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Introduction: Jihadi Culture and Ideology

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This issue of the *Journal of Religion and Violence* on jihadi culture and ideology fits within a recent trend in the field of jihadism studies. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, research on jihadism has taken huge steps. Scholars from terrorism studies, sociology, psychology, criminology, and religious studies—to name just a few of the disciplines and fields involved—have provided valuable insights into the organizational networks and strategies of jihadi organizations, the profiles and radicalization processes of individual participants, and the social, ideological, and religious backgrounds of jihadi violence. What has remained understudied for a long time, however, is the cultural dimension of jihadism. It is only more recently that we have seen an increasing number of studies focusing on cultural aspects of jihadi life, most prominent of which is the edited volume *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* by Thomas Hegghammer from 2017. This volume focuses on the cultural dimension of jihadi life, which Hegghammer defines as the “products and practices that do something other than filling the basic military needs of jihadi groups.” Hence, it aims to study aspects that go beyond the functionally essential elements of jihadi activities; the, in Edwards Leach’s terms, “technically superfluous frills and decorations” of jihadi life.¹ Accordingly, the volume covers topics such as jihadi poetry, music, visual culture, and material culture, while other publications have followed the same line by exploring topics varying from jihadi dreams to weeping.²

This special issue aims to build upon and further this upcoming field of research. Doing so is significant for at least three reasons. First, as Hegghammer also notes, studying the cultural dimension of jihadism is important to

¹Hegghammer 2017, 4–9.

²See, for example, Edgar 2007 and Hegghammer 2015.

understand the appeal of jihadism and thus to explain why people join extremist groups.³ People join jihadism not just because of political and socio-economic push factors and ideological and religious pull factors. The way they perceive their lives and the world around them, and the meanings they attribute to the jihadi struggle are also crucial to take into account. Here we enter the domain of culture; the, in Clifford Geertz's terms, "pattern of meaning embodied in symbols" by means of which "men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life."⁴ Hence, it is important to study symbolic products and practices such as poetry, music, and dreaming, as these issues provide meaning to jihadi life. Understanding this is essential to grasp why some people embrace a struggle in which, in Geertz's terms again, from a utilitarian point of view, the stakes are so high that it seems irrational for people to participate in them.⁵

Second, since research on jihadi culture is only in its infancy, there are many more themes and case studies that can be studied in order to provide insights into the meanings jihadists attribute to their struggles. Moreover, the definition of what constitutes jihadi culture could be broadened. As noted, research on jihadi culture has hitherto mainly focused on products and practices that do something other than filling the basic military needs of jihadi groups. Accordingly, the focus has been predominantly on non-military aspects of jihadism. Jihadi culture, however, involves more than non-military practices alone. Jihadi violence too, has a cultural dimension. Many aspects of jihadi violence are not necessarily functional in a strategic or tactical sense, and are, in that sense, "technically superfluous frills and decorations." One could think of the ritualized form of much of the violence, including symbolic dress, vocabulary, and behavior. Yet the cultural dimension of jihadi violence also includes its relationship to, for example, cultural values of honor and shame, practices of sacrifice and purification, and feelings of belonging and empowerment. These issues are not so much related to the strategic and tactical aspects of jihadi violence, but rather to its cultural meanings for the actors involved.

A third reason for the importance of studying jihadi culture—one that is particularly relevant for the purpose of this journal—is that it facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion in jihadi violence. Over the last two decades, many studies have addressed the role of religion in jihadi practices. Yet, as James R. Lewis observes, voices from religious studies have been relatively few in research on terrorism. "As a consequence," he writes,

³Hegghammer 2017, 14–18.

⁴Geertz 1973b, 89.

⁵Geertz 1973a.

“the religious dimension of terrorism has often been dealt with superficially.”⁶ Although there are several valuable, in-depth analyses on the religious backgrounds of jihadi ideology and violence,⁷ these studies typically focus on religion in the sense of doctrine, and thus on a number of key texts, beliefs, and ideologues. Yet the religious dimension of jihadism involves much more than doctrine and ideology; think of issues such as emotions, imagination, and aesthetics. Moreover, emphasis should also be put on how religion is being *practiced*, and thus on “the way in which the believer experiences religion and appropriates elements of theology, practices, imaginaries, and rites.”⁸ These issues also involve the construction of meaning and are therefore strongly related to culture. To be more precise, many scholars in the field of religious studies have come to view religion not as a separate “entity,” but rather as an aspect of culture, while putting emphasis on the interaction between religion and other cultural phenomena. This implies that (alleged) religious symbols and practices, including jihadi texts, doctrines, and ritual practices, should be studied in interaction with cultural symbols and practices, such as poetry, music, and dreams, as both are needed to understand how jihadists give meaning to their practices.

This special issue brings together four articles that illustrate these observations. In each article, religion in an abstract sense is not the prime focus. Rather, the contributions all focus on topics that illustrate the entanglement of religious and non-religious elements, be it the meanings of miracle stories, practices of sacrifice, conceptions of purity/pollution, or narratives on jihadi infighting. These topics are studied in diverse ways, focusing on different themes and using different approaches, case studies, and sources. The cases span the decades-long history of transnational jihadism, from ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam’s writings in the 1980s, via the Taliban and al-Qaeda to today’s jihadists in Iraq and Syria. All four papers are based on extensive analysis of primary sources, varying from fieldwork in Afghanistan to written sources such as books, pamphlets, magazines, and ideological tracts, and from cassette recordings from the 1980s, to the recent videos of the Islamic State. Yet the cultural dimension of jihadism, including jihadi violence, is central to all of them, by means of which the papers hope to provide insight into the ways jihadists give meaning to their struggle by drawing symbols, beliefs, practices, and narratives from their cultural repertoire.

