appeals to abrogation. The verses are not conflicting rulings. They form a coherent normative discourse whose legal scope is set by context and by the established principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

Nor is the method an outside imposition on the tradition. Khuʾī's principle that an unrestricted verse cannot abrogate a qualified one, even when it was revealed later (Khuʾī, n.d.: 303), and Ṭabāṭabāʾī's insistence that the Qur'an be read through its own internal coherence, show that the hermeneutic applied here belongs to Islamic legal theory itself. What this article adds is its systematic application to the warfare verses and its use as a standard against which expansionist readings, Muslim and Western alike, can be measured. The disagreement with those readings is therefore not one between a Western and a Muslim position. It is a disagreement about how later doctrine should be related to the text on which it claims to rest.

The study's main contribution, then, is not only to question expansionist readings of *jihād* but also to show that *taqyīd al-muṭlaq* offers a more coherent account of Qur'anic legislation on war than broad theories of abrogation. More broadly, it suggests that bringing Qur'anic semantics together with classical hermeneutical principles can yield a more textually grounded understanding of Islamic legal thought, and it offers a framework that future work on Qur'anic warfare, *jihād*, and Muslim–non-Muslim relations can test and extend.

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