

# A Jihadism Anti-Primer

Darryl Li

The US national security state has for the past quarter-century been preoccupied with something it has called “jihadism.” From the aftermath of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan through the September 11, 2001 attacks to the rise of the self-declared Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, or ISIS, the specter of mobile Muslim multitudes wreaking global havoc has given rise to an equally vast body of commentary.

Nearly all of this work is empirically or conceptually flawed. There are many reasons for such shortcomings, foremost being sheer racism and Islamophobia, followed closely by an inability to think beyond the worldview of the national security state. But many critical challenges to discourses on jihadism, however necessary and salutary, have also unwittingly contributed to the stultifying nature of these debates.

What follows is an anti-primer of sorts on jihadism. Unlike innumerable works, it does not purport to tell readers everything they need to know about the different groups whose exotic names and acronyms animate excited “national security” debates. Instead it is an attempt to help readers think through this issue beyond the fashionable threat of the day, to clarify what is and is not known so far, and to better weigh the issues at stake.

## Answering the Wrong Questions

Discussions of jihad today are like a secularized form of demonology. They stem from a place of horror that shuts down serious thinking about politics. Perhaps the most striking example of this orientation is a summer 2015 analysis in the *New York Review of Books*—like much of its ilk, widely circulated but quickly forgotten—declaring ISIS simply too horrific to be analyzed.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the magazine’s unexplained decision to grant anonymity to the author (described only as a “former official of a NATO country”), despite the lack of any sensitive information in the article, seemed only to reinforce this sense of radical cataclysmic difference.

The problem with all demonologies, however, is that they all too easily give rise to witch hunts. By positing jihadism as a problem about Islam, the debate is nearly always framed around questions of authenticity: How much do groups like al-Qaeda or ISIS represent something inherent to Islam and Islam only—or, in other words, how afraid should “we” be of Muslims? In this framing, ordinary Muslims are ritualistically called upon to condemn the acts committed by jihadis, something that is never demanded of Christians and Jews for acts of co-religionists who may also seek to justify their actions in scriptural terms. But no matter how sincere or thorough such

self-flagellations may be, the demand for condemnation will never be completely sated. For the suspicion will persist that as infinitesimally small as groups like ISIS may be, they nevertheless make claims to Islamic authority that are compelling enough to some number of people to both give and take life in an organized fashion. As a result, “Muslims are presented with a brutal logic in which the only way to truly disassociate from ISIS and escape suspicion is to renounce Islam altogether.”<sup>2</sup>

Aside from its tendencies toward racism, the problem with demonology as starting point is that it sets a low bar for analysis and makes for a lot of boring writing. As a result, the engine of much commentary on jihad runs on the shock of discovery that “jihadis” are organized, may not be very religious, care about money, have fun, know how to use computers, fall in love, drink alcohol, use drugs and so on. These writings reveal far more about their presumed audiences than about the jihadi groups themselves.<sup>3</sup> This banalizing narrative serves both the state—which seeks to discredit the jihadis’ self-presentation as superhuman idealists—and liberal critics, who point to impiety or lack of religious learning as proving that Islam as such is not the issue.

The rediscovery that inhumane acts are committed by human beings is often paired with some kind of disclaimer that the writer is not an apologist or a proponent of “moral equivalence” between state violence and jihad but someone who seeks to understand the enemy in order to better combat it. This skittishness about “humanizing” the enemy is a kind of boundary maintenance reinforcing the false idea that the only choices on hand are apology for jihad or joining the fight against it.

Against this discourse on monsters who are actually human but whose monstrousness must nevertheless be reasserted, there are two main forms of pushback: The first insists that jihadi groups do not represent Muslims or Islam in any meaningful sense. The second holds the US or other governments directly or indirectly responsible for the emergence of such groups. Both arguments are generally correct, necessary and important. But insofar as they engage in debates over who is the “real” enemy, these arguments do not move debates about jihad outside the circle of demonology.

