

Jihad: Ibn Taymiyya and the Historians - CEFREPA Lectures Islam: History and Society

Tuesday, 18th May 2021, 6:00 pm (Kuwait time)

Speakers:

- **Dr. Mehdi Berriah** is an assistant Professor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and Associated Researcher at CEFREPA (Kuwait) and the Centre for Islamic Theology (CIT). A specialist of War and Mamluk Studies, Mehdi is also editor for SHARIAsource (Harvard Law School) and the director of the "*Taymiyyan Corpus of Jihad*" project.
- **Dr. Yaser Ellethy** is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Islamic Theology (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam). He has published widely on Islam, reform and democracy in Europe.

Summary of the lecture, led by Mehdi Berriah and moderated by Yaser Ellethy:

Ibn Taymiyya is one of the most famous medieval Muslim theologians. Born in 1263, his time was marked by the wars between the Mamluks and the Mongols, a context in which he developed his thoughts on jihad. He was also distinguished by his rejection of the philosophical works of the time, such as those of Al-Ghazali or Ibn Arabi. Today considered traditionalist, rigorist, and radical (notably cited by jihadist movements to legitimize their violent actions), it is necessary (according to Mehdi Berriah) to recontextualize his writings, which date from the 13th century, to better understand his thought.

First of all, Ibn Taymiyya's writings must be placed in the context of the Mamluk era, which was at war with the Mongols, the Armenians and the French. His determination to fight these enemies stems primarily from a childhood trauma, as he was forced - in the face of the Mongol threat - to immigrate to Damas. It is in this sense that Emmanuel Sivan speaks of the "*refugee syndrome*": constantly immersed in this fear of an attack (through stories, his migration...), he develops a pro-jihad militancy. His first and only objective is to defend Islam and Muslims against both external (Mongols, Armenians, French) and internal threats (philosophical thoughts, Sufism...). The context in which the theologian grew up constitutes the key element for the reading of his writings.

According to the chronicles of the Mamluk period, Ibn Taymiyya had a great deal of experience in jihad. His first participation took place during the siege of Acre (690/1291), in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1298, he was commissioned by Sultan Lajin to preach jihad in the Umayyad Mosque, in order to encourage believers to join the Mamluk army, then at war with the Kingdom of Armenia (the main ally of the Mongols). Then, in the early 1300s, he participated in the jihad in Syria, occupied by the Mongols. He played a key role during the first expedition sent against the inhabitants of the Kisrawan mountains (1300), as well as the second, in 1305. Finally, he participated in his last expedition within the Mamluk army, in the winter of 1312-1313, during the siege of al-Rahba. Although he was active militarily, Ibn Taymiyya was also an ambassador, a negotiator and a preacher. He also played a role of psychological support for the soldiers of the Mamluk army.

For Ibn Taymiyya, jihad is a fundamental religious obligation for all believers. The ultimate goal of jihad is to show that religion organizes all aspects of life, and that God is above all. It is an instrument that will bring about good, and make forgive the evil. As a supreme act of worship, Ibn Taymiyya places jihad alongside the five pillars of Islam, which are the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, the Ramadan fast and pilgrimage. More than that, jihad is the representation of the love of God and the Prophet, on Earth. The historical context of the emergence of Ibn Taymiyya's thought is also very important. One of the turning points was the revelation of the Torah, which changed the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to his interpretation, before this revelation, non-believers were victims of divine punishment and annihilation for their infidelity. However, after the Torah, it is the jihad that replaces this divine action. It constitutes a means for the infidels to improve their situation, before being fatally destroyed.

The theologian is also particularly influenced by the history of Syria, which since its beginnings (including the pre-Islamic era), has been the scene of numerous invasions and attacks (Byzantine, Armenian, French, Mongolian ...). This is why, according to him, the Prophet particularly supports the soldiers of Syria, rather than Yemen or Iraq. Jihad in Syria is then more likely to be agreed upon by the prophetic hadiths, and the fighters, to be part of the "*victorious group*". The latter is for Ibn Taymiyya, central: God will always support this group, which can never lose.

Although jihad is considered one of the pillars of Islam, Ibn Taymiyya says very little about prayer. None of his narratives mention stopping the fighting to pray, implying the superiority of the religious obligation of jihad over all others. Another interesting point to question is the importance of Ibn Taymiyya's political knowledge of the Muslim world. For this, he was supported by many officials, such as Sultan Lajin, or the Emir of Syria, who sent him to Cairo to convince the elites to come and fight in Syria. He was also able to get information thanks to his pilgrimages, but also thanks to the merchants and travellers he met.

Finally, for Mehdi Berriah, Ibn Taymiyya's writings reflect both a hope and a nostalgia. Jihad is first and foremost a hope in the face of external and internal threats. The successes of the Mamluk army, the protection of Syria and the Umma testify to a support from God. His nostalgia comes from the fact that he also had the project of conquering Iraq (project rejected by sultans), and going directly to fight the Mongols on their territory. As an expert in Islamic history, he mentions in his accounts "*the glorious era*", the time when Cyprus and the Syrian-Lebanese axis were Muslims, before being conquered by the Christians. In his projects of jihad, therefore, we find this desire to restore Islam to the place it occupied before.

To conclude, Ibn Taymiyya's writings are to be placed in a precise context, and depict a very complex definition and implications of jihad.

Report written by Justine Clément, CEFREPA and SciencesPo Paris