

Muslim voices: what scholars say ...

In March 2017, a panel discussion was hosted by the Al-Khoei Foundation in London. Speaking on the panel were:

- **Ayatollah Dr Sayyid Fadhel H Al-Milani (Shi'a)** almilani.com/English
- **Imam Monawar Hussain (Sunni)** www.theoxfordfoundation.com/about
- **Sheikh Mohammed Al-Hilli (Shi'a)** en-gb.facebook.com/sheikhhilli/
- **Zameer Hussain (Shi'a)** themuslimvibe.com/author/zameerhussain
- **Dr Chris Hewer**, a scholar of Christian-Muslim relations
www.chrishewer.org

Explain Muslim beliefs about weapons of mass destruction

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): The Muslim perspective is that in the Qur'an (5.32) God the Almighty states that 'whomsoever kills another individual unjustly, it as if they have killed the whole of humanity'. Therefore, in Islam, using any means that causes death to a large number of people, innocent civilians included, is not acceptable. There is a lot of emphasis with regards to inclining towards peace. In Qur'an 8.61 God says 'if the enemy inclines towards peace then you should also incline towards peace, and trust in God'. This was the practice of the Prophet, peace be upon Him and his family, and in Islam, the preservation of the life of innocent civilians is primarily important. You also need to take into consideration that Islam calls for the protection of the environment, as well as the people's personal belongings.


Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): In Islam, the ethics of warfare is that no poison, no chemical weapons, nothing like this is to be used in the battlefield. Elderly, children and women are safe and no one has the right to attack them. Muslims are not allowed to chase those who escape from the battlefield. These are part of the ethics of warfare. That's why mass destruction is not acceptable in Islam at all.

Imam Hussain (Sunni): I'd say that the first objective of *Sharia* is the preservation of life and so warfare is always the last resort. Your question refers to weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Clearly, there are conditions attached to warfare. To fight those who fight you is one of the principles. When we employ WMDs, those weapons don't discriminate between those who are combatants and non-combatants, and therefore, in my humble opinion, (and I am no Sheikh by the way, I'm just a student of Islam) WMDs would be prohibited and not used. That's why it is problematic when states have them – Muslim states like Pakistan, but also the UK; it raises ethical dilemmas – what's the point of having a weapon (into which we put so much money) and that will kill everyone, not just our enemies?



Explain Muslim beliefs about pacifism

Imam Monawar Hussain (Sunni): I think there is an argument to be made for pacifism. For example, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in Pakistan began a movement of pacifism. We need to look at the life of the Prophet (pbuh) during his time in Makkah, when there was terrible persecution and killing of the community. The Prophet's response was to win through by argument – to use the Qur'an as an argument against people who are against you. I think there is a strong argument that pacifism can be justified within the Islamic tradition, just by looking at the *Sirah* – the life of the Prophet (which should be used by students more).



Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): First of all, Islam is not a pacifist religion. However, the emphasis on peace in the Qur'an and in the teachings of the Prophet and in the teachings of the Shi'a tradition of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, is immense. For example, in the Qur'an, Paradise is known as the 'Valley of Peace'. In 10.25, the Qur'an says 'God invites you to the Valley of Peace'. There is so much emphasis on peace that the Muslim greeting is 'peace be upon you', a supplication asking God to bestow peace upon each other. Peace is so important that one of God's exalted names is Peace – *As-Salaam*. In Qur'an 59.23 God himself says that 'one of my names, one of my attributes is peace'.

Why is Islam not a pacifist religion? Because it honours the rights of citizens in self-defence and to rise against oppression. An important verse is Qur'an 2.190, where God says, 'fight those for the sake of God who fight you but never transgress because God dislikes the transgressors'. So there is a limit – if you're attacked you should be able to respond in self-defence and certainly if your land is occupied, for example, you cannot just say 'I'll accept it'.

An example from the life of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) to indicate the inclination towards peace is the conquest of Makkah when, in the year 8 after migration, the Prophet went with a huge Muslim army to regain Makkah after he was driven out and not a single drop of blood was shed. Despite all these people persecuting him, his companions and those people around him, yet he said, 'today is the day of mercy and forgiveness, not the day of vengeance'.

