

Jihad

- Jihad is an Arabic word meaning **“to struggle,” or “to strive.”** Jihad is a concept often used to describe a person’s “personal, spiritual effort to follow God, live out one’s faith and strive to be a better person.” Generally, the word has many meanings depending on context. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, an encyclopedia on the Islamic World, states that **“Muslims use the term to refer to battles within themselves or to efforts to improve the Islamic community.”**
- **Western public discourse and militant groups often incorrectly translate the word to mean “holy war.”** The Arabic word for war is “harb.” Professor Asma Afsaruddin, an expert on religious and political thought in Islam, states in the Qur’an, “jihad’s nonviolent aspects are encapsulated in the term *sabr*, or patient forbearance, to connote individual striving to fulfill God’s commandments in all aspects of life.” Another word “*qital*” is used in the Qur’an to refer specifically to fighting for a legitimate cause. However, she states that Islamic juridical literature “conflated jihad with fighting.” In the **Qur’an, Jihad is used in multiple contexts including self-defense.**
- There are **four types of “Jihads”** or struggles: the Jihad of the heart, the tongue, the hand, and the sword. Jihad **in the context of self-defense is carefully controlled in Islamic law** with specific guidelines surrounding defensive military actions, which have been compared to those articulated in **Just War Theory.**
- While the **majority of Muslims agree that the concept details activities describing inner spiritual struggle** to be better for the sake of God, **violent militants and anti-Muslim activists have co-opted the word and equated it to violence, “holy war,” and “terrorism.”**
- During the 2016 presidential election, Republican presidential nominee **Dr. Ben Carson promoted a conspiracy theory about a Muslim “civilization jihad” plan to take over America.** The Bridge Initiative debunked this claim, which still appeals to Americans who already hold largely negative views of Islam and Muslims. Carson’s source for this claim is the Center for Security Policy (CSP), an organization designated a hate group and run by anti-Muslim activist Frank Gaffney.
- During the second Democratic debate in 2015, Hillary Clinton called on the U.S. and the international community “to root out the kind of radical jihadist ideology that motivates organizations like ISIS.” Following the July 14, 2016 terrorist attack in Nice, France, Clinton went on Fox’s *O’Reilly Factor* program and stated “we’ve got to do more to understand that this is a war against these terrorist groups, the radical jihadist groups.”
- In 2015, **CSP held the “Defeating Jihad Summit,” which CSP described as the “war for the free world” attended by “freedom-fighters.”** The summit included Senator Ted Cruz, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Dutch politician Geert Wilders, former federal prosecutor Andrew C. McCarthy, current CIA director Mike Pompeo, and anti-Muslim speaker Nonie Darwish. The summit involved discussions about various forms of “global jihad,” described as the “violent kind; civilization” or “cultural, stealthy and subversive jihad; institutional jihad” (identified as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations); “individual jihad (its perpetrators are mistakenly being described as “lone wolves”); & material support.”
- In 2012, the American Freedom Defense Initiative, an organization dedicated to stopping the “Islamization of America” led by anti-Muslim activist Pamela Geller, ran **ads on public transit in cities like New York City and Washington**

D.C. The ads read “In any war between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man,” with the tagline: “Support Israel/Defeat Jihad.” The **ads recycled orientalist tropes identifying Muslims as the “savage man.”**

- On her website, **Pamela Geller pairs the word “Jihad” with varying subjects to create phrases like “adoption Jihad,” “food Jihad” and “election Jihad.”** Other anti-Muslim activists who use this strategy include [Robert Spencer](#) who runs the online platform [Jihad Watch](#), an [anti-Muslim website funded](#) by the “[godfather of the anti-Muslim movement](#)” [David Horowitz](#). Spencer’s website **claims that “violent jihad is a constant of Islamic history and a central element of Islamic theology.”** Another website focusing on the “Global Islamic Jihad Movement” is [Counterjihad](#), which seeks to inform the public about this threat by engaging in a “battle of ideas” with the “extremists.”
- In the United States, **ex-FBI agent John Guandolo**, identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center as **an anti-Muslim extremist**, has been **holding training sessions for law enforcement entitled “Understanding and Investigating the Jihadi Network.”** The sessions are run by his “training & consulting” group, [Understanding the Threat](#), which [teaches](#) security professionals and leaders “how to locate and map out jihadi organizations, locate jihadis, and dismantle the network at the local and state level.” The Arizona chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union has [stated](#) that **Guandolo’s “hateful message” is “so symbolically wrong because it’s a message of hate and racism.”**
- In mainstream **media and public discourse, “Jihadist” is often used to identify any Muslim who engages in a violent act.** According to a [BBC](#), the “term “jihadist” has been used by Western academics since the 1990s.” According to [Stimson](#), **since 2001, the “U.S. press” has primarily “referenced Jihad” in violent contexts.** Following the 9/11 attacks, it has been more [widely](#) used “to distinguish between violent and non-violent Sunni Islamists.” **Many Muslims do not use the term “jihadist,” “because they see it as wrongly associating a noble religious concept with illegitimate violence.”**
- During a campaign speech in 2016, then Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, [referenced](#) Jihad when discussing the San Bernardino attack. **Members of the Trump administration**, including [Stephen Bannon](#), [Stephen Miller](#), and [Sebastian Gorka](#), have **utilized the word “jihad” or “jihadist” when referencing violence committed by Muslims.**
- In July of 2017, an edited video of **Muslim social justice activist Linda Sarsour’s speech** at the Islamic Society of North America conference went viral on Twitter. The **activists word’s were tweeted out of context by conservative media outlets like Fox News and figures such as Donald Trump Jr.** The viral story led to **death threats, calls for rape, and deportation against the activist.** In the speech, Sarsour “[told](#) a story from Islamic scripture about a man who once asked Muhammad, the founder of Islam, ‘What is the best form of [jihad](#), or struggle?’ And our beloved prophet ... said to him, ‘A word of truth in front of a tyrant ruler or leader, that is the best form of jihad.’” In an [interview](#), **she stated she was advocating solely for peaceful, nonviolent dissent.**

IMPACT: Jihad is an Arabic term meaning “to struggle” or “to strive.” Most Muslims agree that the concept is best understood and practiced as an inner spiritual struggle towards faith and good deeds, but anti-Muslim groups and militants have co-opted the word and equate it to violence, “holy war” and terrorism.