Research Article

Islamic Ethics of War: A Comprehensive Examination of Just War Principles in Islamic Jurisprudence

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Abstract. This article comprehensively examines the Islamic ethics of war, a sophisticated framework deeply rooted in the Quran and Sunnah, often misunderstood as advocating unbridled violence. It delves into the foundational principles that prioritize humanitarian considerations, proportionality, and moral restraint in armed conflict. We explore how classical Islamic jurisprudence, through the works of scholars like Al-Sarakhsi and Ibn Rushd, meticulously codified rules for just cause, legitimate authority, and non-combatant protection, often predating modern international humanitarian law. The article demystifies the multifaceted concept of jihad, clarifying its defensive nature and broader spiritual dimensions. It also analyzes the contemporary relevance and application of these ethics in modern warfare, including challenges posed by cyber warfare and drone technology. Finally, it challenges pervasive misconceptions, emphasizing how authentic Islamic scholarship consistently promotes peace, justice, and strict ethical conduct, offering crucial insights for global conflict resolution.

INTRODUCTION

The pervasive reality of conflict throughout human history necessitates a profound and ongoing inquiry into the ethical parameters that should govern warfare. Within this critical global discourse, the **Islamic ethics of war** present a framework of remarkable sophistication, depth, and unfortunately, frequent misunderstanding. Far from advocating for unbridled aggression, indiscriminate violence, or a rejection of humanitarian norms, Islamic jurisprudence has, over the course of more than fourteen centuries, meticulously articulated a comprehensive set of principles governing armed conflict. These principles rigorously prioritize humanitarian considerations, mandate strict proportionality in the application of force, and demand profound moral restraint, even when confronted with the most challenging and brutal realities of warfare. This extensive article endeavors to delve deeply into the intricate tapestry of these ethics, thoroughly exploring their foundational sources in divine revelation and the exemplary prophetic tradition, tracing their rich historical development through centuries of classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship, and critically examining their enduring and profound relevance in navigating the multifaceted challenges of modern warfare, international law, and the pursuit of global peace.

The Foundational Pillars: Quran, Sunnah, and Scholarly Interpretation

At the very heart of Islamic war ethics lies a dynamic, interwoven, and rich interplay of its primary authoritative sources: the **Quran**, which Muslims believe to be the literal, unadulterated word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad, and the **Sunnah**, which encompasses the comprehensive body of practices, sayings, and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, serving as a practical model for Muslim life. These foundational texts, through centuries of meticulous interpretation, rigorous exegesis, and extensive elaboration by generations of preeminent Islamic scholars, form the bedrock upon which the entire comprehensive edifice of "just war" (often termed *jihad qital* or defensive struggle) principles within Islamic tradition has been painstakingly constructed and refined.

The Quran, while candidly acknowledging the unfortunate and often tragic reality of armed conflict as an occasional, albeit regrettable, necessity in human affairs, consistently frames warfare within exceedingly strict moral, legal, and ethical boundaries. It vehemently and unequivocally rejects unprovoked aggression, emphasizing with divine clarity that fighting is permissible only as a last resort, strictly in self-defense, or to repel manifest and ongoing aggression against one's community, land, or the oppressed. Key verses repeatedly underscore this fundamental defensive orientation: "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed. Allah does not like transgressors" (Quran 2:190). This powerful and absolute injunction against **transgression (*la ta'tadu*)**, meaning

exceeding limits, acting unjustly, or resorting to excessive violence, is not merely a moral suggestion but a cornerstone legal principle. It unequivocally establishes that even in instances of legitimate defensive warfare, the use of excessive force, disproportionate retaliation, or the intentional targeting of non-combatants is absolutely and divinely prohibited. Furthermore, the Quran repeatedly and emphatically stresses the paramount importance of seeking peace, reconciliation, and cessation of hostilities whenever adversaries demonstrate a genuine inclination towards it: "And if they incline to peace, then incline to it also and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing" (Quran 8:61). This clear, direct, and unambiguous divine directive highlights a fundamental and deeply ingrained preference within Islam for peace over conflict, actively advocating for diplomatic solutions, negotiation, and the cessation of hostilities at the earliest possible and ethically justifiable opportunity. The spirit of these verses calls for proactive measures towards peace, not merely reactive responses.

