
Since the attacks of the 11th September 2001 the question of jihad in the sense of holy war has been of major interest for the non-scientific public as well as for researchers in the field of Islamic Studies. This book’s author, Michael Bonner, is Professor of Medieval Islamic History at the University of Michigan and has been working on the topic of jihad in Islamic history for a couple of years, especially in connexion with the Arab-Byzantine relations in the early Islamic period. The book was first published in French in 2005 under the title Le jihad. Origines, interprétations, combats. Its English version is a revised edition. It concentrates mainly on early Islamic times, but also gives an overview of the different aspects of jihad over the many centuries of Islamic history. At the end Bonner discusses some characteristics of jihad in the modern and contemporary period and tries to analyse to what extent there is a continuity of jihad from the beginnings of Islam until present.

In the preface Bonner says that his main intention is to provide general readers with an introduction to jihad, especially to the origins of jihad within the history of Islam. His first focus is to sketch out the most important ways in which jihad has been identified in past and present times. His second focus is to present three theses of his own concerning jihad and its origins, i.e.:

1. There are two different, but interrelated thematic areas in the Quran: on the one hand notions of gift and reciprocity, generosity, charity and care of the poor and unfortunate; on the other hand recompense, requital and reward relating especially to jihad and the conduct of war.
2. The basic elements of jihad came into being during the lifetime of Muḥammad and the rise of Islam. However, the doctrine of jihad as we know it today did not develop until the end of the eighth century when the Abbasid Caliphate was consolidating its power.
3. Bonner proposes to consider many of the dynastic states in the various parts of the Islamic world as frontier societies and thus an outcome of the doctrine and practice of jihad. Crucial for that was the participation of many religious scholars in wars along the frontiers.

After discussing the concept of jihad with all its facets in the Quran, Bonner proceeds with the analysis of jihad (both “greater” and “minor” jihad) in the literary genres of sīra, maghāzī and hadīth in which it is a topic of high importance. Especially from the latter genre it becomes clear that the warriors who combat against the enemies of the...
Islamic community and thus for God and who strive for the propagation of faith are promised to receive divine reward.

The book’s fifth chapter is dedicated to the concept of martyrdom which is of particular relevance due to the growing number of suicide attacks inside and outside the Islamic world. The author first analyses martyrdom as it is depicted in the Quran. There no direct indication can be found that a shahīd is one who dies in a battle. In the ḥadīth, however, martyrdom is described in detail with all its rewards like going immediately to paradise, receiving extra reward for death and burial in enemy territory, etc. Although there are several categories of non-combatant martyrs, martyrdom in armed struggle has always been at the core of the matter. Self-sacrificing though is seen with extreme caution by the Islamic jurists. Most of them argue that the positive outcome to be expected has to be considered very carefully before taking any action. But in any case, self-sacrificing activity on the battlefield was never equated with suicide, which is condemned.

Over the first Islamic centuries the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates succeeded in expanding the Muslim empire from the Atlantic coast far into Central Asia and India. Bonner identifies common features of the societies existing at the fringes of Islamic territory. As one of these he considers the phenomenon of men of religious learning taking it upon themselves to perform jihād in person. Along the various frontiers of the Islamic empire, warfare against neighbouring non-Muslim states remained a constant topic for a long period of time and evoked the engagement of local ‘ulamā’ in defining the concept of jihād—persons who were often themselves taking part in military actions and at the same time making a claim to authority for themselves in matters of law and belief by looking back to the precedent of the Muḥammadan and the early Muslim community.

Bonner figures out several protagonists performing jihād whose coming into existence was influenced by the long-term experiences of hostilities with non-Muslim neighbours: first, the tribal warriors, who acted as a fighting force establishing new political formations; second, the rulers, i.e. the caliphs and governors, whose aim in conducting jihād was to provide legitimation for the holders of power and for the existing structures of ruling; third, the scholars in a broader sense, who suggested a wide range of options of defining jihād including the actual performance of warfare, the fixing of its norms, the reenactment of idealized versions of the early Islamic community and its wars, the performance of the internalized “greater jihād”, etc.; fourth and especially important, the volunteers, known as mujāhidūn, murābiṭūn, ghuzāt or under several other titles. Of course, these different roles often overlapped with each other.

The ninth chapter deals with jihād in modern times. Bonner emphasizes that he does not offer a comprehensive outline of jihād in the contemporary world, but intends to present some fields in which that “new jihād” has continuity with its historical precedent or lacks it. The colonisation of vast parts of the Islamic world led to a reassessment of the concept of jihād. The Muslims’ answers to that question were twofold. Some, like the Indian thinker Saiyid Aḥmad Khān, maintained that jihād could only be allowed in cases of outright oppression. Since the British guaranteed