

“Jihad is neither simply a blind and bloody-minded scabble for temporal power nor solely a door through which to pass into the hereafter. Rather it is a form of political action in which . . . the pursuit of immortality is inextricably linked to a profoundly this-worldly endeavor—the founding or re-creation of a just community on earth.”

Jihad and Political Violence

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In *Political Theory for Mortals*, John Seery argues that modern and contemporary political theorists have largely averted their eyes from the fact of death and thus have neglected the political implications of human mortality and the finitude it entails.¹ The resounding silence about the relationship between death and politics, Seery suggests, simultaneously reflects and reinforces a larger tendency within American culture—and the liberalism largely underlying it—to privatize the meanings and rituals surrounding death, to cordon it off, as it were, from the public realm. Given that American and European newspapers are almost daily filled with references—often accompanied by a rising

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¹*Political Theory for Mortals: Shades of Justice, Images of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). The following discussion is an adaptation of an essay written before September 11, 2001. Limited by the moment in which it was originally written and by its specific purposes, it is not an attempt to explain recent events, although I hope it may contribute to reflections upon them. Neither apologia or indictment, it is simply an effort to sort out some of the fears and distortions swirling around the meaning of jihad and engage the arguments of those who see death and killing as a legitimate and necessary part of the remaking of politics.

²As Bernard Lewis points out, there is no word corresponding to holy war in classical Arabic usage. See *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 71.

³Categories such as West and non-West provide a way to grasp and order unwieldy terrain yet do so by attempting to fix what are often porous boundaries among cultures, thereby obscuring long histories and cultural interpenetration, and occluding from view the ways in which identities in a postcolonial and now globalized world are relational, permeable, and culturally syncretic.

⁴Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Education of a Holy Warrior,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 25, 2000; Adam L. Penenberg, “Companies, People, Ideas—Digital Jihad,” *Forbes*, February 21, 2000.

note of hysteria—to *jihad*, the Arabic word commonly if misleadingly translated as holy war,² this observation points to an unfortunate gap between scholarly reflections on the premises of politics and the proliferation of rhetorical gestures and practices in which death, martyrdom, and the remaking of politics are uneasily but decisively conjoined. Whether it results in the death of others or the martyrdom of a *mujahid* (fighter of jihad), prosecuting a deterritorialized war against foreign domination, as in the September 2001 terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, or fighting authoritarian and “ungodly” national elites, as in Egypt and Algeria, jihad widely represents the most familiar and terrifying example of how action can be linked, literally, to death. Evident in such representation is an unwitting collusion between those who increasingly claim to act in the name of jihad, despite a radical diversity of contexts and causes, and those who discern a creeping jihad in all things Islamic or fanatic (often considered synonymous). One consequence is that jihad, as a term and a practice, has become part of common parlance in the “Western world,”³ so fully integrated into the English lexicon that within months of each other a *New York Times Magazine* cover story on Pakistan anatomized the inside of “Jihad University” while an article in *Forbes* documented the “digital jihad” of a rogue computer hacker.⁴

This familiarity, even preoccupation, with the phenomenon of jihad would seem to provide a unique opportunity to consider seriously the implications of death for politics and, in so doing, hold a mirror up to the collective avoidance Seery details. Yet this opportunity goes almost entirely unnoticed largely because, in the contexts in which those observers located within the so-called West most often encounter it, jihad is (with one notable exception) abstracted from the ethico-political contexts through which it is defined and instead made to sig-

nify a more general irruption of the irrational, archaic, and pathological.⁵ This is true of scholarly treatments as well as more popular accounts.

Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* contains perhaps the best-known discussion of jihad by a Western political theorist.⁶ Barber posits jihad as one part of a mutually constitutive dialectic between particularism and globalization. No fan of globalization and the march of international capitalism it partly signifies, Barber nevertheless transforms jihad into a kind of shorthand for the atavistic politics of retribalization, balkanization, fanaticism, and tyrannical paternalism—a largely pathological orientation associated with violence, intolerance, and little respect for human life. Barber intends to use jihad in a generalized way to signify a range of rabid practices, evident equally in Western and non-Western settings. Yet its evocative

power ultimately rests in Islam—the locus of what Barber calls the “essential jihad”—which is, he concludes despite caveats, “relatively inhospitable to democracy and that inhospitality in turn

nurtures conditions favorable to parochialism, anti-modernism, exclusiveness, and hostility to ‘others’—the characteristics that constitute what I have called jihad.” Thus it is *Islamic* holy war that Barber mines as a fruitful metaphor for political pathologies rather than the equally evocative language of the Christian crusades: jihad “betokens religious struggle on behalf of faith, a kind of Islamic zeal. In its strongest political manifestation, it means bloody holy war on behalf of partisan identity that is metaphysically defined and fanatically defended. Thus, while for many Muslims it may signify only ardor in the name of a religion that can properly be regarded as universalizing (if not quite ecumenical), I borrow its meaning from those militants who make the slaughter of the ‘other’ a

This reworking of jihad does not represent the revival of pure unadulterated Islamic tradition, but instead a complex fabric of selectively reinterpreted Islamic sources and precedents.

⁵The exception is a growing body of literature analyzing jihad in terms of just war categories derived from a long tradition in Western thought stretching from Augustine and Grotius to Michael Walzer. Here the focus is on Islamic justifications for war among states, refracted through thematics such as *Jus ad Bellum*, *Jus in Bello*, warrant or justification, authority, and conduct. See, for example, James Turner Johnson, *The Holy War Idea in Western and Islamic Traditions* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997).

