



Reconceptualizing Jihad: Said Nursî and the Formation of a Nonviolent Islamic Epistemology

Prof. Dr. Ayhan Tekines

Islamic Studies, Institut für Wissenschaft und Weisheit gGmbH, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.
aytekines@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores how Said Nursî (1877–1960) reimagined the concept of jihad within modern Islamic thought, shifting it away from battlefield imagery and toward an intellectual, ethical, and nonviolent form of struggle. While conventional interpretations highlight military action (*jihād al-aṣghar*), Nursî redirects attention to self-discipline, the attainment of knowledge, and moral transformation (*jihād al-akbar*).

Discourse analysis and hermeneutic readings of Nursî's writings demonstrate how the concept of jihad is removed from the sphere of state power, sovereignty, and coercion, and recontextualised within theological persuasion, religious education, and spiritual formation. Nursî's explicit rejection of compulsion—grounded in Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic legal history—reveals his principled defense of freedom of conscience and reform through knowledge rather than force.

In doing so, he contributed to the intellectual lineage that argues for nonviolent jihad and speaks directly to contemporary debates in Islamic ethics, political theology, and peace studies. The article argues that Nursî's approach is not quietism, apoliticism, or retreat from the public sphere; rather, it represents a constructive model of ethical resistance and epistemic agency.

By situating Nursî within late Ottoman reformism and the broader landscape of modern Islamic intellectual history, the study also underscores the wider relevance of intellectual jihad for ongoing discussions around religious authority, modernity, and communicative ethics in Islam.

Keywords: Intellectual jihad, nonviolent Islam, Greater Jihad (*Jihād al-Akbar*), Islamic political theology, Qur'anic hermeneutics, communicative ethics, freedom of conscience

1. Introduction: Jihad Beyond Violence and Sovereignty

Point of departure: Reductionist interpretations of *jihad* in contemporary debates.

Research problem: The insufficient consideration of ethical, intellectual, and non-violent conceptions of *jihad*.

Central research question: How does Said Nursî reconstruct *jihad* as an ethical, intellectual, and communicative practice beyond coercion, violence, and state sovereignty?

Scholarly relevance: Islamic ethics, political theology, peace studies.

First, by looking at semantic shifts, the study traces how Nursî moves the idea of *jihad* away from its militarized and political meanings and toward moral, intellectual, and communicative forms of struggle. This helps reveal the deeper patterns through which *jihad* becomes an ethical and epistemic concept rather than one tied to force or state power.

Second, drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, the analysis of subject-positioning looks at how Nursî shapes a religious subject defined by knowledge, persuasion, and ethical self-restraint who is set against a political subject defined by force, sovereignty, and factionalism.

Third, the study engages normative legal reasoning within the Islamic jurisprudential tradition (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) to situate Nursî's arguments about the historical nature of militarized *jihad* and his preference for communicative and educational forms of religious engagement.

Texts in Ottoman Turkish and, where necessary, in Arabic were consulted primarily. Secondary scholarship from Islamic studies, political theology, and modern Islamic intellectual history is used to provide context, situating him within broader conversations. The aim is not to produce generalized claims about Nursî's thought; instead, the emphasis is placed on exploring its discursive structure and conceptual implications. Attention is also given to Nursî's intellectual development by distinguishing between the "Old Said" (pre-

1925) and “New Said” (post-1925) periods, noting shifts in method, tone, and political environment.

Taken together, this methodological framework allows for a close reading of Nursî’s evolving model of jihad as a homegrown conceptual pathway to nonviolent agency and communicative ethics. As will be demonstrated, his ideas still speak to ongoing debates about Islamic ethics, religious freedom, and modernity.

Modern academic debates about jihad are often split into two camps: those that read it mainly through state-centered legal frameworks, and those that reduce it to a security issue tied to militancy and coercive violence. Although there has been growing interest in alternative, nonviolent, or intellectual lineages of jihad within the Islamic tradition, the role of Said Nursî in this conversation has not received much attention. Most existing research looks at his hermeneutics, theology, or socio-religious activism, but rarely examines in a systematic way how he rethinks jihad as an intellectual, ethical, and communicative practice. This leaves us with a clear gap: in what ways does Nursî shift jihad away from coercion and state sovereignty and toward ethical self-transformation and intellectual struggle—and what does this shift offer to contemporary political theology?

This study takes a qualitative approach, using discourse analysis and hermeneutic readings of works of Said Nursî (1877–1960)—particularly *Mektûbât* [Letters], *Hutbe-i Şâmiyye* [Damascus Sermon], *İşārāt al-I‘cāz* [Signs of Miraculousness], and relevant parts of the *Risale-i Nur* [Treatise of Light] collection. The approach to Nursî’s texts takes three main analytical angles: (1) semantic reconstruction, (2) subject-positioning, and (3) normative legal reasoning.