Zameer Hussain (Shi'a): If you notice in the Qur'an when it talks about that incident, God calls it the biggest victory, without blood being shed. Also, I think of the incident of Ashura – a clear indication that when your rights are being taken you should stand up for yourself – that was the epitome of standing up to oppression. The third *Imam*, Imam Hussain, had no other option than to say 'speak out'. The aim is always that we don't want to fight whatsoever, but when rights are being violated, Islam does say stand up for yourself. Proportionality must be assumed – there are clear parallels to Just War theory in Christianity.

Imam Hussain (Sunni): Here is a slight disagreement, I think. For most mainstream Sunni Muslims, the view is that as long as a leader of your state allows you to practise your faith, even though they are oppressive, you are not to take up arms against him or her, or arms against the state. I think that is where there is a difference. That is not to say that there is not a minority view within Sunni Islam that would justify taking up arms, but on the whole as Sunnis we are not permitted to take up arms. That's because it can cause chaos and, at times, increased suffering.

Explain Muslim beliefs about forgiveness

Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): We have many traditions of the Prophets and the *Imams* that if you want to be forgiven by God, exercise forgiveness to those who are under your control. And we have other traditions from the Sixth *Imam*, Imam Jafar al-Sadiq, that there are characteristics that are very important for every Muslim. First, the ability to forgive. In the Qur'an we have a command to exercise forgiveness. Firstly this indicates the depth of your faith, and secondly it is the basis of social safety and sound economy.

Imam Hussain (Sunni): One of the traditions of the Prophet (pbuh) was that he was sent to perfect our character. One of the things that we are often not told about is that within the three main dimensions of Islam found in the *Hadith of Gabriel*, alongside *Islam* (doing the Five Pillars) and *iman* (holding the core beliefs of Islam), we have *ihsan* (doing what is good or beautiful). At the heart of *ihsan* is living by chivalrous characteristics or virtues, and part of that is forgiveness. It is one of those essential components. We also see it in the life of the Prophet (pbuh) at the conquest of Makkah. The Prophet forgave all those who had done so much harm to him and his community.

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): A story from the *London Evening Standard* – a Muslim brother owns an ice cream parlour in London. Some people broke in one night and stole £300. The next day he put up a notice saying to the people who stole the money that he had forgiven them and that the money was charity. Also, if they came into the shop, he would give them free ice cream. It might be hard to imagine but it highlights the emphasis that is found in Islamic teaching. One of God's attributes is *Al-Ghafur* – One who Forgives. If we want God to forgive us, we must forgive others. In the Qur'an 2.237 it says, if you forgive you get closer to God – you will be more God-conscious, so forgiveness is good for your spirituality and purity of heart. Also the Qur'an says there is one thing God does not forgive, and that is if you die in the state of polytheism. In Arabic, asking for forgiveness from God is called *tawba*, repentance; it has two essential elements – being sorry for what one has done and making a commitment not to do it again.

What is the Muslim view of unforgiveable sins?

Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): there are major sins and minor sins. The Qur'an lists 58 or 60 sins. The only sin that is not forgivable is to associate partners to God. Other than that, all are forgivable, if you have sincere repentance.

Dr Chris Hewer: There is a difference between knowingly attributing partners to God and doing it in ignorance. Sin requires that you know that what you are doing is wrong, not that you were a small child growing up in a polytheistic community. Sin includes elements of intentionality and knowledge.

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): There are some sins that will be forgiven by God but that need forgiveness by a human too. For example, if a person is taking someone's rights away, God will forgive the dimension that transgresses against God's law, but the human must also forgive that person for the whole package of forgiveness to be obtained.



Explain Muslim beliefs about justice

Imam Hussain (Sunni): One of the names of Allah is that he is the Just, and so justice plays a huge role in the religion. The Qur'an says to stand up for justice *even though it might go against you*. Justice is one of the core values at the heart of Islam. To say a just word in front of a tyrant is a form of *jihad*, a form of struggling against that which is unjust.

Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): [There are different ways of applying justice:] justice in the courts, justice in dealing with people in dispute, to give the verdict that is just, justice that is characteristic of the jurists – one of the essential requirements of a *fatwa* given by a jurist. For those to be followed in whatever area is related to jurisprudence – that is, full knowledge about Islamic law [combined] with acting in a just way. The witness in a court must be just. The test that *Hadith* are telling the truth is one of the criteria for being reliable – that is why we have the 24 volumes written by Ayatollah Al-Khoei about the credibility of the narrators of *Hadith*. Justice is a core value and is one of the five principles of religion according to Shi'a – [it is [the second principle, *adl* – justice. *Al-Adl* – [this is] one of the beautiful names of Allah – Justice.

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): Justice makes up the fundamental element of Islamic spirituality, theology and jurisprudence. It is phenomenal, this emphasis on justice, especially within the Shi'a tradition. If you look in the Qur'an, justice is referenced more than 30 times. Qur'an 57.25 says 'we have sent the Messengers and the Prophets so that justice is established'. So it is identified by God as one of the primary objectives of sending prophets and messengers, that's how important it is. And it's a commandment, as it says in Qur'an 16.90: 'Allah commands first with Justice, then to be good, to be righteous and virtuous'.

The Prophet (peace be upon him and his family) in a beautiful tradition found in Shi'a traditions, says a moment of justice is worth 70 years of worship – not 70 years of obligatory worship but 70 years without justice, without considering justice to be important.

In Shi'a Islam we believe that one of the primary qualities that make Ali (son of Abu Talib, first *Imam* of the Twelve *Imams*, the Prophet's cousin) superior to everyone else is his justice. I recommend the famous book by the Christian author, George Jordac – *Ali: The Voice of Human Justice*. People say of Ali that there was no one as just as he was, after the Prophet. This was seen by the companions, who saw that he learned it from the Prophet himself.

Zameer Hussain (Shi'a): A good verse to use is Qur'an 4.135. God tells the believers to stand up for justice against yourself, even your parents, even your children, rich or poor. Justice has no limitations. There is no favouritism. Have a look at *Letter 53* by Imam Ali – about justice.

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): Yes, that letter was referenced by Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, in 2002 as one of the most brilliant instructions on governance – on how to govern people. It is from Imam Ali to the governor of Egypt. It contains a famous sentence: *people are of two kinds – either your brothers in faith or your equals in humanity*. This is so important today.





What is 'greater jihad'? (Part 1)

Imam Hussain (Sunni): There is a very famous *Hadith* of the Prophet (pbuh) which says that coming back from a battle, a military expedition – the Prophet said to his companions, 'We've just come back from the lesser jihad and we're now going to the greater jihad.' His companions were perplexed and said 'We thought we were doing the greater jihad.' The Prophet said, 'No, the battle against one's selfish desires – the *nafs* – that is the greater jihad.'

So for me, in the mainstream Sunni tradition – the idea of living a life of virtue, this is part of the greater jihad, to live with the values of generosity and magnanimity. When we look at the life of the Prophet, the Qur'an describes him as a '*rahmah* [mercy, blessing] for all the worlds' (Qur'an 21.107). The greater jihad is to embody those core characteristics, to cultivate that within. Earlier I mentioned *ihsan* – doing that which is beautiful, i.e. within the human being there is harmony and beauty, but it should show outwardly, so when we act in the world in our family and society, that beauty should flow out in our actions as well. The greater jihad and lesser jihad are sides of the same coin. You have to do battle with yourself before you can go on and do battle with the enemy.

There is a *Hadith* in which Imam Ali is in a battle and he is about to cut his opponent's head off and the man spits at him and Imam Ali leaves him. At the end of the battle the man found Ali to ask why he left him and Imam Ali's response was 'I was fighting for the sake of God to establish justice, but when you spat at me I would have killed you because you spat at me'. Greater jihad is to live by the great virtues and embody those in our lives.