⁶*Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

higher duty. I use the term in its militant construction to suggest dogmatic and violent particularism of a kind known to Christians no less than Muslims, to Germans and Hindus as well as to Arabs.”

Jihad vs. McWorld exemplifies a broader tendency among pundits, journalists, politicians, and scholars to reify and dehistoricize jihad, to erase the contradictions and ambivalences that have characterized its complex history and efface the changing understandings of political action that history in part reveals. This kind of misreading illuminates how it happens that, in Seery's words, “[m]ost of us Westerners view non-Western cases of political suicide as culturally pathological, and we generally lump together ‘terrorists,’ guerrilla fighters, *sati*, and *satyagraha* as crazed fanatics. Joyous Day of the Dead celebrations we dismiss as dark-skinned exotica.” Emptied of specific content, jihad comes to say

much more about the shoring up of an idealized Western public sphere in which reasoned arguments and nonviolent practices largely prevail than it does about what jihad “really is.” In short,

such fortifications mobilize cultural unease about an Islamic Other to guard against the violence, death, and religious fervor implicated in the invention, history, and continued existence of political worlds closer to home. Through these complex deployments, jihad is thus rendered the repository of contemporary anxieties about death, the irrational, the religious, and the bloody-minded in what has been defined as modern political life, a projection of old ambivalences in Western thought and new fears about the prevalence of such practices and rhetoric *within* the boundaries that demarcate the West—whether it is the bombing of the abortion clinics and the killing of doctors, the stockpiling of weapons by right-wing militias, or the resurgence of “ethnic cleansing” and anti-immigrant violence in post-cold war Europe.

Positing jihad as the catchall counterpart to and pathological side-effect of globalism does not illuminate much about jihad or what analysis of it might offer an investigation into the implications of death for politics. It does, however, underscore Seery's observation about the evasions and neglect that characterize much of Western scholarship when it comes to matters of death, and further makes visible the psychocultural “work” such eva-

sions perform and subsequently conceal. Paradoxically, perhaps, jihad is yet another occasion to evade the interplay of mortality and politics because it operates as a category through which many students of politics within the West mystify or displace, rather than confront, the politics of death.

Yet properly contextualized, jihad is a particularly illuminating way to investigate the implications of mortality and death for politics. It is illuminating, of course, given the high visibility of those who engage in it, those who report on it, and those who misunderstand it; that is, it is a particularly reflective mirror in which to view “our” own anxieties about the relationship between death and politics. Yet in the hands of contemporary Islamic “fundamentalists” (or “Islamists”), jihad is neither simply a blind and bloody-minded scrabble for temporal power nor solely a door through which to pass into the hereafter.⁷ Instead, it is a form of political action in which, to use Hannah Arendt’s language, the pursuit of immortality is inextricably linked to a profoundly this-worldly endeavor—the founding or re-creation of a just community on earth.

These arguments about jihad do not represent “Islam,” but rather express one particularly recent and influential reading of its meaning and purposes. In foregrounding the explicitly political dimension of jihad and applying it to the relations among Muslims, these Islamist thinkers at once revitalize and radically reinterpret a series of arguments about the proper scope and object of jihad in Islamic history. Islamist understandings of jihad, and the parallels in Western history they recall, challenge the insistence that such pursuits belong to a specific world long gone, or that they transpire in a wilderness of cultural Otherness far from “our” own. Indeed, in a postcolonial and now globalized world increasingly characterized by what the scholar Benedict Anderson has called “long distance nationalism” and “portable identi-

ties,” borders between West and non-West, within and without, are increasingly permeable and fluid and, as such, must be taken as appropriate subjects of analysis rather than as premises of it. Such erosion of boundaries and the deterritorialization of politics it augurs is perhaps nowhere more starkly evident than in the genealogical wanderings of jihad across both culture and history, now carried in part by the Internet and mobile mujahidin whose identities are hybrid and multiple, and who move from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to Afghanistan to Africa to the United States and back with breathtaking speed.

Understanding jihad in these terms is not intended as a justification of its diverse forms, nor does it presume that those who develop or invoke it are without “ulterior motives,” those manipulative purposes and psychological motivations that even the most rarified scriptural arguments can express or serve. Rather it is intended to help renew a lapsed discussion about the import of death for the premises of politics; in so doing, it may lend greater insight not only into jihad but also into the larger phenomenon of killing or dying for politics on which no one particular cultural constellation or historical epoch has a monopoly. Wherever it occurs, the toll of such violence on the life of the body politic can be immeasurable, for in addition to the victims who suffer directly, the “practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.”⁸ At the same time, the recurrent impulse to mitigate the finitude of human life by the at times violent remaking of a common political and social world suggests that, in the present as in the recent and ancient past, politics and death may be, for many, less opposites than premises of one another.

WHAT IS JIHAD?

Derived from the verb *jahada*, which means “to exert,” “to struggle,” or “to strive,” jihad literally means “exerting one’s utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation” or striving toward a worthy goal.⁹ When qualified by the phrase “in the path of God” (*fi sabil Allah*), jihad refers to struggle or striving in the path of God, yet the form and means of such struggle are varied in the Islamic sources. The Qur’an often refers to jihad and fighting (*qital*) against non-Muslims, yet scholars have pointed out that, in contrast to *qital*, jihad refers more generally to methods, presumably quite varied, of “bringing

⁷As “fundamentalism” was coined to describe a turn-of-the-century Christian movement in America, “Islamism” is another, slightly less controversial way of referring to Islamic fundamentalism. For a discussion of the heated debates over such terminology, and the usefulness and drawbacks of both terms, see Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), chapter 1.