Although there is growing academic interest in nonviolent currents within Islamic thought, Said Nursî’s role in shaping a homegrown framework for nonviolent jihad has not been adequately explored. Most studies on jihad still center on classical legal debates, militant movements, or security-focused policy discussions—leaving little room for ethical or

epistemic understandings of jihad.¹ Within Nursî studies specifically, scholarship has tended to focus on his hermeneutics, spirituality, or educational work, while his views on jihad often appear only indirectly, in fragments, or are folded into broader topics such as *da'wa* (invitation), *tarbiya* (ethical formation), or reform.² As a result, the potential relevance of Nursî's thought for political theology, peace studies, and current debates on Muslim agency remains largely overlooked.

To explore this problem, the study asks four guiding questions:

1. How does Said Nursî define and conceptualize jihad in his writings, especially in contrast to militarized or political understandings of the term?
2. What discursive moves—semantic shifts, narrative strategies, and forms of subject-positioning—allow him to move jihad out of the realm of coercive politics and into epistemic and ethical domains?
3. How does Nursî's framing of moral and intellectual jihad provide a nonviolent model that can be theorized within contemporary political theology?
4. What normative and epistemological implications follow from this reframing in terms of Muslim agency, authority, and ethical forms of resistance under modern conditions?

By posing the research questions this way, the study brings Nursî's texts into conversation with broader debates in political theology, communicative ethics, and modern Islamic intellectual history.

¹ Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

² Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining discourse analysis and hermeneutic close readings of Said Nursî's key writings, including *Mektûbât*, *Hutbe-i Şâmiyye*, *İşārât al-I'câz*, and selected parts of the *Risale-i Nur* corpus. The analysis is structured around three interconnected dimensions: semantic reconstruction, subject formation, and normative reasoning.

First, the study traces semantic shifts in Nursî's use of *jihad*, showing how the concept is systematically displaced from militarized and state-centered meanings toward moral, intellectual, and communicative forms of struggle. Second, drawing on Foucauldian discourse theory, it examines how Nursî constructs a religious subject oriented toward ethical self-restraint, persuasion, and knowledge, in contrast to power-based and coercive political subjectivities. Third, the analysis situates Nursî's arguments within the broader framework of Islamic legal and ethical reasoning (*uşûl al-fiqh*), particularly his treatment of armed *jihad* as historically contingent and his preference for educational and communicative modes of religious engagement.

Primary sources are consulted in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic where necessary. Secondary literature from Islamic studies, political theology, and modern Islamic intellectual history is used to contextualize Nursî's thought rather than to evaluate it normatively. Attention is also paid to chronological development by distinguishing between the "Old Said" and "New Said" periods. The focus of the study is not empirical generalization, but conceptual coherence, discursive structure, and the ethical implications of Nursî's reconstruction of *jihad*.

1. Said Nursî's Idea of Greater Jihad as an Ethical and Intellectual Effort

In the late Ottoman intellectual world, *jihad* was often understood as a struggle carried out through ideas, education, and intellectual work.³ Many thinkers argued that civilizational conflict unfolded not through weapons but through knowledge, culture, and persuasion.

³ İsmail Kara, *İslamcıların Siyasi Görüşleri*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları, 2001).

Nursî adopted and deepened this perspective, grounding the idea of intellectual jihad in Islamic legal theory and giving it a moral and spiritual foundation.

Said Nursî (1877–1960), known as Bediuzzaman [the Unique One of the Age], was a Kurdish-Turkish Muslim scholar, theologian, and reformist thinker. He is best known for the *Risale-i Nur* [Treatise of Light] *Collection*, a multi-volume Qur’anic commentary that integrates rational inquiry, spiritual renewal, and a form of faith-centered intellectualism. Nursî had a lasting influence on modern Islamic thought in Turkey during the transition from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Republic. His writings grappled with the relationship between religion and modern science, the preservation of faith in secular contexts, and the role of intellectual and spiritual struggle in contemporary Muslim life. Rejecting political violence and coercion, he promoted persuasion, education, and moral transformation as the proper means of social change.

Nursi states that the struggle against one’s own ego—*jihād al-akbar* or the greater jihad—is among the most important ways of elevating religious practice. Sufi tradition emphasized this form of jihad as an inner struggle, identifying it as *the greater jihad*. The Qur’an itself indicates such a struggle: “So do not obey the disbelievers; strive against them with it [the Qur’an] a great striving” (Qur’an 25:52). In line with this, a reported hadith describes the struggle against the self as the “greater jihad” (Bayhaqi, *al-Zuhd al-Kabīr*, no. 373).

Bediuzzaman depicts the concept metaphorically, comparing the human being to a commander who must establish harmony within the palace of the body through the fight against conflicting desires: “Since everyone is a commander in his own world, he is charged in his microcosm with the greater jihad.” (*Early Works*).