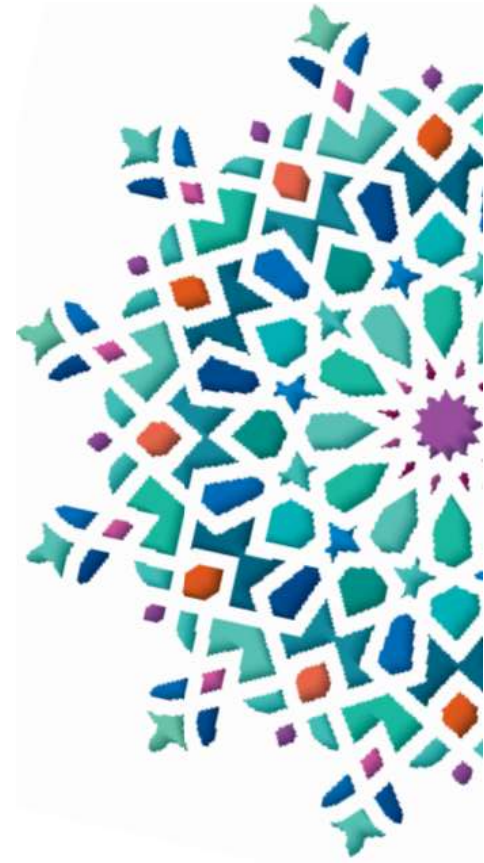
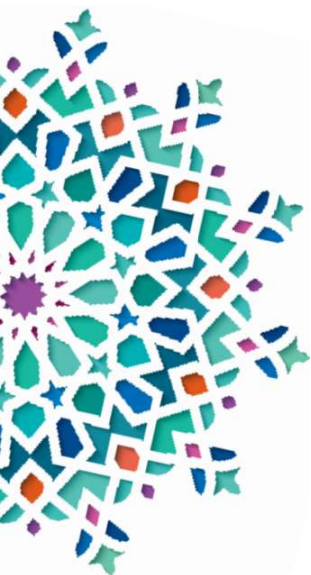
Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): I think that this greater *jihad* goes with one of the most important aspects of Islam and that is purification of the soul. In one verse recited every Friday at prayers, the objective of sending the Prophet Muhammad as a Messenger was as a *qihim* – to purify people. In another verse, we find that those who purify their souls are victorious, and salvation has been achieved, and those who allow the soul to get dirty and filthy and corrupt, those people are losers. It is so important that you don't allow your ill desires or your ego to control you. For example, if you are not able to control your anger, when someone hits you and you want to attack back, this is your *nafs*, soul, ego that wants to attack back. When you think of forgiveness, you allow your wisdom, or brain or spirituality to control your actions.

There is a tradition of the fifth *Imam* that God created all living beings into three different categories. To some God gave only wisdom but not ill-desires at all – these are the angels. Those in the second category were given only the urges and natural urges and whatever is belonging to the desires and these are the animals and cattle. In the third category are human beings and they have both – brain and wisdom and spirituality on the one hand, and on the other hand, they have their desires and natural urges. For this, the human beings who can control their ill desires by their brain and by wisdom and by logic, they become greater and higher than angels. Those who allow their wisdom and their brain to be controlled by ill desires, they become worse than animals and cattle. There is a tradition: those who allow their ill desires to control everything, these are even less or worse than animals (Majlisi, *Bihārul Anwār*, vol. 60, p. 299, no. 5).

What is 'greater Jihad'? (Part 2)

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): It is very important that this subject is dealt with sensitively because of the word 'jihad'. This day, this age, you will know it is a word that has been significantly misunderstood. The media talks about '*jihadist, jihadist, jihadist*' all around the world, but the greater jihad is the struggle of the soul. Why would you want this greater jihad in the first place? It's because there are two powers that derail the heart of the human being. First, the evil Satan and second, their own souls. So the greater jihad is a struggle against two things – the influences of Satan and those very desires that go against what the Almighty has set for salvation for human beings.

Zameer Hussain (Shi'a): When you look at the *mihrab* that shows the direction of prayer; the word is based on the word '*hariba*' – to fight – and the word '*mihrab*' means '*battlefield*'. The word reminds me that when I pray I go to battle with myself and Satan. When I pray I am in a warzone – not with other people but with my pride and desires that have built up over a few hours. So you can also make the link with self-purification – the biggest way of self-purification is the five daily prayers that all Muslims do.



Can you explain your beliefs about just war – when is it permitted for Muslims to declare lesser jihad? And how should a just war be conducted? (Part 1)

Ayatollah Al-Milani (Shi'a): A just war is a defensive one.