⁸Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harvest Books, 1972), p. 177.

⁹Edward Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, book 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), p. 473.

religion into practice.”¹⁰ Moreover, even in contexts where jihad seems to entail some use of force, divergent verses render it unclear whether jihad is justified only in defense, or in circumstances that include expansionist conquests against unbelievers.¹¹ These ambiguities in the Qur’anic references are captured in a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, where a distinction is drawn between armed fighting against unbelievers and the struggle against one’s own desires and selfishness and the temptations of Satan: on returning from battle Muhammad is reported to have said, “We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad.” When asked which is the greater endeavor, Muhammad reportedly replied, “It is the struggle against one’s self.”¹² It is thus the internal struggle that is termed the “greater jihad” (*al-jihad al-akbar*) and is incumbent on all individuals, whereas the “jihad of the sword,” or holy war, is the lesser (*al-jihad al-asghar*) and is a collective obligation (*fard al-kifayah*).

Classical jurists would come to classify these as the jihad of the heart and of the sword, and further identified additional ways in which Muslims might struggle for the betterment of the Islamic community, such as the “jihad of the tongue” and the “jihad of the pen.”

Many references to jihad in the Qur’an and *al-hadith* (the collected words and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) thus betray a marked

ambivalence to violent struggle even in the path of God; jihad here appears less a fixed doctrine about warfare than a recurrent and flexible motif with multiple interpretive possibilities. By contrast, the doctrine of jihad, as it is now known, was codified in legal scholarship undertaken in the second half of the eighth century, the period that coincided with perhaps the greatest Muslim conquests. While jihad had been considered but one of many duties in the Qur’an, the Arab conquests, as Ann K. Lambton notes, “gave a psychological twist to Islamic thought, as a result of which the duty of jihad was exalted in the Traditions.”¹³ Against this backdrop Islamic exegetes undertook the task of categorizing and systematically ranking the Qur’anic references to jihad: later (the period in Medina where the community led by Muhammad was ascendant) Qur’anic

*Jihad can be understood as a revolutionary process
with stages that proceed from the spiritual
to the temporal realm of politics.*

references to jihad by Muhammad that render even the expansionist fight against unbelievers obligatory under any circumstances are said to

take precedence over earlier (Meccan period) references to jihad against non-Muslims by means of preaching and persuasion. The result was a doctrine in which jihad came to be equated with the “jihad of the sword,” or the “lesser jihad,” and was primarily meant to apply to the relations among Muslims and non-Muslims—or what is also referred to as *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (Abode of War).¹⁴

In its most general formulation, this doctrine came to be understood as “any act of warring authorized by legitimate Muslim authorities on behalf of the religious community and determined to contribute to the greater good of Islam or the community of Muslims, either in part or as a whole.”¹⁵ Yet many instances of battle in early Islamic history were initiated for less than high-minded purposes; for example, as W. Montgomery Watt has shown, several of Muhammad’s early military expeditions were instances of *razzia* (nomadic incursions in pursuit of booty) and many early wars of expansion were concerned with material gain rather than with the spread of Islam. The doctrine of jihad, however, sought not only to describe what had been but to reflect the relations between Muslim and non-Muslim states that obtained at the time and to codify the rules that ought to govern them: according to Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman, the jurists’ formulation justified the expansion of the

¹⁰Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* 2, S. M. Stern, ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), p. 354.

¹¹Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996), pp. 21–23; “dijihad” in B. Lewis, C. Pellat, and J. Schacht, eds., *Encyclopedia of Islam, New Edition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).

¹²Ali B. ‘Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1976), p. 200.

¹³“A Nineteenth-Century View of Jihad,” *Studia Islamica* 32 (1970), p. 181.

¹⁴“Dijihad” in H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, eds., *The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974). However, there have always been jurists who argued that as the Qur’an states “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256), such an interpretation, and the division of the world into warring opposites it presupposes, is incorrect. Hadia Dajani-Shakeel, “A Reassessment of Some Medieval and Modern Perceptions of the Counter-Crusade,” in Hadia Dajani-Shakeel and Ronald A. Messier, eds., *The Jihad and Its Times* (Ann Arbor: Center for Near Eastern and North African Studies, University of Michigan, 1991), p. 44.

¹⁵Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origins of Holy War in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 18.

political domain of Islam through territorial conquest by reference to the conversion of unbelievers and, concomitantly, to the establishment of the order on earth that the Qur'an commands. In so doing, the ambiguities of the Qur'anic references and *hadiths* were resolved into a coherent doctrine that legitimized force in defense and expansion of Islam and linked the pursuit of jihad to the realization of justice within a concrete social order, obedience to divine guidance, and the "desire to secure the well-being of all humanity."¹⁶

The eventual dissolution of an extended form of Islamic unity and the subsequent rise of many independent states raised problems for a doctrine premised on the existence of a single political entity, an *umma*, that provided clear borders between the Dar al-Islam and the Dar al-Harb. The many implications of this development and the debates occasioned by the initial adumbration of the classical doctrine of jihad—for example, differences among the schools of Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in Sunnism and Shi'ism, not to mention real disagreements among the very exegetes who first produced it—are beyond this essay's focus. Yet following the disintegration of the initial *umma* and the remarkable expansion of Islam between 1000 and 1500 AD, jihad as it was classically conceived clearly was less frequently invoked, mainly because it was not taken

to apply to the relations among Muslim states. Of course, historical practice was never fully contained within the terms of classical doctrine. There were, for example, many instances in which the language of jihad proved useful to various Muslim rulers or upstart leaders eager to stamp this or that regime or insurgency with the imprimatur of a religious mission sanctioned by God. There were also crucial moments, such as Saladin's fight against the Crusades or the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, in which the doctrine of jihad mapped well onto the relations of power among the Muslim community and those outside it. Yet the increasingly central matter of dissension among Muslims tended to fall under juristic guidelines associated with, for example, the problems of *fitna* (discord, sedition, or internal strife), or the treatment of rebels (*bughat*).¹⁷ Despite the relative elasticity of the practice of jihad, Majid Khadduri notes that from the tenth century, the idea of active jihad as formulated by the classical jurists "assumed a dormant status."¹⁸