There is an enormous body of scholarship in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies demolishing the myth that Muslims are inherently or irrationally violent. Some of it also shows that political groups fashioning themselves in Islamic terms, such as the Society of Muslim Brothers in Egypt or the Justice and Development Party in Turkey (usually known by the Turkish acronym, AKP), should not be conflated with jihadis, whatever else their flaws may be. There is also scholarship showing that even groups engaging in violence under the banner of jihad cannot all be lumped together—nationalist organizations such as Hamas and Hizballah

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**The clock tower in Raqqa, Syria. In November 2013, ISIS cut the heads off the statues, one of a man and the other of a woman.**

DRAWING BY MOLLY CRABAPPLE, BASED ON AN IMAGE PROVIDED BY A SYRIAN RESIDENT OF RAQQA.

are distinguished from transnational groups like al-Qaeda. In other words, not all Muslims are pious, not all pious Muslims are Islamists, not all Islamists are violent and not all violent Islamists are at war with the West (or other Muslims they dislike).

There is, however, one significant limitation to this approach when it comes to the question of jihadism: Telling us who is not a jihadi is not particularly helpful for understanding jihadism on its own terms. In a sense, we are back in the condemnation trap, except using more analytical language. Moreover, the “not all Muslims” argument can all too easily play into the distinction between “good” and “bad” Muslims that states have long employed as an instrument of rule. It is much better at telling the state which Muslims not to torture or bomb than it is at arguing against those practices in the first place.

There is a corollary to this political argument, namely “not all terrorists are Muslim,” frequently trotted out to ask why violence perpetrated by right-wing or white supremacist groups is not treated as terrorism. If the question is posed rhetorically to draw attention to the continuities and complicities between state and extra-state forms of racial terror, it is helpful. But when couched instead as a plea for the state to be simply more judicious in the distribution of its violence, then it is naïve at best.

The other most common pushback against anti-Muslim demonization is to highlight the role that the United States played in creating the conditions that gave rise to jihadism. Indeed, a critical understanding of imperial practices and the US role in particular is absolutely indispensable. But it is equally true that reducing jihadi groups to mere epiphenomena of US actions is a dead end for analysis. Such approaches give rise to

a kind of Frankenstein theory of jihad, which insists that the US can manufacture such groups but then somehow always loses control over them without ever really explaining how (an even more conspiratorial argument is that the US continues to control such groups, which at least enjoys the virtue of consistency). Moreover, the political logic of the complicity charge can be all too easily appropriated by warmongers, such as the late columnist Christopher Hitchens, who maintained that US support for Saddam Hussein in the 1980s made Washington all the more obligated to overthrow him in 2003.

A more sophisticated variant of this argument is to highlight the role of US proxies like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in stirring up jihadi energies. Again, there is much truth to this account: The House of Saud’s role as a leading exporter of counterrevolution and the Pakistani military establishment’s ruthlessness in pursuit of domestic and foreign policy goals are a matter of well-established record. But when the influence that these regimes exercise over jihadi groups is overplayed or commentators suggest that Riyadh and Islamabad are somehow directing overseas attacks against their most powerful patron in Washington, the argument loses its footing. And politically, this narrative can bizarrely turn into a redirection of militarism rather than a rejection of it.<sup>4</sup> One respected commentator on the region, Patrick Cockburn, has gone so far as to argue, “The ‘war on terror’ has failed because it did not target the jihadi movement as a whole and, above all, was not aimed at Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.”<sup>5</sup> More extreme versions of the argument include conspiracy theories blaming the House of Saud for the September 11 hijackings, which conveniently ignore its

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long-standing mutual enmity with Osama bin Laden as well as al-Qaeda's bloody attacks on the Saudi regime.

Arguments over who is the real enemy—whether emphasizing that the enemy is not all Muslims or declaring that there is no enemy as such, only the blowback from imperial policies—ultimately do not challenge jihad talk as demonology. The fundamental problem is not only how Islam is discussed; it is how politics is understood in general. The statist discourse and its liberal opposition present a choice between demonizing the enemy and banalizing him. But there is a third option: taking radicalism seriously as a political orientation, whether its idiom is Islamic, communist or anarchist. The challenge is how to understand the distinctiveness of jihadi groups without lapsing into an all-too-often racialized exceptionalism. Letting racist flat-earthers and their more respectable counterparts set the terms of debate with questions like whether jihadis represent Islam or why they are so horrible only obscures this important task. Jihadi groups may have very different ideas of the good and may operate in forms unfamiliar to those who can only think of politics in terms of the state and its categories. But that does not render any less concrete the ideas and interests at stake in their antagonisms, nor does it make thinking clearly about them any less urgent.