He further emphasizes that struggle against the self contributes to the exaltation of religion, since morally refined believers represent the faith through their conduct: “The aim and purpose of unity is the exaltation of the word of God, and its method is waging the greater jihad against one’s own soul and guiding others.” (*Hutbe-i Şamiye*).

Another dimension of jihad is what may be termed *intellectual jihad*. Islamic thinkers identified liberation through intellectual, moral, and social responsibility as a dimension of

jihad. Through reflections on proximity and relationality, they linked jihad with freedom, noting that the etymological sense of *jahd* contains the meaning of hardship, while its usage also conveys capacity and exertion (*tāqa*). Thus, arduous intellectual efforts became associated with *ijtihād* (structured reasoning), while moral exertion against base desires was expressed with the term *mujāhada*.

This multifaceted understanding—connecting jihad with moral discipline and ethical responsibility, as well as scientific inquiry and intellectual labor—was shared among many Muslim scholars. The central question then arises: may the term jihad be used to justify spreading religion, and does such usage permit violence?

2. Nursî's Rejection of Coercion and His Legal Reasoning: Engagement with the Educated through "wisdom and beautiful exhortation"

For Nursi, the answer is unequivocal: coercion and violence in matters of religion are never legitimate and violate freedom of conscience. Commenting on the Qur'anic verse "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2:256), he states that freedom of conscience constitutes a constitutional principle in modern states, rendering coercive religious struggle and armed jihad for the sake of religion obsolete: "Freedom of conscience, which opposes compulsion, coercion, and armed religious struggle, has become a constitutional and political principle in governments." (*11th Ray*).

However, stating that coercion is wrong is not sufficient, since the Qur'an contains verses concerning jihad and warfare, and the Prophet himself participated in battles. Nursî approaches this issue with classical legal method: by determining the legal rationale (*'illa*) for warfare and examining whether it applies under current conditions.

Nursi begins by assessing the condition of modern people. For him, the modern world is composed of educated and civilized individuals. The Qur'an, he argues, assessed people with reference to knowledge, referring to the educated class of the time as "People of the Book." He explains: "The present age and its people of the Book are in dire need of the Qur'an's instructive address 'O People of the Book,' such that this address appears to be

directed specifically to this age, and the phrase ‘People of the Book’ encompasses the meaning of ‘people of schooling.’” (*The 25th Word*).

The Qur’an instructs Muslims regarding engagement with the educated: “Do not argue with the People of the Book except in the best manner—except for those who do wrong” (Q 29:46). What constitutes “the best manner”? Another verse answers: “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation” (Q 16:125). For Nursi, wisdom means rational proofs, while beautiful exhortation means positive action and love.

In Said Nursî’s epistemic and *da‘wa* framework, the Qur’anic binary of *ḥikmah* (“wisdom”) and *al-maw‘iẓa al-ḥasana* (“beautiful exhortation”) functions as a hermeneutical key for distinguishing two modalities of religious communication. Drawing on Qur’ān 16:125—“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation”—Nursî interprets *ḥikmah* as referring to the domain of rational proofs, demonstrative reasoning (*burhān*), and theological argumentation, whereas *al-maw‘iẓa al-ḥasana* denotes ethical counsel, affective persuasion, and kind-mannered guidance. In this reading, *da‘wa* becomes a dual activity involving both intellectual illumination and moral attraction.

Building on this distinction, Nursî argues that modern societies—particularly those shaped by schooling, literacy, and discursive rationality—must be addressed through reasoned proofs and affectionate engagement rather than coercion or polemic. He writes:

“As for external jihad, we refer it to the diamond swords of the decisive proofs of the Sharia. For dominance over civilized people is achieved through persuasion, not by force as with savages who do not understand speech. We are lovers of love; we have no time for hostility.” (*Haqiqat*, 1909)

From a hermeneutical standpoint, this passage yields three observations. First, Nursî re-situates the Qur’anic imperative of *da‘wa* (invitation) within a non-coercive epistemic framework: belief is not produced by force but by conviction. The distinction between persuasion and force mirrors the Qur’anic prohibition of compulsion in religion (2:256) and the Qur’anic emphasis on *bayān* (clarification) as a mode of divine communication.

Thus, for Nursî, “external jihad” in a civilized context operates through epistemic clarity rather than physical confrontation.

Nursî’s hermeneutical framework entails a contextual ethics of communication in which differing social and intellectual conditions call for differentiated modalities of *da‘wa*. His distinction between “civilized people” and those who “do not understand speech” should therefore not be read as an ethnographic or cultural taxonomy, but as a normative-ethical differentiation grounded in communicative capacity. The contrast is not directed against the classical *tafsîr* tradition but operates within it: where speech, literacy, and rational deliberation are possible, persuasion through argument and moral exhortation takes precedence over any form of coercion.