AN ISLAMIST INTERPRETATION OF JIHAD

In the work of two foremost theorists of contemporary Sunni fundamentalism, the Pakistani jurist Mawlana Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979) and the Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), several of these countervailing tendencies regarding jihad are given perhaps their most systematic and influential expression.¹⁹ In contrast to classical doctrine and to subsequent exhortations by several prominent Sunni jurists to endure unjust Muslim rule, Mawdudi and Qutb argue that jihad is an urgent imperative that applies not only to the relations between Muslims and the newest Dar al-Harb, the unbelieving West, but also between Muslims and so-called Muslims who aid and abet Western supremacy by betraying the precepts of Islamic sovereignty and opening the door to foreign corruption. By reinscribing the cosmic battle between the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War *inside* the Muslim community, Qutb and Mawdudi represent part of what Emmanuel Sivan characterizes as a sea-change in jihad mythology, a massive inward turning in the postcolonial era.²⁰ In this sense, they mark a significant departure from antecedent doctrine and prevalent practice regarding the scope and purpose of jihad. Yet their radical rereading also draws together formerly marginal or seemingly disparate precedents in Islamic history: for example, just 25 years after Muhammad's death, a group of Muslims that came to be known as the Kharijites (plural of *khariji*, which means outsider) justified

¹⁶Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, "The Development of *Jihad* in Islamic Revelation and History," in James Turner Johnson and John Kelsay, eds., *Cross, Crescent, and Sword* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 37.

¹⁷Joel L. Kraemer, "Apostates, Rebels and Brigands," *Israel Oriental Studies* 10 (1980), pp. 34–73. The questions of who can and must be fought, when, and how are exceedingly complex; answers differ among Islamic legal schools, and theory often differs from and is modified by historical practice and vice versa.

¹⁸*War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), pp. 65–66, 74–80.

¹⁹Qutb's and Mawdudi's views on jihad do not, of course, exhaust the range of its contemporary meanings. Instructive in this connection is the claim by Khalil Abdel Alim of the American Muslim Mission that "jihad does not mean fighting a war; it means struggle for what is required of one in obedience to God." Thus "[g]etting out of bed for dawn prayer . . . is jihad." See Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World* (New York: Mentor Books, 1990), p. 113. Nor are Mawdudi and Qutb the only significant theorists of Islamic fundamentalism—although they are perhaps the most influential of the Sunni Islamist thinkers. See, for example, Yvonne Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival," in John Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 67.

²⁰"Jihad: Text, Myth, Historical Realities," in Évelyne Patlagean and Alain Le Boulluec, eds., *Les Retours aux Écritures: Fondamentalismes Présents et Passés* (Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1993), p. 94.

ment: the challenges to the rule of the Mamluks in Egypt and to the Mongol invaders in the thirteenth century who had converted to Islam yet retained many of their own legal practices. Not coincidentally, both instances occurred during “periods when the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East were dominated and profoundly influenced by foreign, that is to say, non-Islamic conquerors, and when a governing class emerged which professed Islam, but which followed many of the ways and customs of the former infidel masters.”²⁶ Mawdudi, Qutb, and contemporary Islamists who draw on their work frequently invoke such historical examples when exhorting Muslims to struggle against a world dominated by Western powers and their proxies among Muslim elites entirely unwilling to, in Mawdudi’s words, “accept the restraints and to perform the duties imposed on them by Islam.”²⁷ Mawdudi approvingly discusses Ibn Taymiyya, who had argued that ostensibly Muslim rulers who neglect or transgress Islamic law or portions thereof can be deemed infidels and legitimately killed.²⁸

These arguments are central to *Al-Jihad: al-Farida al-Gha’iba* [*The Neglected Duty or The Absent Precept*], the pamphlet written by Abd al-

Salam Faraj of the Egyptian Jihad Group, the organization that assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. As Faraj writes: “The basis of the existence of colonialism in Islamic countries is these [so-called Muslim] rulers. To undertake the annihilation of colonialism right away, then, is neither an advantageous nor useful course of action; rather, it is a waste of time. Instead, we must first concentrate upon our own affairs, and make Islamic law and the Word of God authorita-

tive in our own land. After that, there is no doubt that the first battleground of jihad will be the eradication of those same infidel leaders and the establishment of a comprehensive Islamic order in their place.”

