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The Misconception of Jihad in America

Jihad is most often translated as “holy war.” This phrase is not unfamiliar to Americans. It is often heard on the news and read in bold print on published article titles. War itself has a negative connotation to begin with; however associating it with a certain religious view can strike fear in the heart of others. This concept may seem especially frightful to one who does not understand the philosophical concept behind such a word. Due to the terrorist attacks on September 11th, the generalized American public entertains the misconception that all aspects of Islam and Muslim culture are harmful and jihad is synonymous to war. Would Americans think differently if they knew that a more direct translation of jihad would be “struggling” or “striving?” The Islamic Supreme Council of America states that the philosophy behind jihad “can refer to the internal and external efforts to be a good Muslim as well as working to inform people about the faith of Islam” (Kabbini, 10). This explanation can be used to describe how any other religion would go about being devout to their beliefs. Islam does not condone acts of terror. War is only legitimized when there are no peaceful alternatives and the motivation is pure, with good intention to combat injustice. This paper will discuss jihad, the misconceptions which surround the idea in America, and the efforts to move past such misconceptions.

Jihad, an Introduction

The philosophy behind jihad takes many forms. Jihad may be in reference to the internal, personal struggle to achieve peace as a Muslim, spreading knowledge of Islam and Muslim society, and as a last resort, militaristic action to protect this

struggle- the struggle to defend Islam. The internal jihad encourages efforts of Muslims to live by their faith as best as possible. Regardless of religion, any devout believer strives to live their life in a way that would please their God. With this in mind, Muslims strive or struggle to live by God's standards. This includes the five pillars of Islam – the backbone of the Islamic faith: profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The term holy war refers to when the Prophet, Muhammad, came back from battle and stated: "We are finished with the lesser jihad; now we are starting the greater jihad.' He explained to his followers that fighting against an outer enemy is the lesser jihad and fighting against one's self is the greater jihad (holy war)" ("Jihad"). The controversy as to which aspect of jihad is greater and actually the holy war is one source of confusion, which fuels misconceptions of Islam.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, there are three modern interpretations of jihad. The first "arose in the late nineteenth century in response to Western criticism that jihad meant "holy war" and that Islam was spread through force. Muslim apologists argued that the Qur'an and Prophetic traditions allow war only for self-defense against persecution and aggression." The second approach is referred to as the modernist: "jihad in the modernist view is the Islamic equivalent of the Western idea of just war, a war fought to repel aggression with limited goals and by restricted means." And last, the third is classified as the revivalist, which limits jihad to self-defense and that the "goal of jihad today ought not to be to coerce people to accept Islam, because the Qur'an clearly encourages freedom of worship" (Hashmi).

Jihad as holy war is legitimized when it is done with the right intention. An example of this includes waging wars against oppression or a figure of injustice. According to an article published by the BBC, "Permissible reasons for military Jihad include self-defense, protecting the freedom of Muslims to practice their faith, putting right to a wrong, etc." Jihad, in reference to war, does not condone killing innocent people, acts of terror, killing others who do not practice the Islamic faith, or acting upon personal anger. Jihad is not forcing groups to convert to Islam or demonstrating power over others. The act of war itself has specific limitations and rules which keep its intentions pure and aim to do the least harm. Rules of jihad include: women, children and innocent people may not be killed, the opponent must have started the fight, enemies must be treated with justice, wounded enemy soldiers must be treated, property must not be damaged, poisoning is forbidden, the war must stop as soon as the enemy asks for peace, etc. ("Jihad"). The concept of jihad has been twisted in America, due poor public education of the topic and the September 11th terrorist attacks, so much so that misconceptions have established lasting effects of for decades, possibly centuries, to come.

Misconception: "Jihad" is synonymous to "War"

In order to understand the misconception that Americans have adopted, perceiving jihad as war, it is relevant to recall the historical relationship between Islamic countries and the United States. Al-Qaeda, a militant Islamic organization, created by Osama bin Laden and others was founded in 1989. It is considered an extremist, jihadist group. Al-Qaeda aimed to create a global Islamic society. Jihad is

referred to in a militaristic context here. Al-Qaeda has attacked many countries, civilians, and landmarks; however one of the attacks that scarred the United States and world the most were the September 11th terrorist attacks. Shortly after, the “War on Terror” began.

When the World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th, 2001, Islamic terror became real. Instead of an idea, the act was tangible. The incredible number of casualties, the scale of the attack, and the fact that the United States was taken by surprise immediately instilled fear in the hearts of Americans. It is important to note that, “Islamic terrorism was certainly not a new phenomenon... Al-Qaeda was no less known to many in academia and government professions as well as others. Yet... the answer to why this happened could be elaborated upon almost indefinitely” (Turner, 2). With everyone answering why they believed this tragic event occurred, it seems only natural that the scope of misunderstanding grew so large.