## Unthinking Through Jihadism

In the vacuum left by all of the attempts to distinguish jihadis from other Muslims, the work of explaining and interpreting jihadism is largely abandoned to the cottage industry of “terrorism experts.” Aside from its sordid links with racist fearmongering, this field's intimate relationship with the national security state has left it without the autonomy needed to develop into a serious intellectual project.<sup>6</sup> Over the past decade, a more sophisticated, professionalized generation of specialists in jihadism has emerged. This newer cohort is more likely to have at least some relevant linguistic experience and may even dabble in critiques of Islamophobia to bolster its own credibility. Nevertheless, the overwhelming demand to provide “actionable” insights renders jihad studies unable or unwilling to engage any of the grand recurring questions of social and political theory. Jihadologists may dismiss this as ivory tower irrelevance; others might call it intellectual autonomy.

The terrorism studies field has continued to hamper useful conversations in many ways, starting with the concept of “jihadism” itself. This category logically presupposes various people identifying as Muslim, engaging in violence and legitimizing this violence in terms of the Islamic concept of jihad (put aside the accurate but banal point that the word “jihad” can be used to describe non-violent action as well). This set of criteria is far too thin to support a meaningful analysis. Declaring jihad, after all, is ultimately nothing more than a claim to a certain kind of legitimacy. Some claims may be treated with more credibility than others, but the kinds of actors who may make such claims, the content of such claims and the audiences for assessing them

vary so widely that one can question whether the idea of jihadism is even a useful analytical category. And without any clarity on the concept, the idea that such groups can somehow be ranked on a scale of moderate to radical is even more questionable.

Much of the research on jihadism, however, barrels past this basic problem. There are four major approaches in studying the jihadi enemy: doctrine, tactics, propaganda and members.

Writing on jihad that traces genealogies of Islamic scholarship often seeks to explain how bad Muslims belong to one particular doctrinal school or pietistic orientation but not others. But one does not have to learn all of the interesting and important distinctions and relationships between Sufis, *salafis*, Ahl al-Hadith, Deobandis and Wahhabis to know that no doctrinal position or school can be identified as causing the actions of jihadi groups. Historically, the correlation between doctrinal position and armed jihad seems weak at best. In the nineteenth century, Sufis frequently led anti-colonial jihads, Sufis from the same orders that today are celebrated (often by authoritarian regimes) as pacifist. At the same time, a great many *salafis* worldwide are uninterested in organized politics of any kind, let alone armed action. The point is not that these doctrines are unimportant or ideological smokescreens for other social forces. Instead, ideas must be situated with respect to movements, organizations and structures to identify the elective affinities that may make one school or another associated with radicalism at specific points in time. It is impossible to write good intellectual history without good history in general, which is missing for the transregional migratory worlds in which many of these groups emerged. As a result, this type of writing on jihad often strings together names like Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam and Osama bin Laden to get to September 11 with all the sophistication of explaining the Holocaust by skipping from Hobbes to Nietzsche to Hitler.

In contrast to focusing on the ideas of jihadi groups, others attempt to understand them through their violent tactics, especially whether they target non-combatants. Classifying groups on the basis of some kind of atrocity scale leads only to confusion, because the relationship between means of violence (such as suicide bombings and torture) and political goals is at best underdetermined. “Extreme” violence such as torture or deliberate targeting of civilians can be undertaken for “moderate” political goals such as seeking a share of state power and vice versa.

This approach often ends up conflating normative and analytical approaches: Groups are classified according to how bad we think they are.

A third major approach is to analyze media output, especially imagery of martyrs or the gruesome snuff films of torture and murder. This study can yield some helpful insights, but no political movement should ever be understood primarily through its own propaganda, especially when the analyst and the movement in question have different cultural referents. Without a clearer sense of how people take up, interpret, modify, criticize or parody this media production, this brand of analysis will tend to play up everything that seems exotic

or bizarre. Moreover, these approaches often have little of insight to say about the vast amount of jihadi media output that appears unrelated to armed activity or other lurid ends—at most, they are noted simply as ways to lure potential recruits.