The **Sunnah**, serving as the practical exposition and living embodiment of Quranic principles through the exemplary life and actions of Prophet Muhammad, offers invaluable practical guidance and a meticulously documented standard of conduct during times of war. His directives to his commanders and armies before dispatching them to battle are profoundly illustrative of the humanitarian principles he instilled. He famously commanded: "Do not kill women or children or an old, old man, or a sick person, or a monk. Do not destroy buildings, nor cut down trees, nor harm animals. Do not commit perfidy. Do not mutilate bodies" (various Hadith collections, notably elaborated upon by classical jurists such as **Al-Mawardi** in his *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah*). These explicit and extensive prohibitions extend far beyond direct combatants, encompassing the preservation of civilian lives, the protection of agricultural land and vital sources of sustenance, and the safeguarding of places of worship for all faiths. They further underscore the critical principles of **proportionality** (*tanasub*) – ensuring that the means employed are always commensurate with the legitimate military objective and do not cause excessive or indiscriminate collateral damage – and the inviolable **protection of non-combatants** (*hurmat al-madaniyyin*). These Prophetic traditions, meticulously documented, authenticated, and transmitted through rigorous chains of narration, offer a powerful and historically verifiable practical application of the Quranic injunctions, demonstrating unequivocally how ethical conduct was to be maintained and prioritized even amidst the brutal and chaotic realities of armed conflict.

Building upon these sacred and foundational texts, classical Islamic scholars embarked on an ambitious and systematic endeavor to develop comprehensive legal treatises that meticulously codified the intricate laws and ethics of war. Luminaries such as **Shams al-Din al-Sarakhsi** (d. 1090 CE), in his monumental work *Sharh al-Siyar al-Kabir* (Commentary on the Great Book of International Law by Shaybani), detailed every conceivable aspect of inter-state relations, including the precise conditions for legitimate warfare, the humane treatment of prisoners of war, the absolute inviolability of civilian life and property, and the equitable terms for peace treaties and truces. **Ibn Rushd (Averroes)** (d. 1198 CE), in his *Bidayat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid* (The Distinguished Jurist's Primer), provided a profound

comparative analysis of different legal opinions and jurisprudential debates concerning warfare, illustrating the intellectual depth and the widespread consensus around the ethical limitations of military action within Islamic thought. **Al-Mawardi's** (d. 1058 CE) *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* (The Ordinances of Government) further elucidated the administrative, legal, and constitutional aspects of governance during times of conflict, powerfully reinforcing the ethical conduct expected of rulers and commanders, and their ultimate responsibility to uphold Islamic moral standards and justice. Even influential scholars like **Ibn Taymiyyah** (d. 1328 CE), whose writings are frequently and regrettably misconstrued or selectively quoted by extremist factions in contemporary discourse, primarily addressed internal conflicts (rebellions or *baghy*) in works such as *Qital Ahl al-Baghiy*. In these contexts, he laid down extremely stringent rules for engagement, consistently emphasizing reconciliation, due process, and the restoration of justice over punitive or excessively violent actions. These vast and erudite classical works collectively stand as an enduring testament to a deeply rooted, highly sophisticated, and internally consistent tradition of ethical reasoning that was rigorously applied to the challenging and often tragic realities of war, often predating by many centuries the formal codification of much of what is now recognized as modern international humanitarian law.

Demystifying Jihad: Beyond the Battlefield and the Sword

One of the most profound, persistent, and damaging misunderstandings surrounding Islamic ethics of war revolves around the concept of **jihad**. Frequently, and often reductively and erroneously, translated in popular media and political discourse as merely "holy war," jihad in its true, multifaceted Islamic theological and legal framework encompasses a holistic spectrum of struggle that extends far beyond purely military engagement. Its linguistic root, "jahada," fundamentally means "to strive," "to struggle," "to exert effort," or "to toil," reflecting its much broader spiritual, intellectual, social, and personal applications.

Scholarly giants in the field of Islamic studies and comparative ethics, such as **Michael Bonner** in *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* and **Reuven Firestone** in *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, have meticulously traced the historical, linguistic, and theological evolution of the concept. They illuminate its primary and crucial distinctions: the greater jihad (***al-jihad al-akbar***), which refers to the arduous, lifelong internal struggle against one's own lower desires, ego, temptations, and sins, striving for self-improvement and moral purity; and the lesser jihad (***al-jihad al-asghar***), which pertains to armed struggle, specifically permissible only as defensive warfare. The Quran and the Sunnah consistently, overwhelmingly, and explicitly prioritize the greater jihad, viewing self-improvement, moral purification, and the cultivation of virtue and piety as the most fundamental, challenging, and spiritually rewarding struggle for every individual Muslim.