This reading corresponds closely to classical *tafsîr* interpretations of Qur’ân 16:125, which understand *ḥikmah* as rational demonstration (*burhân*) and sound reasoning, and *al-maw‘iza al-ḥasana* as gentle, sincere admonition oriented toward moral formation rather than domination. Nursî does not oppose these exegetical meanings but recontextualizes them for modern conditions marked by public discourse, education, and communicative plurality. His emphasis thus lies not in redefining *ḥikmah* and *maw‘iza*, but in foregrounding their ethical priority in societies where communicative reason can function as an alternative to force.

Third, the claim—“We are lovers of love; we have no time for hostility”—frames *da‘wa* as ethical formation, not political domination. Within a Qur’anic hermeneutic, *maḥabba* (love), *rahma* (compassion), and *nuṣḥ* (good counsel) are constitutive elements of guidance, whereas hostility belongs to the realm of coercion and compulsion. In this sense, Nursî’s interpretation preserves the Qur’an’s non-instrumental and non-coercive conception of guidance, in which the objective is moral transformation rather than sovereign control.

Taken together, Nursî’s hermeneutic of “wisdom” and “beautiful exhortation” positions *da‘wa* as a dual epistemic-ethical project grounded in persuasion and rational illumination

as well as kind admonition, thereby distancing Qur'anic communication from coercive paradigms rooted in a struggle for religious and political power.

3. Historical Context of War in Early Islam and the Modern Transformation of Jihad

When Nursi wrote these lines, the Ottoman Empire was still governed by Islamic law and the First World War had not yet begun. His insights on war and jihad remain remarkably relevant. He interprets Qur'anic verses that grant permission for war and the Prophet's battles in their historical context: most people the Prophet encountered were *bedouin*, characterized by ignorance and incivility.

The Prophet Muḥammad did not engage in warfare to compel people into religion; rather, his military engagements were undertaken to prevent aggression and to establish a legal order grounded in justice. In the city-state of Mecca, where a functioning legal system existed, he abided by its laws and refrained from violence despite severe persecution. A parallel may be drawn with the case of Prophet Moses, who, during his time in Egypt, complied with the legal framework of Pharaoh's state and avoided armed confrontation, yet resorted to defensive violence upon entering the desert, where lawlessness and aggression prevailed, in an effort to establish order.

This, in his view, constituted the rationale for warfare. In contrast, in the modern era, jihad is achieved through rational proofs and loving kindness, which exalt religious practice.

Nursî reiterated this view in his famous sermon in Damascus in 1911:

“Their swords are decisive proofs, and their path is love, causing the seed of love—contained within the brotherhood of believers—to flourish like the Tree of Tuba.” (*Hutbe-i Şamiye*).

Nursî clarifies that Muslims did not desire war; rather, they were compelled into it by their adversaries. He consistently emphasizes that the Qur'an attempted to persuade its audience through rational and literary discourse, yet its interlocutors—Bedouin Arabs—closed the doors of dialogue and turned to violence. Although the Qur'an repeatedly invited the

polytheists to literary and intellectual contestation, they chose war, fearing defeat in open debate.

In *The Twenty-Fifth Word*, Said Nursî argues that the Prophet's contemporaries in Arabia—particularly those renowned for eloquence and rhetoric—were initially confronted with an intellectual and discursive challenge. The Qur'ân invited them to respond in kind: through language, reasoning, and literary counter-argument. This constituted the most accessible, least risky, and most legitimate form of opposition, fully in line with their cultural competence and social standing.

Yet, driven by hostility and resentment rather than confidence in their argumentative abilities, they deliberately abandoned this path of rational disputation. Instead of engaging the Qur'ân on the level of speech and writing, they turned to armed conflict. In doing so, they chose a course that was not only longer and more arduous, but also far more dangerous and uncertain—namely violence and warfare. For Nursî, this shift itself functions as indirect evidence of the Qur'ân's inimitability: the refusal to answer a linguistic challenge with language reveals the incapacity to do so.

Thus, Nursî's approach may be summarized as follows: war in the Prophet's time resulted from historical necessity; however, since the rationale has disappeared, warfare no longer possesses religious legitimacy.

In contrast to classical juristic approaches, **this study argues** that defensive warfare should not be conceptualized primarily within the framework of religious law, but rather through the lens of international law. In the modern period, freedom of religion and conscience is safeguarded by international conventions and constitutional guarantees. **From this normative standpoint**, scholarly engagement with questions of armed conflict must therefore be situated within the broader human rights framework. **This raises a hermeneutical question that guides the present analysis:** under these conditions, how are Qur'anic verses concerning *jihad* to be interpreted today?

4. The Value of Nursî's Non-Violent Concept of Jihad for Contemporary Discourse

Nursî's characterization of employing rational arguments and explaining religious truths through intellectual proofs as "jihad" is highly significant. It provides both a response to contemporary challenges and a model for personal religious excellence. For Nursi, both internal and external struggles constitute jihad, and the path to spiritual jihad lies in attaining *īmān taḥqīqī* ("verified faith"): "The spiritual jihad for religion will occur with the sword of verified faith." (*11th Ray*).