Fourth, and finally, there are studies of why individuals join jihadi groups, a process often called “radicalization.” These studies are often based on interviews with incarcerated individuals or on media reports and prosecutorial documents. This work has occasionally yielded some sound findings, mostly of a negative nature, like the apparent lack of a clear correlation between socio-economic status and jihadi activity or the diversity of motivations from humiliation and disaffection to positive desires to help others. The problem with these studies is that the factors identified are often shared across much broader swathes of the population, so they hardly explain why those specific individuals joined jihads as opposed to other armed groups or even state militaries. Moreover, focusing on recruitment tends to leech out the political dynamics of the groups themselves; one would never write a cogent analysis of the invasion of Iraq by focusing on why soldiers volunteer to join the US military. Radicalization literature tends to ask why people fight with little if any regard to what they may be fighting for. The absence of politics leaves accounts rather empty.

Terrorism studies, even in a more evolved form claiming to transcend Islamophobia, remains trapped in an unwillingness to raise challenging questions. Without rendering legible the political nature of jihadi projects, its focus on doctrine becomes deterministic; its analysis of propaganda tends toward voyeurism;

its study of tactics redounds to incoherent moralism; and its focus on individual motivations is atomistic. This is not a matter of the failings of individual analysts but rather is a feature of this body of work as long as its *raison d'être* remains *raison d'état*.

## Jihad in a World of Sovereigns

In order to start writing intelligible accounts about contemporary groups invoking jihad, one needs to engage and understand the political struggles at work by understanding the social forces driving them, the worldly goals they pursue and the antagonisms that they face. An important starting point is to recognize that groups claiming to wage jihad today operate in a world organized formally along nation-state lines. Jihadi groups may invoke an authority above this formal legal system (and they are hardly alone in doing so), but such universalist messages must always contend with and often work through actual institutions such as states.

The first thing to note is that a great many of the groups operating under the banner of jihad have been largely oriented toward capturing state power and recruit primarily from a single national group, even if geographically dispersed. Some of these groups have sought to overthrow existing regimes, such as the Gama' Islamiyya in Egypt or the Groupe Islamique Armé in Algeria. Others, such as Hamas and Hizballah, arose in response to foreign occupations. Yet others emerged in situations where prolonged civil war led to a near-collapse of state institutions, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Islamic Courts Union



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in Somalia. Their claims to being “Islamic” notwithstanding, there is no obvious reason why these groups should be analytically clustered together and segregated from non-Muslim insurgencies in other parts of the world.

Claims to jihad have also been raised by groups whose goals, areas of operation or memberships do not fit into the nationalist mold. These groups are often glossed as “global jihad,” a free-floating, rootless and more radical counterpart of the nationally oriented jihads. This shorthand reflects the tendency to treat the “global” lazily as a catch-all appellation for things that are not readily understood in local or national terms and its unqualified use should raise red flags for any attentive reader. For even so-called global jihad movements must contend with the locally grounded politics and the state order.

The first type of such movements includes the various pan-Islamist jihad mobilizations of the past quarter-century (what jihadologists sometimes misleadingly call “classical” jihad). The best-known was the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, followed by those in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq and, finally, Syria. These mobilizations were attempts to enact some idea of a global Muslim community, but they always claimed to support some local organized movement. Roving Marxists and anarchists of previous generations faced similar dilemmas. In some situations—such as in Bosnia or during the 1994 Yemeni civil war—foreign volunteers fought on the side of recognized governments. More often—as in Kashmir, the Philippines and Chechnya—they sided with independence movements. Some of these situations were conventional wars with clearly demarcated front lines, others were guerrilla conflicts, and the relationships between foreign and local fighters varied accordingly. These mobilizations were not based on solid permanent organizations: Fighters would move on to other wars, settle down and marry in their adopted countries, or simply return home.

