

DPhil research: Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of jihad, its place in medieval Islamic legal thought and its subsequent reception

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The medieval Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328, Damascus) is an unusual and extremely prolific scholar with considerable modern influence, and has been described as a primary inspiration for contemporary violent actors.¹ Yet, we lack an accurate understanding of his views on jihad. This project seeks to provide it.

Despite Ibn Taymiyya's importance to many later theorists and militants,² there exists no dedicated comprehensive study of his overall doctrine of jihad, as expressed across the breadth of his expansive corpus.³

This project aims to show that:

- later in his life, Ibn Taymiyya argued that war is justified only on grounds of self-defence or inability to practice the Islamic faith freely;
- this was a significant departure from prevailing juristic views which permitted proactive warfare to expand Muslim territory, and thereby establish rule by God's law and induce unbelievers to join the true faith.⁴

Beyond this, the project uses Ibn Taymiyya as a case study in how legal traditions revise inherited doctrines under conditions of authoritative constraint. By treating juristic texts as sites of argument rather than repositories of positions, the research speaks to broader humanistic questions about legal interpretation, doctrinal change, and the relationship between normativity and coercion across traditions.

The primary intended contribution of this project is rigorous historical and doctrinal reconstruction. Secondly and derivatively, if this reading is shown to be correct, Ibn Taymiyya's work may, instead of being seen as supplying justification for contemporary violence, constitute an atypical medieval precedent for restraint.⁵

¹ The 9/11 Commission Report, ed. Kean (2004), 362.

² Sivan (1990), 94-108; Jansen (1986), 159-234; Wagemakers (2012), 158-63; Krawietz (2003), 50-52.

³ Most work has instead focussed narrowly on his 'anti-Mongol' and 'Mardin' fatwas, and his excommunication of the Islam-professing Mongols for not accepting in full the laws of Islam. See: Michot (2006), Bori (2003) and Heck (2004), 115-122.

⁴ Permission does not by itself entail obligation, and, in any case, practice did not necessarily mirror legal theory. That the Muslim rulers did not fully implement God's law was a common complaint of the jurists; that they at times neglected jihad to expand the boundaries of Islamdom was another; and that, when they fought, it was not with pious aims but for their own worldly interests was a third. See e.g.: Maḥbūbī, *Sharḥ al-Wiqāya*, 1/81; Ibn Rajab, *Ḥikam*, 40; Ṣaḥnūn, *Mudawwana*, 3/5.

⁵ We must, of course, through methodological rigour and textual systematicity, guard against adopting a reading *because* of its perceived contemporary utility. See Hoover (2016) and Michot (2012), for two approaches that may be considered, respectively, more and less evidently successful in this regard.

A. Research questions

1. What does prior Sunni legal doctrine say about the grounds for initiating war?

Existing research. This identifies several *casus belli* that may be gleaned from scripture or the writings of Islamic jurists. These include strict or pre-emptive self-defence, protective intervention, local or generalised elimination of ‘polytheism’, facilitating peaceful missionary work, and coercive proselytization.⁶

Planned activity. I will produce, through close analysis of primary texts,⁷ a diachronic study of the development of these justifications across the four major Sunni law schools and their maturation into a broadly shared belligerent position, before Ibn Taymiyya. My analysis will be deliberately selective rather than exhaustive. It will comprise: a conceptual micro-history of selected terms as used by the lawyers in their justification of jihad; and a sampling of the views of representative jurists (chosen for geographical and methodological diversity) from each school on key questions.⁸

Intended outcome. I will argue that the *settled* jihad doctrine of these schools was one that permitted offensive warfare in order to spread the rule of Islam and increase the number of its followers. This historical scaffolding will enable us to examine our central question of whether and how Ibn Taymiyya differs from his predecessors in substance and in expression.

2. What are Ibn Taymiyya’s views on these questions?

Existing research. Ibn Taymiyya is arguably the first pre-modern Muslim author to argue, most clearly in his *Treatise on Fighting the Unbelievers* (*Qā’ida fī qitāl al-kuffār*),⁹ that war is permitted only if non-Muslims attack Muslims first or prevent them from practising their faith. Yet this is hardly known,¹⁰ and the *Treatise*, and its close parallels in his corpus, have received very limited academic attention.¹¹

Planned activity. I will: compare the *Treatise* with the views of earlier jurists and, by identifying Ibn Taymiyya’s interlocutors and specific discursive targets,¹² establish that he rejects those views; conduct a full cross-corpus analysis of parallel Taymiyyan texts¹³ and construct an up-to-date systematic chronology of his works, using both to show that the *Treatise* is authentic and represents a late development in his thought.

Intended outcome. I hope to show that his views, whilst presented by him as mere systemisation and analysis,¹⁴ represent a significant doctrinal modification, and are more akin to contemporary Muslim scholars’ defensive just war doctrines than to those of prior jurists. I will also highlight ambiguities in his position and explore whether it is better understood as mostly continuous with the legal heritage.