Imam Hussain (Sunni): When you look at the life of the Prophet, when the migration to Madinah takes place, that's when the first verses are revealed about the permission to fight. Of course, the community of Madinah was constantly under threat of obliteration. But that community was not only a community of Muslims. One of the first things the Prophet had done when he arrived at Madinah was to invite the Jewish community and others to join to agree on a constitution, in which all had a right to live and practise their faiths. But the Makkans were not willing to allow this community to live; they wanted to obliterate them. So we are talking about defensive war and there are conditions. What happens when people are being oppressed – e.g. Muslims a minority in a country – does that mean that war is justified? That's where the real difficulty comes in. I think that most people would agree that if you are being attacked you can stand up and defend yourself.

But what about offensive warfare where you fight to establish social justice or the freedom for people to practise their faith? That's more problematic.

There is a justification that where people are being oppressed and their lives taken, [Muslims should] stand up and defend them. For example, [setting] a peace-keeping force to establish the five key principles of *sharia* – first the preservation of religion or the right of people to practise their faith; second, to preserve life – if life is being taken unjustly. The other principles include preservation of family, intellect and wealth/property. Are those five being threatened? If so, there is an argument to be made that a state can use force – working in a multi-lateral way, through the United Nations, for example. But we are always faced with the problem of collateral damage, which brings up the important ethical dilemma.

Sheikh Al-Hilli (Shi'a): First of all, Qur'an legislates war. In Quran 22.39 the Almighty says, 'it has been permitted to you to fight because you are being oppressed'. Then in the next verse, 22.40, it says, 'you have been forced out of your lands, and therefore in self-defence you are permitted to fight'. However, the ethos of the Qur'an is to incline towards peace, even in war. The verse has already been mentioned (*Surah* 8.61) – if they incline towards peace, you should incline towards peace. There are some differences between Sunni and Shi'a perspectives; during the life of the Prophet, for 23 years after the first revelation until he passed away, there was not a single offensive war. Offensive war took place in the time of the first three Caliphs, and then in the time of the fourth Caliph, whom the Shi'as believe is the right Caliph, there is no offensive war either, only war in self-defence. So that gives you an idea.

In Shi'a tradition, in general, you can only have an offensive war with the permission of somebody chosen by God – a divinely selected individual such as the Prophet or an *Imam*. Only they can call an offensive war because of oppression, otherwise nobody else can do so, and so it is only defensive war that is allowed as a result of oppression or injustice. The Qur'an speaks about oppression over 300 times. There are etiquettes in the books of jurisprudence that talk in terms of civilians, collateral damage, property – plants and such like. What ISIS is doing now is absolutely not Islamic. Capturing a prisoner and beheading them – that is against Islamic law. They are from all different types of denominations but unfortunately they have taken the law into their own hands.

Can you explain your beliefs about just war – when is it permitted for Muslims to declare lesser jihad? And how should a just war be conducted? (Part 2)

Imam Hussain (Sunni): Just one point. Clearly in Sunni states we don't have an *Imam*, just an executive. It is important to differentiate between terrorism that is going on and a state whose executive decides about going to war. The authority lies in the state, not in individuals going around declaring jihad. This is called *al-baghi* or *rebellion* and it should be put down. Where we have chaos it's from the privatisation of something that properly belongs to the state executive rather than individuals. That's why we are in a mess. Fundamentally, the authority belongs to the state executive.

Dr Chris Hewer: For those of us who are not Muslims, it is important that we can offer an authoritative document when dealing with this issue, [so we can say] 'this is what Islam and the scholars are saying'. Let me alert you to three:

- **The Amman Message** (2004) – a collective effort by Sunni and Shi'a Muslim scholars to say that terrorism has no part to play in Islam. ammanmessage.com
- **Open letter to Baghdadi** (2014) – in 24 articles, this takes everything associated with ISIS and explains why it is outrageous against Islam; it represents authoritative teaching. www.lettertobaghdadi.com
- **The Marrakesh Declaration** (2016) King Muhammad VI of Morocco drew together scholars from 120 different countries to produce a non-sectarian declaration on the rights of minorities in Muslim-majority communities. www.marrakeshdeclaration.org