This formulation of jihad also entails an explicit repudiation of the argument that jihad is primarily defensive. The argument that jihad is neither expansive nor offensive has been embraced by many contemporary Muslim thinkers. Mawdudi and Qutb, however, had in mind several Islamic “modernist” reformers—derisively referred to as apologists by some Islamists—of the nineteenth century, including the Indian thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the Egyptian jurist Muhammad Abduh, and his student, Rashid Rida, who sought to show that peace, rather than enmity, was the normative state of affairs between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islam.²⁹ In an argument reminiscent of Marx, Mawdudi, in *Jihad in Islam*, insists that such claims are akin to false consciousness,

Far from being archaic remnants of some tribal era, Islamist understandings of jihad entail an innovative reading of an Islamic past through the prism of contemporary dilemmas and discourses.

a legacy of colonial domination: whereas imperialists ravage the world to satisfy their greed, jihad alone “conjures up the vision of a marching band

of religious fanatics with savage beards and fiery eyes brandishing drawn swords and attacking the infidels wherever they meet them. . . .” Having internalized this image, Muslims rush to apologize and renounce armed struggle in all forms, reducing jihad to words rather than deeds; thus the colonialists retain the exclusive right to “fight with arms and ammunition while we are contented with our pen and our tongue.” As opposed to such modernist arguments, Mawdudi and Qutb regard the extent and expansionist ambitions of the new jahiliyya as a justification for a “permanent revolution” where fine distinctions between defensive and offensive jihad have little meaning. The Qur’anic (4:77) injunction to “Hold back your hands (from attacking), observe your devotional obligations and pay the *zakat* [alms]” must, according to Qutb, be properly contextualized: given the specific conditions that obtained at that moment in Muhammad’s life, Qutb contends, this command was a “question of strategy, not a matter of principle.” Jihad, he continues, is thus a “permanent condition, not an occasional con-

²⁶Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, p. 86.

²⁷*Jihad in Islam*, 6th ed. (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publications, Ltd., 1998), p. 29.

²⁸A *Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam*, trans. Al-Ash’ari (Lahore, Pakistan: Islamic Publications, Ltd., 1972), pp. 63–69. Originally published in Urdu in 1940.

²⁹Islamic “modernism” in general refers to a nineteenth-century stream of thought whose proponents posited a golden age in the earliest generations in Islamic history and sought, simultaneously, to revive and reform Islam in its image as a bulwark against the encroachments of Western power on a decaying Ottoman Empire. What is called Islamic “modernism” is not an uncomplicated embrace of the ideas and processes constitutive of “Western modernism” but is itself a hybrid.

cern.”³⁰ Reading Islamic sources through the prism of his own era, Mawdudi in *Jihad in Islam* designates Muhammad as the greatest revolutionary of all time, characterizing the call of the prophets as no less than a “charter of a complete social revolution.”

In contrast to those who have read the world as too corrupt to realize the principles of the original Islamic umma in a contemporary context, Mawdudi and Qutb insist that it is precisely the extent of the new jahiliyya that lends the struggle its urgency. Indeed, as Qutb argues in *Al-'Adala al-Ijtima'iyya fil-Islam [Social Justice in Islam]*—an earlier and somewhat “liberal” treatise—although Europe is less religious than ever, the “Crusader Spirit” lives on in the seemingly inexorable advance of Western colonization and the cultural hostility to Islam it embodies and expresses. While Islam is inherently peaceful, peace is impossible in the context of such animus.³¹ Thus the umma must be a transcendent ahistorical ideal waiting to be actualized at any moment in history—as Qutb put it in *Ma'alim fil Tariq*, a “demand of the present and a hope for the future.” Much like Marx’s argument about communism, the claim here is that while the establishment of divine sovereignty on earth is necessary—in the sense of being inevitable and desirable—it is also contingent on human action. Despite the given status of human beings as vice-regent (*khalifa*, in this context meaning God’s deputy on earth), if the virtuous society is only realized, in Yvonne Haddad’s words, “through human participation in the flow of history,” such vice-regency is not a given, nor is it fulfilled by speech, in the absence of righteous deeds.³²

This emphasis on activism transforms the understanding of what it means to be Muslim, for it represents the denial that being Muslim requires only formal membership in the visible community of believers.³³ Jihad is the form of this activism par excellence, for it is the means by which to establish

³⁰*Ma'alim fil Tariq*, pp. 67ff, 82, 68. All translations of Qutb’s work are my own from the original Arabic.

³¹Qutb, *Al-Salam al-'Alami wal-Islam [Islam and Universal Peace]* (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1974).

³²“Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival,” in John Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 21.

³³Ellis Goldberg, “Smashing Idols and the State: The Protestant Ethic and Egyptian Sunni Radicalism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33 (1991), p. 12.

a just social order and, inasmuch as it realizes human promise by acting in accordance with God’s will, an end in itself. Thus, Mawdudi writes in *Jihad in Islam* that in order “to eradicate evil and to prevent wrong Islam has prescribed that by systematic endeavor (jihad)—and, if the necessity should befall, by war and bloodshed—all such governments should be wiped out. In their place a just and equitable system of government should be erected which is founded upon the fear of God and based upon the canons He has ordained. Leaving aside personal, class, or national interests, this type of government serves all humanity. Its purpose is to make righteousness flourish and evil be obliterated. Its servants are those people alone who adopt as the one purpose of their lives ‘to command the good and forbid the evil,’ and who take government into their hands, not to serve their own purposes, but for the betterment of mankind and the service of God.”

Jihad in pursuit of divine sovereignty on earth is neither an expression of blind rage nor simply a response to an other-worldly imperative.

Since the Qur’an states that “oppression is worse than killing” (2:217), jihad against

both unbelievers and “so-called Muslims” is justified because virtuous Muslims are obligated to realize human freedom for all—and freedom is here defined as freedom from jahiliyya. And while the Qur’an also states (2:256) that “there is no compulsion in religion,” only in a state in which Islamic law reigns supreme are human beings free from enslavement to one another’s rule, and all are equal by virtue of their common submission to God. Mawdudi argues, unpersuasively, that once sharia becomes the law of the land, non-Muslims will enjoy “perfect freedom of religious belief” and the scope to “live according to their faith and creed,” provided such practices do not interfere in matters of state law or contradict Islam. Only after the constraints of jahiliyya are eradicated and replaced by the rule of sharia is authentic choice possible: as Qutb reasons in *Ma'alim fil Tariq*, “[One should always keep in mind] the principle that there is no compulsion in religion; so after the removal of the rule of men and the sole authority of Allah is established—because, of course, the totality of religion belongs to God—then there is no compulsion to adopt the faith.” Preaching and persuasion are necessary but not sufficient modes of action: tyrants are not reasoned out of power, Qutb notes, so the path to freedom must be hewn by way of the sword (*jihad bil saif*).