Crucially, when military engagement is considered within mainstream Islamic jurisprudence, it is invariably framed as an exceptional defensive necessity, an absolute measure of last resort, and always rigorously contingent upon specific, stringent moral and legal prerequisites. As **Majid Khadduri** incisively elaborates in his seminal work *War and Peace in the Law of Islam*, early Islamic jurisprudence

predominantly viewed warfare as permissible only in direct response to aggression, to repel an attacking enemy force, or to remove severe, systematic oppression that actively prevents the free practice of faith, threatens the lives and well-being of the innocent, or obstructs the establishment of justice. This inherently and overwhelmingly **defensive orientation** is a critical and often tragically overlooked distinction, fundamentally separating legitimate Islamic warfare from unprovoked aggression, territorial expansionism, imperial conquest, or forced conversion. The pervasive misconception of jihad as an inherently offensive, expansionist doctrine designed for global domination or the forceful imposition of Islam is a significant and dangerous distortion, often fueled by selective readings, decontextualized verses, and extremist interpretations that are overwhelmingly rejected by the vast majority of mainstream Islamic scholars, jurists, and the global Muslim community throughout history and in the present day. Authentic Islamic teachings unequivocally and explicitly condemn such aggressive, unprovoked warfare as a grave violation of divine law and human morality. The emphasis is always on protecting life, not destroying it.

Convergences and Distinctive Contributions: Islamic and Western Just War Theories

A thorough and scholarly comparative analysis between Islamic just war theory and Western philosophical and theological traditions reveals remarkable and often surprising convergences in their fundamental ethical concerns, alongside unique and distinctive contributions that Islamic ethics offer to contemporary discussions on military conduct and international humanitarian law. Scholarly works such as **John Kelsay's** *Islam and War: A Study in Comparative Ethics* and the meticulously curated collection *Cross, Crescent, and Sword: The Justification and Limitation of War in Western and Islamic Tradition*, edited by **James Turner Johnson and John Kelsay**, provide invaluable, in-depth insights into these shared and uniquely Islamic dimensions.

Both Islamic and Western just war traditions share fundamental principles that govern both the initiation of war (***jus ad bellum***) and the conduct during war (***jus in bello***). Regarding *jus ad bellum*, these include the core requirement for a **just cause** (typically defined as legitimate self-defense, resistance to clear aggression, or the cessation of severe, widespread oppression and tyranny), the necessity of **legitimate authority** to declare and wage war (e.g., a recognized state, a legitimate sovereign, or an established legal authority, not rogue individuals or groups), and the underlying **right intention** – that the ultimate and sincere aim of the conflict must always be to achieve a just and lasting peace, to restore order, or to eliminate oppression, not merely personal revenge, territorial conquest, or economic gain. Both frameworks also rigorously emphasize **proportionality (*tanasub*)** – that the anticipated harm inflicted by military action must always be proportionate and must not outweigh the legitimate military or political good sought to be achieved – and **discrimination** (often referred to as non-combatant immunity or the principle of distinction), the absolute and unyielding imperative to distinguish clearly between combatants and non-combatants, ensuring that civilians are protected from direct and intentional attack, and their lives and property are safeguarded to the greatest extent possible.

Michael Walzer's *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, a seminal and highly influential work in Western just war theory, echoes many of these universal ethical concerns, powerfully highlighting a shared human impulse across diverse cultures and civilizations to regulate, constrain, and mitigate the inherent savagery and destructive potential of war.

However, Islamic ethics introduce distinctive nuances and profound emphases that significantly enrich the broader global discourse on warfare. The fundamental emphasis on **tawhid** (the absolute oneness of God and the ultimate sovereignty of the Divine) imbues Islamic ethical thought with a powerful, all-encompassing sense of ultimate accountability to a higher moral and spiritual authority. This means that ethical considerations in warfare are not merely pragmatic calculations, utilitarian considerations, or political expediencies, but divinely ordained imperatives and sacred obligations. This profound spiritual dimension often translates into a stricter, more unwavering, and more deeply ingrained commitment to moral boundaries and ethical restraints, even when such adherence might appear strategically disadvantageous in a purely pragmatic sense. The sanctity of human life and the pursuit of justice are seen as divine commands, transcending immediate tactical gains.