In this sense, jihad means moral excellence, respect, and argumentative reasoning. The social dimension of jihad entails striving to convey the light of faith to others. However, this must be carried out through a mode of invitation that is entirely purified from violence, political interests, and worldly expectations of benefit. Otherwise, people may perceive the communication of faith-based truths as a form of propaganda and question what personal gain the speaker seeks to obtain. Such suspicions, in turn, lead individuals to distance themselves from religious and moral truths.

Nursî, in response to the question addressed to him—"Your third question: Why are you so indifferent to the politics of the world? You never alter your stance in the face of the spectacles and tumult of the age. Do you approve of these spectacles? Or is it out of fear that you remain silent?"—offers the following example, which fundamentally summarizes his view of politics, war, and violence:

"It may be that my service to the Qur'an restrains me from engaging with reflections on the socio-political life of humankind. The matter may be explained as follows:

Human life is a journey. In the present age, through the illumination of the Qur'an, I have discerned that this road has entered into a swamp. The human caravan proceeds through a mire that is defiled and malodorous, stumbling and faltering along the way. A portion of humankind travels upon a safe and sound path. Another portion has discovered certain means by which to extricate itself from the mud and the swamp to some extent. Yet the great majority advance within that foul, filthy,

and muddy morass in darkness. Approximately twenty percent, due to a state of intoxication, suppose that repugnant mud to be musk and amber, and smear it upon their faces and eyes; they progress, falling and rising, until they finally drown. The remaining eighty percent recognize the existence of the swamp, sense its foulness and corruption, yet are bewildered; they cannot discern the secure way and do not know how to save themselves.

For such people there exist two possible responses: (1) to strike the intoxicated twenty with a mace in order to bring them to sobriety; (2) to indicate the path of safety to the bewildered by showing them a light.

Yet I observe that against the twenty there are eighty individuals armed with maces. Meanwhile, the unfortunate and bewildered eighty are not being adequately shown a light. Even when a light is shown, the situation remains insecure, for it is held in one hand while a mace remains in the other. The bewildered person becomes alarmed, saying: “Is he attempting to attract me by means of the light only in order to strike me with the mace?” Moreover, when the mace breaks due to various contingencies, the light may likewise be dropped or extinguished.

In this allegory, the swamp corresponds to the heedless, misguided, and morally dissolute social life of humankind; the intoxicated are those obstinate individuals who derive pleasure from misguidance; the bewildered are those who detest misguidance yet cannot escape from it—desiring salvation yet unable to find the path. The maces represent political currents; the lights represent the truths of the Qur’an. One does not combat the light, nor show hostility toward it; none but Satan, the accursed, would harbor enmity toward it.

Accordingly, in order to hold firmly to the Qur’anic light, I declared, *A ‘ūdhu bi ‘Llāh mina ‘l-shayṭān wa ‘l-siyāsah* (“I seek refuge in God from Satan and from politics”), relinquished the political mace, and grasped the light with both hands. I subsequently observed that within political currents, both among supporters and opponents, there exist admirers of that light. Therefore, the Qur’anic instruction and the luminous

truths of the Qur'an, presented from a position[??] that transcends all political currents and partisan biases and is purified of their malicious interpretations, ought not to be feared or accused by any party or group—unless they are devils in human form or beasts in human guise who imagine irreligion and heresy to constitute “politics” and show partisanship toward them.

Praise be to God: owing to my disengagement from politics, I did not reduce the diamond-like truths of the Qur'an to the value of broken glass under the accusation of being political propaganda. Rather, those diamonds increasingly intensify their brilliance and value in the view of every group.” (Nursi, *Mektubat*)

Although the passage initially appears as an allegorical narrative intended to admonish its audience, a closer discourse-analytical reading shows that the concept of **jihad** is systematically displaced from a militaristic, political, and externally oriented semantic field toward a moral, self-regulating, and intellectually oriented field of struggle. This displacement is not merely a matter of terminology or rhetoric. Rather, it involves a reconfiguration of subjectivity, a critical distancing from power-centered language, the articulation of an alternative framework of legitimacy, and the establishment of a distinct regime of truth.

Bediuzzaman's conceptualization of jihad privileges the metaphor of the mace (*topuz*), which signifies politics and relations of coercive power, as opposed to the metaphor of light (*nūr*), which signifies truth. This metaphorical opposition may be interpreted as a modernization and functional redeployment of the classical Islamic distinction between minor and major jihad. The minor jihad (*jihād al-aṣghar*) or jihad by political and military means is embodied in the “mace” metaphor and is coded as coercive, manipulative, partisan, and exclusionary. By contrast, the major jihad (*jihād al-akbar*), embodied in the metaphor of “light,” is oriented toward spiritual self-purification, instruction, and knowledge and. The distinction is not merely moral, but also epistemological: truth is disseminated not through coercion but through persuasion, instruction, and exemplary conduct. The locus of jihad is thus shifted from “defeating an external adversary” to “overcoming the self and ignorance.”

