What's on Your Mind?

Jihads today are difficult to define

Q: What do Hamas, Hezbollah and Jihad mean?

- Jack Hawkins, Blacksburg

A: Shortly after 9/11 we learned that radical Islamists were responsible for the attacks, which killed nearly 3000 people.

Five years later, we've seen more attacks, more violence in the Middle East and the coining of the term "Islamofascists" to describe the terrorists.

But, after five years, most of us have made little progress in understanding Islam – a religion practiced by neighbors and colleagues who live peacefully beside us here in the U.S.

To find answers, I started with a standard reference book and checked on the official U.S. government stance. Then I sought further information from the Islamic Center of Blacksburg.

Some readers may find that the answers may find that the answers lead to more questions. Others may find themselves agreeing or disagreeing with the answers. I hope you will send me your comments and questions after reading the column.

According to the Columbia Encyclopedia. Hamas means "zeal" and Hazbollah is the "party of God." Both of these are political groups – Hamas in Palestine and Hazbollah in Lebanon – which the U.S. State Department classifies as terrorist organizations because of their roles in Middle East violence.

"Jihad is similarly complicated. It is often translated as "holy war." But there's a lot more to it than that.

Holy war "is both a mistranslation and oversimplification." Sedki Riad told me in a detailed e-mail. Riad, a Virginia Tech professor, is also administrative director of the Islamic Center of Blacksburg.

One reason he objects to the term "holy war" is that he thinks it suggests an attempt to spread Islam by force. That goes against one of the tenets of Islam, that "the freedom of belief is a God-Given-Right."

But no one can deny that the word jihad is today, closely linked with violent struggle in the Middle East.

Among the terrorist-linked groups using the term are Hazbollah, which is sometimes called "Islamic Jihad," Al Jihad and Islamic Jihad of Palestine, according to the State Department.

While Jihad does call for Muslims to fight for the rights of all people, Riad noted that is also demands that violence be a last resort.

"It is an Islamic religious duty to defend and protect God-given rights with vigor and commitment, be it the rights of Muslims or non-Muslims," he wrote.

"Peaceful means are to be exhausted before resorting to the use of force."

He also listed rules Muslims must follow when force is required. These include prohibitions against killing women and children or destroying farms and factories.

Although I'm no expert on the Middle East, it seems clear to me that these rules are being broken on a regular basis.

"Islam gives the Muslim the highest code of ethics to abide by." Riad wrote.

But when the pressure and injustice exceed human tolerance and withstanding, human beings (Muslims or non-Muslims) break down and are tempted to revolt and respond violently.

“You can’t demand ideal behavior from human beings living under oppressive regimes and unjust tyrannies.” He wrote. “You can’t defend their wrong actions, too.”

How does 9/11 fit into all this, I asked.

Riad said he is careful not to judge any individuals, but this is how he judges the act itself:

The atrocities that were committed on Sept. 11 are not befitting to Islam in any way. “

Personal struggle

So far we have focused on the violence side of jihad, but there is more to it than fighting. While the Colombia encyclopedia sometimes uses the “Holy war” translation, its section on Islam calls jihad, “the extension of efforts for the cause of God”

Jihad can even refer to one’s “personal struggle to be righteous”

Riad explained how this works on an everyday basis.

“I do Jihad against my own temptations [in order] to implement righteousness in my life style (physically and spiritually), when I resist eating, that delicious ice cream cone to control my own weight, I am doing Jihad, and when I persist to be constant in my prayers I am also doing jihad ”

Ido Jihad when I speak for what is right and when I speak against what is wrong. I am doing jihad right now as I answer your questions and am trying my best to be accurate and informative”

Correction: Last week, I misidentified biologist Donald Linzy. Linzy, who answered a question about rabies for us is a professor at Wytheville Community College.

Got a question? Got an answer? Call Tom Anglerger at 777-6476 or send an email to tomangloberger@yahoo.com. Don’t forget to provide your full name, its proper spelling and your downtown.