Americans looked toward public broadcasting, radio, and the Internet, to help explain why America was attacked, and the answers were insufficient. Had the public been educated on Islam and jihad before the attacks, they would have known that the Al-Qaeda group was a Muslim extremist group and in no way is an accurate representation of the Islamic faith. Americans would have also known that the concept of a “holy war” is not the only aspect to jihad, and that in fact it is the last, lesser aspect of jihad. Americans would have known that Islam is a peaceful denomination and does not motivate its followers to destroy those who do not follow the same faith. With these misconceptions just being some of the many

issues, it did not help that in addition to the content issue, the countless reporters simply misused the information that they were given to share. What the American public essentially received was a correlation between what had just happened, Islam, and the phrase “holy war.”

Dispelling the Misconception: Jihad is *not* Synonymous to War

There are three simple facts that would dispel the misconceptions that surround the perception of jihad in America, post 9/11. First, Islamic extremists performed the September 11th terrorist attacks. The individuals from Al-Qaeda who participated in the acts of terror are not an accurate representation of the Muslim religion or jihad holistically. Al-Qaeda was aimed to make a political statement about forceful jihadism, and they did. This is the most important fact to remember. Additionally, the act itself, suicide bombing, is forbidden in Islam. It is viewed as “challenging the authority of God who determines the span of our lives... the Qur’an promises a heavenly reward to those who die in deference of the faith, but suicide is not part of that vision” (Hussain, 135). Second, Islam as a whole teaches peace, not violence. Many aspects of the Islamic faith teach self-control, seeing beauty in all things, and tolerance. This tolerance includes accepting the faiths of those who are not Muslim. The Islamic faith takes root in Jewish and Christian beliefs. The Qur’an explicitly states that “whoever believes in God and the Day of Judgment and does good, they shall have no fear neither shall they grieve” (5:69). Regardless of faith, a believer is not referring to those who are Muslim but any believer of God. Last, as examined earlier in the paper, jihad refers to the inner struggle to follow what God expects a good Muslim to be. War is the last resort to

jihad, and is only done with proper intentions. Militaristic Jihad is referred to as the “lesser jihad,” because the inner struggle or striving is that much more important.

Effects of such Misconceptions in America

There were three main effects created by the misconception of this “act of jihad”: an uneducated, American public, security issues, and a new wave of racism toward American-Muslims. First, the biggest impact was the sheer scale of people who were uneducated on Islam and its practices now believing untrue allegations about the faith. This first effect gave way to the next effect; second, the issue of national security struck fear in every American’s heart. The terrorist attacks again, solidified that terror was not just an idea but something had become of it. Though unknown to the public, since the terrorist attacks, “the Muslim-American community has helped security and law enforcement officials prevent nearly two of every five al Qaeda terrorist plots threatening the United States” (Gallup). This positive reaction, interestingly enough, made the Muslim-American community the “largest single source of initial information to authorities about these few plots,” (Gallup). A little known fact though, is that: “the U.S. identified more than 160 Muslim-American terrorist suspects and perpetrators in the decade since 9/11, just a percentage of the thousands of acts of violence that occur in the United States each year” (Gallup). The light that shines upon violence in America by the media may be drawing more attention to Muslim Americans rather than the security issues and violence at home. This extreme fear contributed to the American public correlating Jihad with “holy war.” Last, there have been numerous studies done that display racism towards Muslims in America- profiling and hate crimes- that have occurred

since 2001. There has been a rise in hate crime toward Muslims in America since the terrorist attacks. The fear, lending itself to become mistrust and discrimination, has had a large effect on the Muslim community and any one who may look to be Muslim in appearance. Muslims in America today face the fear of violence and of hate in places such as the airport, school and work. There is also constant opposition when any mosque is planned to be built, for fear that it will some how lead to another organized attack. A Cornell University study “found that twenty-nine percent (of the public) agreed that undercover law enforcement agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations, in order to keep tabs on their activities and fundraising” (Cabili, 13).

All of these effects have a greater overarching theme in common: Islamophobia. A trend noticed was that: “While research on... Islam has already been important since the 1980s, there were hardly any publications on attitudes towards Muslims before 9/11” (Helbling). Islamophobia is specifically described as: “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (Gallup). The European Muslim Initiative for Social Cohesion (EMISCO) defines Islamophobia as “a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated with fear, mistrust, and hatred of Islam and its adherents” (Balkan). Some studies have shown that after the attacks, Americans were not necessarily more Islamophobic, but they simply came together with this in common. Other studies have shown that Americans are more afraid of Islam than Muslims as people. They simply “fear the

religion, but for example, really enjoy the company of their Muslim neighbor (Helbling).