The discourse that Said Nursî develops also institutes a notable form of subject-positioning. He situates himself outside processes of political subjectivation, characterizing his stance as one who “casts away the mace of politics” and “grasps the light.” In Foucauldian terms, this constitutes a mode of subjectivation within the domain of truth rather than within the domain of power. In this framework, the subject does not appear as a political actor who possesses or seeks power, but rather as an epistemic subject who illuminates, instructs, and guides. This reconfiguration relocates jihad to the sphere of epistemic production, representation, and admonition, thereby distinguishing it from the hegemonic discourse of the political field.

Furthermore, Nursî positions politics and the language of power as objects of critique. Through the “mace” metaphor, politics is associated with coercion, propaganda, partisanship, and violence, whereas “light” is coded as lacking any claim to power and merely radiating truth. This coding is compatible with Habermas’s differentiation between strategic action and communicative action, where the former corresponds to power-oriented persuasion and the latter to rational, undistorted communication. Nursî’s claim that “one becomes insecure when holding both a stick and a light in the same hand” parallels the proposition that a secure communicative condition deteriorates when communication is subordinated to power strategies. Nursî’s discourse is therefore intelligible not only within an Islamic conceptual lexicon but also within modern communication theory.

The legitimacy structure of Nursî’s argument asserts that jihad ought to be conducted not through violence but through wisdom, and not through political contestation but through epistemic and moral effort. As a result, the discourse functions as an internal corrective mechanism against the terrorization and radical politicization of jihad in the modern period. Political and military forms of struggle are positioned as morally and epistemically inferior, whereas self-discipline and knowledge-based struggle constitute superior modalities.

The broader ideological implications of Nursî’s approach are significant. Rather than engaging with *jihad* through **state-centered and sovereignty-based political frameworks that have become dominant in the modern period**—whether Islamic or secular—Nursî

decouples the concept from theories of power grounded in militarism and political domination. He instead relocates *jihad* within a religio-civic and ethical domain shaped by truth, persuasion, and moral responsibility. In doing so, *jihad* is safeguarded both against instrumentalization by radical Islamist movements and against reductionist or criminalizing interpretations prevalent in secular-modern discourses.

Nursî's reconceptualization thus performs a balancing function rarely achieved in either intra-Islamic debates or contemporary academic discussions: it reconstitutes *jihad* as a form of struggle that neither legitimizes violence nor seeks political domination, but rather aims at constructive transformation through the articulation and dissemination of truth. In this sense, Nursî's approach can be understood as a **theoretical prototype for a nonviolent paradigm of *jihad* within modern Islamic thought**, where "modern" denotes not a rupture with tradition, but a reflective engagement with contemporary political conditions and forms of power.

In sum, while Said Nursî's discourse on *jihad* remains broadly compatible with **classical classificatory frameworks of *jihad* in Islamic jurisprudence and theology**—such as the distinctions between greater and lesser *jihad*, or between ethical self-discipline and armed struggle—it nonetheless constitutes a substantive intervention against the politicized and militarized interpretations that have dominated much of Islamic history, particularly in the transition to the modern era. Nursî's intervention does not reject these inherited categories, but rather **reorients their normative center of gravity** by foregrounding *jihad* as a form of communicative action, moral resistance, and cultural transformation.

By relocating *jihad* into these non-coercive domains, Nursî contributes both to an internal renewal of Islamic ethical reflection and to broader contemporary debates in political theology and peace-oriented ethics. Comparative research engaging other modern Islamic frameworks—such as post-Ghazālīan Sufi approaches, Mawlānā Mawdūdī's systematized theory of *jihad*, or Fazlur Rahman's ethics-centered reform project—would further clarify the diversity of modern reconstructions of *jihad* and help to address a significant lacuna in current scholarship.

In response to these questions, Nursî turns to the conditions of the contemporary world. He argues that modern societies are characterized by a level of civilization in which freedom of religion and freedom of conscience are, at least normatively, guaranteed by state institutions. **Against this background**, his argument is addressed primarily to Muslims living under such conditions and concerns the practical implications of *jihad* in everyday life.

Accordingly, Nursî maintains that in the present context Muslims are called to

1. embody their religious commitments through exemplary personal conduct,
2. relate to others with love, tolerance, and moral consideration, and
3. communicate religious truths through reasoned argumentation rather than coercion.

5. Nursî's Defense Statement as a Critique of Coercive Politics

This passage is from Nursî's defense statement during the Afyon trial in 1948, where he was accused of exploiting religion for political purposes.

“We, the students of the Risale-i Nur, cannot instrumentalize the Risale-i Nur for worldly currents—indeed, we cannot use it even for the whole universe. The Qur'an has strictly forbidden us from politics.