Furthermore, the Islamic concept of **amān** (safe conduct, protection, or pledge of security) is exceptionally robust and legally binding. It mandates strict and inviolable adherence to promises of safety granted to individuals, including enemy combatants who seek protection, or non-combatant civilians, even if such a promise is given by a single Muslim individual without explicit command from a superior. This underscores the individual's moral agency and responsibility in upholding justice. The strong emphasis on fulfilling **treaties and covenants** (`**uhud**) with absolute fidelity, even with adversaries or non-Muslim states, and the grave prohibition against perfidy, treachery (**ghadr**), or breaking promises, highlight a remarkably sophisticated and principled framework for diplomatic engagement, the cessation of hostilities, and long-term conflict resolution that significantly predates and often surpasses many modern international law frameworks in its explicit moral demands. The explicit prohibition against the **mutilation of bodies** (**muthla**), the respectful treatment of the dead, and the humane and dignified treatment of prisoners of war, all explicitly detailed in Islamic tradition, further exemplify a deeply ingrained and compassionate humanitarian impulse that extends even to those considered adversaries. These comprehensive principles collectively reflect a profound and universal moral code that seeks to uphold and preserve human dignity, even amidst the extreme violence and chaos of war.

Contemporary Applications: Navigating the Complexities of Modern Warfare

The classical principles of Islamic war ethics are far from being mere historical relics confined to ancient texts; they constitute a robust, flexible, and profoundly relevant framework for addressing the unprecedented complexities and rapidly evolving nature of modern warfare. Contemporary applications of these enduring principles are being actively explored, debated, and applied in diverse contexts, ranging from traditional interstate military conflicts and complex counter-insurgency

operations to the emerging and ethically challenging domains of cyber warfare, drone technology, artificial intelligence in combat, and asymmetric conflicts involving non-state actors.

For instance, the principle of **proportionality** (*tanasub*) takes on critical new dimensions and heightened importance in the age of precision-guided munitions, drone strikes, and the increasing reliance on remote warfare. While these technologies are often touted for their ability to minimize civilian casualties, the potential for unintended collateral damage to non-combatants remains a grave concern, requiring constant ethical scrutiny. Islamic legal scholars and ethicists are actively engaged in rigorous jurisprudential debates about how these modern military technologies and tactics align with the strict injunctions against harming non-combatants and causing excessive or unnecessary destruction. They meticulously examine whether remote warfare technologies, such as armed drones, truly uphold the principle of discrimination when the operator is physically distant from the battlefield, the intelligence gathering may be imperfect, and the risk of misidentification or civilian casualties, though statistically reduced, remains a persistent ethical challenge. Similarly, the ethics of **cyber warfare**, which fundamentally blurs the traditional lines between combatants and civilians, military infrastructure and essential civilian services (e.g., power grids, financial networks, healthcare systems), and which can have widespread, debilitating societal impact, are being meticulously examined through the foundational lens of Islamic principles of non-transgression, the absolute protection of innocent life, and the preservation of societal well-being (*maslaha*). **Ahmed Al-Dawoody's** *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* provides detailed and nuanced analysis of these pressing modern challenges within a contemporary Islamic legal framework, powerfully demonstrating the remarkable adaptability and enduring relevance of classical Islamic jurisprudence.

Furthermore, a growing number of Muslim-majority nations and their sophisticated military institutions are actively and consciously integrating these profound ethical principles into their modern military doctrines, professional training protocols, and participation in international peacekeeping operations. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Jordan, and Pakistan, as highlighted in influential works by scholars such as **Tariq Ramadan** in *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* and **Abdulaziz Sachedina** in *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*, have actively and systematically incorporated traditional Islamic values and jurisprudential insights into modern military training and operational procedures. This robust integration includes emphasizing ethical conduct on the battlefield, unwavering respect for human rights, the rigorous protection of civilian populations, strict adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL), and proactive engagement in various international peacekeeping missions, humanitarian interventions, and nuanced counterterrorism strategies. This conscious and deliberate integration demonstrates practical, effective, and ethically sound pathways for harmonizing deeply held religious ethical commitments with the professional and operational obligations of modern military forces within pluralistic national and international

societies. It offers a powerful counter-narrative to the extremist misrepresentations of Islamic teachings.