JIHAD AS REVOLUTION

The penultimate focus of jihad is thus this-worldly: human beings must change themselves so that they may change the world. Indeed, here jihad can be understood as a revolutionary process with stages that proceed from the spiritual to the temporal realm of politics.³⁴ Virtuous Muslims must first struggle to overcome the alienation intrinsic to jahiliyya to fight the greater battle (*al-jihad al-akbar*) within, against Satan and their own desires and ambitions. But the individual's struggle presages and also inaugurates the worldly endeavor to realize Islam as a social system. Such action, in turn, has several stages. Before engaging in jihad there must be a group of Muslims that coalesces around the commitment to jihad and thus initiates change, and there must be a stage where this group removes itself (*hijra*, meaning separation, exodus, in the model of the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD) for a period of time from the corrupting influences of *jahili* society. Yet the righteous mujahid must return to the political realm to initiate the struggle to establish divine sovereignty on earth. All struggle in this cause—ranging from preaching, persuasion, and financial contributions to martyrdom and the killing of apostates and unbelievers—is endowed with existential weight, for every action is simultaneously a means to achieve the umma on earth and a realization of the promise of human vice-regency by bringing all action into accord with God's plans and purposes. Indeed, as divine rewards in this life and the next are promised but far from guaranteed, the worldly significance of human deeds is considerably magnified. As Qutb argues in *Ma'alim fil Tariq*: “[Allah's wisdom] guarantees that believers will see the signposts along the road clearly and starkly, for [God's wisdom] establishes the course for those who wish to traverse this road to its end, whatever that end may be. Thus, the fate of their mission and of their very lives will be whatever Allah wills. . . . [I]f God

intends to actualize His mission and His religion, only He will do so, but not as recompense for human suffering and sacrifices. . . .”

This complex (in)determinacy endows those who die *fi sabil Allah* (in the cause of Allah) with a special stature among the living who remain behind. Many traditions and Qur'anic verses specify that the martyr (*shahid*) may hope for numerous rewards in the world beyond, yet the “significance of the martyr's death transcends the individual; in the eyes of ordinary Muslims, he endows his entire community with purity and grace, and his immediate family are the object of admiration and support.”³⁵ Here it is worth considering that the Arabic root of martyrdom (*shahada*), like the ancient Greek antecedent for the English “martyr,” *martus* or *marturia* (noun), *marturomai* (verb), also means to be present, to witness, and to testify—connotations that suggest the martyr lives on not only in the afterlife, but in the recollection and remembrances of the community of the living. Pericles famously eulogized those Athenians fallen in battle as deserving of “unfading praise and the most glorious of burial places—I do not mean the place where they rest, but the renown they have left behind, which will be remembered forever.” From the Shi'ite passion play that regularly redramatizes and laments the martyrdom of Husayn, the third Imam, at Karbala in 680 AD, to a recent “martyr's wedding” held for two Palestinian boys in the Gaza Strip, those who have died *fi sabil Allah* are repeatedly memorialized by ritualized performances and on occasions that recall and even reenact the loss of the righteous, retellings from which an ongoing community draws sustenance, identity, and resolve.³⁶ So understood, it is the pursuit, realization, and continued existence of the just umma in the world, and the remembrances and stories that in part constitute it, that endow such mortal deeds with a measure of immortality.

NEITHER RAGE NOR OTHER-WORLDLY IMPERATIVE

The shifting understandings of the scope and meaning of jihad evident in the Qur'an, the Hadith, and in the various juristic responses to the early Arab conquests, the invasion of the Muslim heartlands by foreign converts, and the experiences of colonialism and imperialism all suggest that jihad is less a fixed set of rules for violent, fanatical conquest than a category that refracts changing understandings about the scope and meaning of worldly action given radical political and social change. The contemporary Islamist understandings of jihad ana-

³⁴John Ralph Willis, “*Jihad fi Sabil Allah: Its Doctrinal Basis in Islam and Some Aspects of Its Evolution in Nineteenth-Century West Africa*,” *Journal of African History*, vol 8, no. 3: pp. 414–415. Interestingly, in *The Neglected Duty*, Faraj rebuts this understanding of jihad by charging that the report of Muhammad's distinction between “lesser” and “greater” jihad is a fabrication. For Faraj, the jihad that matters is that of the sword (*jihad bil saif*).

³⁵“Shahid” in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, CD-ROM, vol. 1.0.

³⁶Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 181–185, and Michael Finkel, “Playing War,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 24, 2000.

lyzed here simultaneously build on and exploit such ambiguities: the insistence that jihad pertains primarily to a common social world—and that it must apply not only to infidel governments but ostensibly Muslim ones—foregrounds those precedents in Islamic history conducive to a distinctively political revolutionary theory and practice. In this sense, it is both continuous and radically discontinuous with what has gone before. Moreover, in tying the imperative of jihad to a systematic attempt to reconstitute temporal sovereignty in the face of colonialist power and its proxies, Mawdudi's and Qutb's understanding of jihad is profoundly engaged with a "Western discourse of modernity" and those processes and modes of domination that have rendered its premises inescapable, even for those who wish to contest or eradicate them.³⁷ The very insistence on what is traditional or authentic is, after all, born out of contest; despite claims to the contrary, this reworking of jihad does not represent the revival of pure unadulterated Islamic tradition, but instead a complex fabric of selectively reinterpreted Islamic sources and precedents that respond to and inadvertently incorporate aspects of contemporary arguments about, for example, sovereignty, socialism, and rationalism.