Yes, the mission of the Risale-i Nur is to serve the Qur'an through the truths of faith which save eternal life from destruction and prevent worldly life from turning into a dreadful poison through absolute disbelief. It fulfills this service by means of powerful proofs capable of bringing even the most obstinate and irreligious materialist philosophers to faith. Therefore, we cannot make the Risale-i Nur a tool for anything.

Firstly, it is to avoid lowering the diamond-like truths of the Qur'an to the level of mere pieces of glass in the eyes of heedless people through the suspicion of political propaganda, and thus to avoid betraying those precious truths.

Secondly, the foundational principles of the *Risale-i Nur*—compassion, truthfulness, fidelity to reality, and conscience—categorically preclude involvement in partisan politics or interference in governmental authority. The reason is ethical rather than strategic: even if a small number of individuals might, due to outright unbelief, be deemed deserving of harm or punishment, any collective calamity would inevitably also afflict children, the sick, the elderly, and other innocent persons who bear no responsibility. When disorder or punitive measures occur, these vulnerable groups suffer alongside those targeted.

For this reason, and given that the moral outcome of political confrontation is uncertain, the *Risale-i Nur* tradition strictly prohibits engagement in political activity that enters social life in a manner liable to disrupt public order or undermine social peace.

Thirdly, in order for the social life of this homeland and this nation to be saved from anarchism in this astonishing time, five principles are necessary and indispensable: respect, compassion, abstaining from the unlawful, trustworthiness, and giving up lawlessness through obedience. When the *Risale-i Nur* looks at social life, it fixes and strengthens these five principles in a powerful and sacred manner. The proof is that, over the past twenty years, the *Risale-i Nur* has transformed hundreds of thousands of people into harmless and beneficial members of the homeland and the nation.”

In his Afyon defense statement delivered in 1948, Said Nursî lays out a clear normative stance on how religion, politics, and social order ought to relate to each other. Confronting accusations that he had used religion for political purposes, Nursî responds by insisting that the *Risale-i Nur* cannot—and should not—serve worldly agendas or political agitation. He supports this claim with two interconnected arguments: first, that the Qur’an forbids believers from entering partisan power struggles; and second, that religious truths lose their moral and epistemic integrity when turned into political propaganda. Taken together, these arguments point toward a different political-theological vision, one in which faith is judged not by its ability to mobilize power but by its ability to reform the self and sustain social ethics.

Nursî consistently describes coercive politics as epistemically corrupting and morally dangerous. His metaphor of “diamond-like truths” being reduced to mere “pieces of glass” when instrumentalized for political gain reflects a clear hierarchy between revelation and power. Revelation is absolute and salvific; politics is contingent and morally unstable. From this angle, religion enters public life not through the force of sovereignty, but through persuasion, moral development, and intellectual illumination. In doing so, Nursî shifts political-theological agency away from statecraft and toward the formation of ethical subjects.

A second major point in the passage concerns the ethics of collective harm. Nursî argues that political agitation exposes innocent people—children, the elderly, the sick, and other non-combatants—to suffering. By highlighting this collective vulnerability, he draws on an implicit logic rooted in (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*) and harm (*ḍarar*), where social peace (*ʿaṣāyış*) and mutual trust (*emniyet*) outweigh partisan struggle. This reinforces an ethic of politics centered not on acquiring power but on preventing unjust harm. The goal here is not sovereignty, but social cohesion, moral restraint, and nonviolent forms of relating to others.

A second major point in the passage concerns the ethics of collective harm. Nursî maintains that political agitation and confrontation inevitably expose innocent persons—children, the elderly, the sick, and other non-combatants—to suffering. By foregrounding this collective vulnerability, his argument implicitly resonates with a normative logic akin to the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*, particularly the prevention of harm (*ḍarar*) and the protection of life and social order. Central to this logic is the priority of *asāyış*—understood not merely as public order, but as social stability grounded in moral restraint—and *emniyet*, meaning existential and social security rooted in mutual trust.

Within this framework, *asāyış* and *emniyet* take precedence over partisan conflict and power-driven political struggle. Politics, accordingly, is not evaluated in terms of sovereignty or domination, but in light of its capacity to prevent unjust harm and preserve social peace. The ethical aim is thus social cohesion, moral self-limitation, and non-violent modes of relating to others rather than the pursuit of power.

Nursî then identifies five principles needed to protect society against modern “anarchism”: respect, compassion, avoidance of the unlawful, trustworthiness, and obedience. These principles suggest a deeper conviction that social order rests less on coercive institutions and more on interpersonal virtue. The task of the *Risale-i Nur*, as he sees it, is to cultivate these virtues within individuals, transforming them into “harmless and beneficial members” of society. With this move, Nursî completes his argument: political authority is neither rejected nor embraced as ultimate; religion is grounded in moral formation; and theology becomes a source of non-coercive social stability rather than a tool of political competition.