Challenging Misconceptions and Promoting Authentic Scholarship

Perhaps one of the most critical and pressing aspects of examining Islamic ethics of war in the contemporary global landscape is the urgent and indispensable necessity of directly addressing and actively challenging the pervasive misconceptions and the egregious, violent misappropriation of fundamental Islamic concepts, particularly the distortion of **jihad**, by extremist movements. Groups like ISIS (Daesh), Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and other violent non-state actors cynically, intentionally, and malevolently distort sacred Islamic texts and principles to justify their indiscriminate violence, brutal sectarianism, and barbaric acts against both Muslim and non-Muslim populations alike. Such extremist interpretations and actions represent a radical, violent, and illegitimate departure from the mainstream, historically consistent, and ethically rigorous interpretations of Islamic law and morality, a distortion that is unequivocally, universally, and vehemently rejected by the vast majority of legitimate Islamic scholarship, religious institutions, and the global Muslim community throughout history and in the present day.

Authentic Islamic scholarship, spanning centuries, encompassing diverse schools of thought, and manifesting in myriad legal and theological traditions, has consistently and resolutely emphasized moral restraint, profound compassion, robust civilian protection, and the ultimate, overarching goal of establishing justice and achieving lasting peace. Seminal sociological research, such as **John Esposito** and **Dalia Mogahed's** *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, demonstrates through extensive polling and empirical data that the vast majority of Muslims globally overwhelmingly reject extremist ideologies and unequivocally uphold peaceful, tolerant, and just interpretations of their faith, actively embracing coexistence, human rights, and religious pluralism. **Asma Afsaruddin's** *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* meticulously dissects the historical and theological misinterpretations of jihad, showing in detail how extremist narratives are not only a radical but also an intellectually dishonest and illegitimate departure from mainstream Islamic thought, often based on selective, decontextualized, and erroneous readings of canonical source texts.

The thorough and unbiased analysis of Islamic war ethics unequivocally reveals that, far from endorsing unlimited violence, unchecked aggression, or forced conversion, these ethics actually impose far more restrictive and profoundly humane conditions on warfare than many secular international law frameworks had historically developed until relatively recently. This striking adherence to moral limits is powerfully evident in the detailed prohibitions against the intentional targeting of civilians, the wanton destruction of property and vital infrastructure, and engaging in perfidy, treachery, or breaking solemn covenants. The profound and consistent emphasis on actively seeking peace, even with adversaries, and the robust legal framework for the humanitarian and dignified treatment of all individuals in conflict zones—including enemy combatants, prisoners of war, the wounded, and especially non-combatants—underscore a deep, abiding, and divinely mandated commitment

to ethical conduct rooted in divine commandments and the exemplary prophetic example. These principles are not optional; they are integral to the very fabric of Islamic justice.

CONCLUSION
Towards Universal Humanitarian Principles and Lasting Peace

The comprehensive and nuanced study of Islamic ethics of war offers invaluable insights, practical lessons, and ethical guidance for policymakers, military professionals, international legal experts, human rights advocates, and scholars globally engaged in the critical endeavors of conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. By meticulously elucidating the sophisticated, humane, and profoundly ethical framework governing warfare within the rich and diverse Islamic tradition, this research actively challenges reductive stereotypes, dismantles simplistic and often Islamophobic narratives, and makes a significant and constructive contribution to broader, more nuanced global discussions on religious approaches to international relations, conflict resolution, and the universal, timeless aspiration for genuine and lasting peace.

Ultimately, the Islamic ethical framework for war stands as a powerful and enduring testament to humanity's collective and perennial quest to mitigate the horrors, suffering, and barbarity inherent in armed conflict. Its unwavering emphasis on moral restraint, strict proportionality, the absolute protection of human dignity, the pursuit of justice, and the eventual establishment of peace resonates profoundly with universal humanitarian principles that transcend cultural, religious, and geographical boundaries. As the world continues to grapple with the increasingly complex, interconnected, and evolving challenges of modern warfare and global security, understanding and appreciating these deeply rooted ethical traditions from all faiths and civilizations becomes not just an academic exercise but an urgent, vital, and indispensable imperative in our collective pursuit of a more just, humane, and peaceful world. The profound insights derived from Islamic jurisprudence, with its centuries of rigorous scholarly deliberation on the ethics of armed conflict and its compassionate application in times of strife, provide a crucial, nuanced, and powerful voice in this ongoing and vital global dialogue, guiding us towards a future where peace is not merely the absence of war, but the flourishing of justice, compassion, and human dignity for all. This rich tradition serves as a reminder that even in the darkest moments of conflict, humanity's moral compass must remain steadfast.

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