Al-Qaeda emerged from the Afghan jihad but was distinct. While pan-Islamist jihad mobilizations were amorphous and decentralized movements, al-Qaeda eventually became a relatively small, self-contained organization. And unlike pan-Islamist jihads, al-Qaeda sought to mirror Washington’s ability to strike anywhere in the world at a time of its choosing—East Africa, Yemen, Indonesia, Spain. Yet despite this aspiration, al-Qaeda’s goals were largely state-oriented. It sought to end US support for Arab clients, in particular Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and thereby help to topple those regimes. Despite occasional talk of supporting a return to the caliphate, al-Qaeda’s program would also have been compatible with these states simply asserting their independence from the West and implementing some form of “Islamic” rule. Al-Qaeda’s project could be read as a shallow anti-imperialism, employing spectacular acts of violence against an overstretched hegemon to induce regime change without any interest in mass mobilization or organizing—and, not unrelatedly, with little concern for the consequences borne by its Afghan hosts.<sup>7</sup>

The latest chapter in the story of jihadism is the self-declared Islamic State that has emerged in Iraq and Syria. What makes ISIS distinct is not its attempt at enacting “Islamic” governance,

its incorporation of foreign fighters or its apparent willingness to sponsor attacks outside its territory, although these aspects are all important in their own right. Instead, based on what little solid information exists, one can say that the basic political dynamic of ISIS on the ground stems from its emergence in the wake of not one but two adjacent and prolonged processes of partial state collapse, in regions deemed peripheral from both Damascus and Baghdad. By openly exercising authority on both sides of the border, ISIS can lay claim to a kind of supranational authority that the Taliban and Islamic Courts Union could not. (Other groups such as the Afghan mujahideen were also constituted by a cross-border existence, but in the mold of using one side as a haven against the other.) Yet despite boasting of having erased the Sykes-Picot borders between the two countries,<sup>8</sup> ISIS in many ways remains constituted by the border and the arbitrage opportunities it presents. ISIS authorities remain partially dependent on local administration in both countries, especially for infrastructural needs. Foreign resources and fighters coming through Turkey destined for Syria can find their way into Iraq; US-made weapons and equipment captured in Iraq can be taken to Syria. On one side of the border, the US and Iran can be de facto allies; on the other they are at loggerheads. ISIS is therefore best thought of as a sectarian double secessionist movement that has skillfully seized the opportunities available to position itself as an enemy to all but a priority to none, with the possible exception of the Syrian Kurdish rebels who have similarly exploited power vacuums to carve out an autonomous zone. This dynamic makes ISIS distinct and interesting, but not unique or apocalyptic.

None of the foregoing is to deny the newness of the ISIS phenomenon or the genuine difficulty of understanding it. Rather, it is to insist that the newness of ISIS springs from the historical conjuncture at which it appeared. The group’s claims to religious legitimacy have precedents but none with such renewable financial resources and (thus far) such diffident military opponents. Its stylized killings are familiar from Hollywood productions but rendered grotesquely novel by the real-world knowledge that this plot has no necessary beginning, middle and end. Its rapid rise to prominence on the regional stage is stunning but quite comprehensible as a consequence of the authoritarian rule, maldistribution of wealth and power, external intervention and other crises that have bedeviled this part of the world for so very long. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 Anonymous, “The Mystery of ISIS,” *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 2015.
- 2 Caner Dagli, “The Phony Islam of ISIS,” *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2015.
- 3 One of the few non-racist forms of satire here plays on the theme of terrorists as regular Joes plodding away at meaningless office jobs. A slightly smarter version of this joke depicts al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as a vapid Silicon Valley entrepreneur. *The Onion*, March 29, 2013.
- 4 Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).
- 5 Patrick Cockburn, “Al-Qa’ida, the Second Act: Why the Global ‘War on Terror’ Went Wrong,” *The Independent*, March 18, 2014.
- 6 Lisa Stampnitzky, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented “Terrorism”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- 7 Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2012).
- 8 On the many problems with this argument, see the two-part article by Sara Pursley, “Lines Drawn on an Empty Map: Iraq’s Borders and the Legend of the Artificial State,” *Jadaliyya*, June 2 and 3, 2015.