Taken as a whole, the Afyon statement shows Nursî as a thinker who questions coercive political theology and instead advances a model of nonviolent, ethically grounded political subjectivity rooted in Qur’anic interpretation.

Conclusion

This study examined how Said Nursî redefined *jihad* through a discourse-analytical and hermeneutic reading of his writings. It demonstrated that Nursî systematically shifted the meaning of *jihad* away from its political and military associations and reframed the concept within an intellectual, ethical, and communicative horizon. In doing so, he challenges dominant narratives—both **within Islamic theological debates that privilege juridical or militarized readings of *jihad*** and **within popular and media discourses that reduce *jihad* to violence, militancy, or state power**. In Nursî’s account, *jihad* emerges as a form of agency grounded in knowledge, persuasion, and ethical self-governance rather than coercion.

On the theoretical level, this study contributes to political theology by demonstrating a mode of Muslim agency that is not grounded in sovereignty or military force, but in communicative truth and moral persuasion. Nursî’s account thus offers an **internally grounded and tradition-derived Islamic perspective** for conceptualizing power beyond coercion—one that emerges from within Islamic ethical and theological resources rather

than being imported from external theoretical frameworks. In this respect, his approach resonates with broader contemporary critiques of sovereignty in political theology.

Rather than advocating withdrawal from political life or endorsing passive quietism, Nursî articulates a form of nonviolent political agency oriented toward **resistance against coercive, domination-based, and violence-centered conceptions of power**. This agency seeks to transform individuals and social relations through ethical formation, persuasion, and moral example rather than through the exercise of force. By doing so, Nursî complicates the prevailing binary that casts Muslim actors as either militant or apolitical and instead introduces a more nuanced category of **ethical resistance to coercion, domination, and the instrumentalization of religion for power**.

Ethically, the study highlights the central role of nonviolence in Nursî's vision. His focus on self-purification, social reform, and the communication of truth resonates with peace studies while remaining firmly grounded in Islamic theology and law. By affirming freedom of conscience and rejecting coercion as a legitimate means of religious engagement, Nursî anticipates present-day debates on human rights, religious freedom, and pluralism within Islamic ethics. Importantly, this position did not rely on borrowing from Western liberalism; it emerged from Qur'anic interpretation and Islamic legal reasoning, demonstrating the tradition's own resources for thinking about nonviolence.

The study also shows that Nursî's jihad is essentially communicative—operating through rational proofs, moral example, and discourse rather than force. This aligns with Habermas's idea of communicative action, where legitimacy rests on rational agreement. For Nursî, in an age of literacy, political pluralism, and legally recognized conscience, coercion is both ineffective and illegitimate, making intellectual and moral jihad the most fitting form of struggle.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Nursî merits greater attention in contemporary debates on modernity, pluralism, and nonviolent resistance within Islamic thought. His reconceptualization of *jihad* provides a compelling prototype for a nonviolent Islamic political theology that warrants further comparative investigation. Future research could

explore how Nursî's model intersects with other reformist traditions, informs contemporary Muslim movements, or critically challenges **security-centered and threat-oriented representations of Islam** that dominate much of the global public sphere and policy discourse.

References

Abu-Rabi', I. M. (2003). *Islam at the crossroads: On the life and thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. State University of New York Press.

Bayhaqi. (n.d.). *Al-Zuhd al-Kabir*.

Bonner, M. (2006). *Jihad in Islamic history: Doctrines and practice*. Princeton University Press.

Gerges, F. A. (2009). *The far enemy: Why jihad went global* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press

Kara, İ. (2001). *İslamcıların siyasi görüşleri* (Vol. 1). Dergâh Yayınları.

Mardin, Ş. (1989). *Religion and social change in modern Turkey: The case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. State University of New York Press.

Moghadam, A. (2008). *The globalization of martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi jihad, and the diffusion of suicide attacks*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Nursî, S. (1997). *Mektubat (The Letters)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work published 1920–1935)

Nursî, S. (2004). *Sözler (The Words)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work published 1920–1932)

Nursî, S. (1992). *Lem'alar (The Gleams)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work published 1920–1935)

Nursî, S. (1998). *Şualar (The Rays)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work published 1920–1935)

Nursî, S. (2005). *İşaratü'l-İ'caz (Signs of Miraculousness)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work published 1918)

Nursî, S. (2008). *Hutbe-i Şâmiye (The Damascus Sermon)* (Ş. Vahide, Trans.). Istanbul: Sözler Publications. (Original work delivered 1911)

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action, Volume 2: Lifeworld and system: A critique of functionalist reason* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Beacon Press.

Turner, C., & Horkuc, H. (2009). *Said Nursi*. I.B. Tauris.

Turner, C., & O'Leary, S. (2009). *Nursi's Damascus sermon: A historical analysis*. Journal of Islamic Studies, 20(1), 1–27.

Vahide, Ş. (2005). *Islam in modern Turkey: An intellectual biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. State University of New York Press.