⁶ al-Dawoody (2011), 43-105; Sinai (2023); Peters (1996) 2-8 and 29-42; Crone (2005), 358-85.

⁷ See *bibliography* for an indicative list.

⁸ Key terms include: ‘belligerence’ (*hirāba*) and ‘strife’ (*fitna*). Key questions: what is meant by the ‘obligation to fight’ (*wujūb al-qitāl*), and what are the legal ground (‘illa) and purpose (ghāya) thereof?

⁹ Ibn Taymiyya, *Qā’ida* (2004).

¹⁰ The *Treatise* was excluded from the standard collection of Ibn Taymiyya’s writings, the *Majmū‘at al-Fatāwā* (2017). This has condemned the text to relative obscurity; and its surprising contents raise the question of its authenticity.

¹¹ There exists only a single article that critically discusses, in avowedly preliminary fashion, the attribution and canonical consistency of the *Treatise*, and without any sustained comparison with earlier jurists (Ellethy, 2025).

¹² I draw inspiration here from Quentin Skinner’s approach to intellectual history. See: Skinner (2002).

¹³ Including: Ibn Taymiyya (1983), (1999), (2000), (2017); and Ibn al-Qayyim (1994), (2019).

¹⁴ The adoption of this rhetorical strategy, whilst attractive in an authority-bound dialectical environment, runs the risk of encouraging inaccurate harmonizing interpretations of one’s intentions; as manifested in some contemporary Salafi readings of this text (for an example, see al-Kharāshī, *Aqwāl*).

3. How does this relate to his hermeneutical commitments?

Existing research. We have a good understanding of Ibn Taymiyya's meta-ethics and jurisprudence: he is a moral realist who inclines to a consequentialist pragmatism that emphasises public welfare.¹⁵ There are however no dedicated studies utilising these insights to interpret his jihad doctrine.

Planned activity. I will provide a thorough conceptual analysis of his general hermeneutical principles and particular views on jihad, to arrive at an explanatory reflective equilibrium,¹⁶ raising our confidence in any analysis of *what* his legal stances are and illuminating *why* he adopts them. Principles I will analyse through reference to his legal and exegetical views on other matters include his purposive scripturalism in law,¹⁷ and a moderately contextualist Qur'anic and general semantics.

Intended outcome. I will argue that Ibn Taymiyya's wise God, cognisance of whose wisdom serves as the proper interpretative frame for His word, is presented as not commanding violence except where necessary, and not deeming it necessary except for self-defence. Beyond the *Treatise*, Ibn Taymiyya makes allusive arguments which may be most faithfully reconstructed along these lines.

4. What is the subsequent reception of his views?

Existing research. The literature identifies a handful of later Muslim scholars who thought Ibn Taymiyya held a primarily defensive doctrine of jihad and themselves adopted a similar stance.¹⁸ We also know that Salafi-Jihadists, by contrast, regard him as a strong proponent of the purely offensive jihad,¹⁹ and his general reputation amongst academics is that of a zealous activist scholar not particularly given to holding eirenic positions.²⁰

Planned activity. I will fill pressing knowledge gaps by providing a fuller enumeration of later scholars in the former camp, an analysis of their arguments, and an evaluation of their reliance on Ibn Taymiyya relative to other authorities.²¹ These include scholars who expressly follow him in his distinctively defensive interpretation of jihad, such as al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī, Muḥammad Abū Zahra and Abd Allāh ibn Zayd Āl Maḥmūd; and those, like Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, who can be shown through close textual analysis to rely on his arguments.²²

To explain contrasting Salafi-Jihadi readings, I will consider, alongside their arguments, the impact of the following factors: the disparate form of Ibn Taymiyya's writings, his preference for allusive arguments on some matters of controversy, the specific cloud of ignorance surrounding the *Treatise*, and the level and quality of engagement with Ibn Taymiyya's corpus in Jihadist ideologues' writings.

Intended outcome. I will argue that Ibn Taymiyya's impact on later Muslim scholarship has been significantly underappreciated, and that he is likely a central, unusually influential authoritative resource for later defensive theorists. A late, but systematic, shift in his thinking on non-Muslims (the issue of fighting them included) remains under-discussed and poorly understood, and I hope to show that many Salafi-Jihadis share this blind spot and consequently misconstrue his views.

¹⁵ Vasalou (2016), *passim*; Jackson (2009), 146-51; Hoover (2007), 35-9; and Rapoport (2010).

¹⁶ On reflective equilibrium, see Rawls (1971) 48-9; and Knight (2017).

¹⁷ The hybrid view I attribute to Ibn Taymiyya may usefully be compared with purer purposive and textualist approaches in legal philosophy. For the former, see: Hart and Sacks, 1994; and the latter: Scalia, 1997.