⁶Lewis 2017, 2.

⁷See, for example, McCants 2015 and Maher 2016.

⁸Roy 2017, 42–43.

In the first paper, Mathias Müller focuses on jihadi battlefield miracles and explores how they were experienced, explained, and debated in jihadist literature in the period between 1982–2002, with a prime focus on the influential jihadist scholar ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam (d. 1989). It provides an overview of the more than three hundred miracle stories compiled by ‘Azzam and it develops a typology of his stories on battlefield miracles, distinguishing between stories in which the miracle was performed by living mujahidin, brought about by external intervention, or performed by martyred mujahidin. These stories, Müller demonstrates, were indebted to a longstanding and complex tradition of experiencing and narrating battlefield miracles in Islam, which both inspired and constricted the varieties of miracles experienced in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the miracle stories from Afghanistan were doubted by the *mujahidin* themselves. By examining how the miracle stories were published, circulated, and received in the Muslim world, the paper addresses the discussions that surrounded ‘Azzam’s miracle stories. Yet, in the end, neither criticism nor censorship could make miracles disappear from the battlefield, as Müller illustrates by indicating how ‘Azzam’s writings have influenced the development of miracle stories in later jihadist literature, and specifically in al-Qa’ida’s portrayal of 9/11. ‘Azzam and his colleagues, the article concludes, competed with secular histories written about jihadi struggles and endeavored to write an alternate sacred history instead, thus reconciling the messiness of war with the conviction that history was divinely ordained.

Based on extensive fieldwork in Afghanistan between 1982 and 2004, the paper by David B. Edwards focuses on the theme of sacrifice. Whereas Afghanistan’s history is typically framed through the prism of “terrorist violence,” this paper alters the terms of that telling, shifting the focus from terrorism to the role of sacrificial violence. It explores the process by which sacrifice took on new meanings, symbols, and practices in the context of the wars in Afghanistan between the 1980s and 2010s. It does so by examining five “acts” and the “axial figures” associated with each of these acts. The first of these centers on the early efforts of Afghan political parties during the first years of the Soviet occupation to change the focus of popular esteem from brave deeds to heroic deaths and the axial figure of veneration from the Warrior to the Martyr. The second act is associated with ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam who infused the figure of the Martyr with a sanctity long associated with the Sufi Saint by documenting miracles observed during and after the death of Afghan Arabs who died in the Afghan jihad. The third act involves the Taliban’s deployment of public rituals that altered the focus of sacrificial violence from collective veneration of the Martyr to the punishment of criminals who had defiled the purity of the jihad. The fourth act is associated with Osama Bin Laden who

exploited the potential of using bodies as weapons of mass destruction, in the process turning the figure of the Suicide Bomber into one of the key symbols of our age. The fifth and final act discussed here involves the rise of the Islamic State and its synthesis of diverse forms of sacrificial violence, expanding and recasting these elements in a symbolic register derived from popular media and centered around the figure of the Slaughterer.

Further exploring the cultural dimension of the Islamic State's violence, Pieter Nanninga's paper explores conceptions of purity and pollution in relation to the group's bloodshed. Whereas the connection between violence and conceptions of purity/pollution has been a longstanding theme in research on fundamentalism and mass violence, it has hardly been addressed in relation to jihadism. This paper integrates insights from these studies into research on jihadi violence. Drawing from the author's archive of Islamic State media releases, it identifies three types of violence to which conceptions of purity/pollution are central: the destruction of cultural heritage, the targeting of non-Muslim minorities, and the punishment of alleged sinners and spies. These acts of violence can be perceived as acts of purification that are deemed to purify space, society, and the Muslim community, respectively. Perceiving the Islamic State's violence from this perspective, the paper argues, provides additional insights into the cultural meanings of the Islamic State's violence for the perpetrators and their supporters, and thus for grasping the appeal of the group that has become infamous for its bloodshed.

In the fourth and final paper, Mohammed M. Hafez explores the rationalization of infighting between Islamist factions. Islamists in civil wars such as those in Algeria (1992–1999), Iraq (2003–2011), and Syria (2011–2019) often prioritize their factional conflicts above the collective goals of their movements. They end up fighting and killing each other despite having mutual state adversaries and shared normative commitments. This reality raises an intriguing puzzle. How can Islamists justify fratricidal practices given the ubiquity of Qur'anic scripture and prophetic traditions that prevail upon them to unite and refrain from infighting? In his paper, Hafez explores two religious narratives that rationalize such cases of violent infighting between Islamist factions. The *Victorious Sect* narrative is typically upheld by extremist factions and depicts rival Islamist factions as insufficiently Islamic by harboring political pluralism and nationalism in their ideological platforms. These deviations from orthodoxy are proof of their ineligibility to lead the Islamist movement. The other, "moderate," narrative, depicts rival factions as modern day *Kharijites* or Muslim extremists that must be repelled and driven out of the Islamist movement because they undermine its legitimacy. Although these narratives do not necessarily drive factional struggles for power, Hafez

indicates, they are important because they rationalize and publicly justify the highly controversial act of Islamists killing one another in their quest for movement supremacy. Moreover, he concludes, they once again illustrate the ductility of the Islamic tradition.

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