From this vantage point, what needs to be explained are the ways in which jihad has been resignified as the atavistic politics of retribalization, particularism, and irrationality. Far from being archaic remnants of some tribal era, Islamist understandings of jihad entail an innovative reading of an Islamic past through the prism of contemporary dilemmas and discourses. And either explicitly or implicitly, action in the name of jihad has always been, at least since the Medinan period, in the service of a universalist and universalizing political and

social order. If the foregoing discussion is plausible, Barber's argument and those that are similar but far less sophisticated may disclose more of a desire to organize the world than understand it. Challenging Barber's presuppositions in this way does not entail the valorization of jihad as a heroic expression of anticolonialist struggle; appalling destruction and suffering have been inflicted in its name. Yet given the violence and coercion so often undertaken in the name of democracy, it is difficult to regard attempts to make jihad the sole repository of bloody-minded impulses as anything other than the displacement of anxieties about killing and dying for politics onto an Islamic other. Such displacement, in turn, depends on flattened (mis)understandings of a variety of non-Western thought and practices and on the other, hidden histories within the so-called West in which death (often violent) is implicated in both the creation and continued existence of even the democratic public realm.

By contrast, in the context of what is seen as pervasive jahiliyya, jihad in pursuit of divine sovereignty on earth is neither an expression of blind rage nor simply a response to an other-worldly imperative. Rather, for those who endorse it, it is a form of political action that endows human struggle to remake a common world with existential weight. Jihad simultaneously signifies an enactment of God's will and the political effort to bring into existence a public sphere in which true justice, equality, and freedom are possible. While the mujahidin may seek the ever-elusive rewards of the afterlife, jihad against modern jahiliyya entails the political struggle to realize the umma in a particular historical moment; in turn, the continued existence of the earthly umma immortalizes their efforts.

VIOLENCE AND POLITICS

I suggested earlier that this perspective recalls Arendt's elegiac evocation of a time and a place where "men entered the public realm because they wanted something of their own or something they had in common with others to be more permanent than their earthly lives."³⁸ Crucial to Arendt's argument, however, is that this pursuit of worldly immortality transpired in a specific public space forged in a particular historical epoch that cannot be resurrected, even if it were desirable. The world she evokes disappeared with what she calls the triumph of the eternal over the immortal, and the victory is traced to two sources: the fall of the Roman Empire, which demonstrated the finitude of all works of human hands; and the rise of Christianity,

³⁷Of course, while Islamists such as Qutb and the Ayatollah Khomeini are highly critical of scientific rationalism, for example, both insist that the technological and scientific advancements that are its fruits are permissible. Indeed, audiocassettes were often the means by which religious sermons critical of the Shah reached the Iranian populace prior to the 1979 revolution, and as Farhang Rajaee shows, the Islamic government has selectively embraced modern technologies and scientific innovations ever since, ranging from computers and television to military technology and the distribution of birth control devices to curtail a population explosion. Farhang Rajaee, "Islam and Modernity: The Reconstruction of an Alternative Shi'ite Islamic Worldview in Iran," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalisms and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 117–121.

³⁸*The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 55.

in which the ancient emphasis on earthly and collective immortality was displaced by the preoccupation with the eternal life of the human individual: "Political activity, which until then had derived its greatest inspiration from the striving toward worldly immortality, now sank to the low level of an activity subject to necessity, destined to remedy the consequences of human sinfulness and to cater to the legitimate wants and interests of earthly life. Aspiration toward immortality could now only be equated with vainglory; such fame as the world could bestow on man was an illusion, since the world was even more perishable than man, and a striving for worldly immortality was meaningless, since life itself was immortal."

Once immortality is a potential associated with individual life rather than the world, human existence becomes the highest good. This is so not because of any lasting significance to worldly events and human actions, but because simple existence is the penultimate step to eternal life. Despite the fact that, for Arendt, the "outstanding political characteristic of our modern secular world seems to be that more and more people are losing the belief in reward and punishment after death," we in the contemporary world still labor in the shadow of that fateful inversion: politics largely remains the handmaiden of necessity, mired in the instrumental pursuit of interests, the play of power, and the mere maintenance of life.³⁹ In an age characterized by the rise of the social, the permanent loss of the public realm, and the common world on which it depends, Arendt argues, political action in pursuit of earthly immortality is consigned to oblivion.

³⁹Arendt, "Religion and Politics," in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 383.

⁴⁰Consider, for example, the philosophy of Satyagraha associated with the Indian independence movement led by Mohandas K. Gandhi. This entailed a commitment to divine truths that could be approached only by way of a certain disposition to action among human beings on earth: honesty, integrity, *ahimsa*—the renunciation of violence and the will to kill or damage another—and preparedness to suffer unto death.

⁴¹"Puritanism as a Revolutionary Ideology," in S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Protestant Ethic and Modernization: A Comparative View* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 120–121.

⁴²As Bernard Lewis writes, "[t]hroughout the history of Christendom there have been two powers: God and Caesar. . . . always there are two, with its own laws and jurisdictions, its own structure and hierarchy. . . . [T]he distinction between church and state, so deeply rooted in Christendom, did not exist in Islam." *The Political Language of Islam*, pp. 2–3.