Due to extreme fear and lack of media attention, the general public will never hear of or understand the magnitude of the effect this event and misunderstandings has had on Muslims in America. Post 9/11, Muslim Americans have had to battle many hardships. Researchers have found many cases of “anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress disorder among a population some call doubly traumatized – first by the attacks themselves and then by the finger-pointing that followed;” however, “they’ve also found effective coping and resilience, especially among young Muslim Americans” (Clay, 72). Clay goes on to discuss how Muslim-Americans were effected by backlash of the 9/11 attacks in three ways: the act of the event, adverse reactions from individuals, and government legislature aimed at this population. Going off this point, Clay notes that the media also selectively highlights negative news focusing on Muslims that would not be allowed if said about a different community. The study found that Muslim-Americans cope with the trauma via both religious and non-religious outlets. Non-religious strategies for, “Muslims and non-Muslims – resulted in positive changes, such as strength and an appreciation of life. Those who isolated themselves from others experienced greater depression and anger” (Clay). September 11th had an effect on all Americans- Muslim or otherwise. The effects of the misconception of jihad and Islam have permeated society. Despite being alienated and discriminated against, the American pride that younger generations feel “gives young Muslims resilience... they feel that (as) Americans, they have certain rights and can stand up for their

rights” (Clay). Extreme efforts are being made to educate the public, fight for fair treatment of Muslims, and recreate America’s mental association with Islam.

Efforts to fix Misconceptions

Although there is no foreseeable end to the effects of the misconceptions discussed, there are serious efforts being taken in order to correct the current beliefs of jihad and Islamic culture in America. An example of this is the Muslim civil rights and advocacy group called CAIR. CAIR is an acronym, which stands for the Council on American-Islamic relations. Their mission is to “enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding” (CAIR). The Council, based out of Washington D.C., works to end the defamation of Islam and Muslims in the media and by public officials. As an issue of importance and an issue mentioned in this paper, as well as another topic of interest for CAIR is Islamophobia. The Council on American-Islam Relations stands on the foundation that there “are few Islamophobes... but the vast majority of Americans are people who have been misinformed, who don’t know the truth” (CAIR). The organization guides efforts to educate the public and encourage interfaith dialogue between Muslims and other religions in order to help educate Americans on Islam. The council found that, “in 2012, CAIR rates Islamophobia as a 5.9 on a scale of one to 10, with one representing an America free of Islamophobia and 10 being the worst possible situation for Muslims. In 2010, CAIR rated the state of Islamophobia in America as a 6.4” (CAIR). There was a period of extreme Islamophobia in 2010, which was stirred up due to the controversy over building a mosque by Ground

Zero. This significant reduction can be attributed to the decline of phobia after this point of culminating fear. According to CAIR's *Legislating Fear Report*, in 2011 and 2012, 78 propositions to amend laws, in ways that disparaged Muslim-Americans, were proposed. Many of them were deemed unconstitutional; however the CAIR stood firmly against these actions to combat Islamophobia (CAIR). The Council continues to take a stand when it comes to religious tolerance, separating Islam from violent extremists, racial profiling, women's rights, freedom of worship, and many more issues that surround the topic, including jihad. The organization is dedicated to providing an Islamic perspective on issues of importance to the American public.

Another group dedicated to promoting justice for all is Muslim Advocates. This American Muslim group leads strategic lawsuits, policy advocacy, and communication with the goal of ending profiling and countering hate (Muslim Advocates). The organization works on the frontier of civil rights to reach justice and freedom for all religious faiths. In addition to the Council on American-Islamic relations and Muslim Advocates, there are many other groups that strive to dispel the common negative misconceptions that surround jihad and Islam in America. Muslim Advocates has taken on many cases recently to prove the existence and find consequences for those who perform hate crimes towards American-Muslims. This is a hurdle in it of itself. Not only is it difficult to prove a crime was motivated by hateful reasons, but most hate crimes are not reported because people believe that the authorities will not help. Muslim Advocates has been developing online resources that help victims, both Muslim and Non-Muslims, report hate crimes

(Khera). Organizations work tirelessly; however without the participation of the public, there will be no relief.

Conclusion

War itself has a negative connotation to begin with; however associating it with a certain religious view can strike fear in the hearts of others. Jihad, more commonly known to Americans, as “holy war,” has become a source of misconceptions about the Islamic faith. Jihad is more accurately described as the struggle to be a dedicated Muslim. In times of self-defense and when motivated by just intentions, war may be used as a tool to continue being a devout Muslim. After a rough past with Islamic nations, following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, jihad was only regarded as war. Muslims across America were subjected to racial profiling and acts of racism. The country fell into a state of Islamophobia, because the public was not educated on the reality of Islam. What Americans must re-learn is that Islam is not a violent religion, and that jihad does not encourage fighting-including fighting non-believers of Islam. First of all, the terrorist attacks were not an accurate representation of Jihad. The individuals responsible for this were Muslim extremists. In no way is jihad synonymous to war; in fact, Islam teaches peace. Going to war is a last resort. Additionally, Islam took its roots with acknowledgement of Jewish and Christian beliefs as well. Jihad is not a motive to be intolerant of other religions. The rift that divides the ignorant or fearful and those fighting for justice for all will continue to grow unless Americans can learn to dispel these and their own misconceptions of Islam and jihad. Civil rights groups, such as CAIR, have made great efforts to reverse the effects of misconceptions surrounding

this topic; however, in order to begin reversing the misconstrued ideas, which have lead to misconceptions of Jihad, everyone needs to be a part of the change. This begins by being informed- thus was the goal of this paper.

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