¹⁸ Ellethy (2025), 291, 294, 310-1, 322.

¹⁹ See, for example, Fuchs (2011), 77-83.

²⁰ A welcome recent corrective: "Despite his reactionary temperament, he was also a more nuanced and sophisticated thinker than both his modern acolytes and detractors would allow" (Fitzroy, 2022, 139).

²¹ For deflationary assessments of Ibn Taymiyya's pre-modern influence, whose conclusions may need refining following this research, see Melchert (2013) and Rouayheb (2010).

²² al-Ṣan'ānī, *Baḥth*; Abū Zahra, *Ibn Taymiyya*, 304-09; al-Būṭī, *Jihād*, 94-111; Āl Maḥmūd, *Jihād*.

B. Importance of research

A likely project finding will be that the ‘modernist’ defensive interpretation of jihad, often assumed to be purely apologetic, has deeper roots - and therefore greater ancient authority for the many contemporary Muslims who care about such things - than is often assumed. Without this research, and the further inquiry it will hopefully facilitate, a poorly informed reading of Ibn Taymiyya will likely persist, and along with it the reliance on his authority to justify acts of contemporary violence.

C. Motivation for research

My initial interest in this subject was scholarly, emerging from sustained engagement with pre-modern Islamic legal texts during a decade of traditional study in the Middle East. This is where I first encountered Ibn Taymiyya’s lesser-known views through my own reading, and, set against the majoritarian later juristic position that I had learnt in the traditional seminaries, they struck me as notably novel and worthy of sustained examination.

I have also, over the past decade, held several specialist roles relating to counterterrorism in the UK civil service, which required continued engagement with primary Arabic sources, and have witnessed first-hand Ibn Taymiyya’s pre-eminent status and dialogical ‘presence’ within the ideological worlds of some contemporary militants. I hope that, with my academic background in classical Arabic, Islamic law, and analytic philosophy, I am well-suited to undertake this research. I believe it could also, depending on the research outcomes, have a significant downstream impact beyond the academy.

D. Supervisor fit

I am seeking joint supervision in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies from Professor Nicolai Sinai and Professor Fitzroy Morrissey.

Professor Sinai. This research will derive tremendous benefit from Professor Sinai’s expertise on the Qur’an, and several key project constituents align with his work in the following areas:²³

- (i) The Qur’an in general and specifically establishing what the Qur’anic terminology would have meant to its earliest recipients; the arguments of Ibn Taymiyya’s later works, like the *Treatise*, rely significantly on the Qur’an and adopt at times a similar approach to interpreting its content.
- (ii) The practice and ends of exegetical holism, that is, a privileging of the full Qur’anic text itself for understanding its parts, vis-à-vis secondary sources; modern defensive jihad theorists influenced by Ibn Taymiyya often adopt this holism, and the *Treatise* itself employs a version of this strategy.
- (iii) The history of Islamic philosophical and theological thought; Ibn Taymiyya’s late views on jihad are heavily influenced by the developed state of his theological and semantic commitments.

Professor Morrissey. In addition to the very strong thematic alignment with Professor Morrissey’s research interests in Islamic law and the history of Islamic thought, I believe I will gain invaluable support from his expertise in these areas:²⁴

- (i) The close reading of Islamic legal texts and careful diachronic analysis of concepts, arguments, and discursive contexts; this approach is critical in my own project of establishing what Ibn Taymiyya says and means on jihad and to what end.
- (ii) The tracing of Islamic reformist thought’s extensive reliance on premodern Islamic theology and law; a key aim of my project is to show the reliance on Ibn Taymiyya and his *Treatise* by modern defensive jihad theorists.
- (iii) Writing with rigour and impact for both specialist and broader audiences; post-doctorate I hope to produce a monograph on this topic, and would later like to disseminate a more accessible version.

²³ Examples can found in: Sinai (2023), (2016; *Reading Sūrat al-An‘ām*), (2016; *al-Suhrawardi’s Philosophy*)

²⁴ Examples can be found in: Morrissey (2024), (2022); and his forthcoming work on Islamic reformist thought.

F. Dissemination and outline research timeline

The project is intended to result, beyond the doctoral thesis, in a monograph on Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of jihad and a separate peer-reviewed article on the doctrine of prior jurists, with scope for wider scholarly and public engagement.

The project is designed to be completed within the standard three- to four- year DPhil period.

Year 1: refinement of research questions; targeted survey of pre-Taymiyyan jihad doctrine; corpus-mapping and consolidation of chronology.

Year 2: close analysis of Ibn Taymiyya's writings on jihad; drafting of core analytical chapters.

Year 3: reception history; synthesis; completion and submission; preparation of article.

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²⁵ This is an indicative list of primary legal sources for a comparative history of justifications for jihad. Entries are listed concisely, without publication information, and by chronological order within each legal school.

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