There are, of course, many other cultural and religious worlds in which the "modern condition" in Arendt's sense might very well be another experience altogether, not least because the triumph of the eternal over the immortal she ties so closely to the demise of the Roman Empire and the rise of Christianity cannot be presumed to be the defining moment of politics in all contexts.⁴⁰ Yet it is not necessary to look to worlds less familiar to complicate the conclusion that politics and immortality were conjoined in one particular way only in a specific moment long gone. Paradoxically perhaps, this becomes most evident in those complex Western deployments of jihad aimed as much at concealment as illumination, for they inadvertently bring into sharp relief that which has been displaced or forgotten. Thus the "permanent revolution" of contemporary Islamists not only evokes current abortion-related violence justified in the name of Christianity but also recalls, for example, what

Michael Walzer characterizes as the "constant warfare" waged by Puritan saints of the European Reformation against both "their own natural inclinations and against

the devil and his worldlings."⁴¹ This is despite the repeated insistence on a radical divide between the intimacy of religion and politics in Islam, and the Christian distinction between temporal and divine authority.⁴² As in the work of the Islamist revolutionaries, politics is the terrain on which God's will is penultimately realized and through which the mortality of his soldiers is at once mitigated and extended.

Such parallels between sixteenth-century Puritans and twentieth-century Islamists exist against a background of significant differences. Yet taken together they show that the lessons of history do not render the pursuit of earthly immortality "futile and unnecessary" because there are and always have been forms of political action in which the answer to Silenus's question about what makes life worth living is not deferred to a realm in the hereafter but is possible only through participation in this world. More specifically, my analysis of Islamist understandings of jihad, and the echoes with the Reformation and radical elements of contemporary Christianity it brings into sharp relief, suggests that Arendt may have been premature and perhaps parochial to see in the advent of supposedly universal modern conditions the extinction of the pursuit of earthly immortality and the pri-

Positing jihad as the catchall counterpart to and pathological side-effect of globalism does not illuminate much about jihad.

macy of politics it entails. More important, this analysis suggests that contemporary conditions do not foreclose the possibility of escaping a world in which politics is concerned with mere necessity, pursuit of self-interest, and the play of power; on the contrary, perhaps it is precisely in the revolt against such purportedly inescapable “modern conditions” that alternative conceptualizations of politics and what it may mean to be modern emerge and are at times violently pursued.

This is not to say that jihad replicates Arendt’s specific understanding of earthly immortality as the memorialization of lives and deeds among distinct and equal citizens inhabiting a public sphere that endures beyond a single lifetime. My purpose here is not to update or test Arendt’s theory but rather to deploy the evocative connections she elaborates so powerfully to foreground understandings of jihad obscured by the displacements and projections swirling around it. In fact, as in the Puritan revolution, the political meaning of jihad outlined here is contingent on the existence of a transcendent divinity; it thus presupposes a metaphysics Arendt eschews. In Islamist understandings of jihad, moreover, violence is a legitimate expression of political action because, in contrast to Arendt’s argument in “On Violence,” it is not solely distinguished by its instrumental character. All struggle in the name of jihad is guided and justified by a divinely authorized plan, yet inasmuch as each instance of action simultaneously signals submission to divine authority and commitment to its earthly and public manifestation, it is an end in itself. Whether it issues in the killing or others, the martyrdom of the mujahidin, or both simultaneously, violence in the

name of jihad is but one category of action on a continuum of what is seen as intrinsically legitimate and existentially significant struggle.

Although many political theorists are skeptical of the specificity of Arendt’s understanding of politics, a remarkable range share her conclusion: whether constituted in part by shared understandings, deliberative practices, or rules of procedural justice, politics is said to end where violence begins because killing for politics entails, in essence, killing politics itself. Yet, of course, the Athenian city-state so important to the idea of democracy was founded in violence and had bloody borders; violent struggle and actual death made possible a political sphere in which free and equal male citizens could meet to discuss common ends. Indeed, the restriction of citizenship in this instance points to the violence of exclusion as well, here the exclusion of women, slaves, and resident aliens from the category of citizen, just as the mujahid poised for battle or martyrdom is ineluctably male.⁴³

Fundamental and crucial differences exist between violent death and such violating exclusions, of course, yet they represent points along a single continuum of violence broadly understood; both disclose the ways in which foundings, in Melissa Matthes’s words, “often seem to violate the most basic principles of the political communities they seek to inaugurate.”⁴⁴ As William Connolly suggests, from the subordination of women in Rousseau’s *Social Contract* to the brutality against Native American populations, a “legacy of violence” is part of the paradox of political foundings, an inheritance at once denied and omnipresent in the ongoing existence of even the democratic territorial state.⁴⁵ This is no less true of those of radical revolutions of renewal that move, often by way of the sword, from the margins to the center than those political foundings that claim to create something out of nothing. Augustine saw in this mutual implication of violence, death, and politics an other-worldly imperative; my suggestion is that these Islamist understandings of jihad recall less Augustine’s lament than Machiavelli’s suggestion not that all politics is violent, but that the violence of a founding may be the precondition to politics at all. ■

⁴³There is, however, an important tradition in which Muhammad was reported to have permitted some women to come with him to war to assist the wounded. See Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, pp. 16–17. And even Mawdudi exhorts women and children to be prepared to lay down their lives in the cause of a jihad repelling India from Pakistan.

⁴⁴*The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2000), p. 9.

⁴⁵“Democracy and Territoriality,” in Frederick M. Dolan and Thomas L. Dumm, eds., *Rhetorical Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 251.