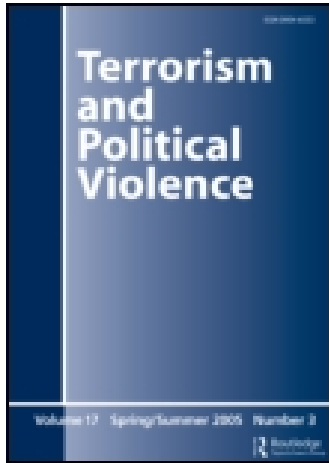


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## **Al-Qaida as a Muslim (Religio-Political) Movement Remarks on James L. Gelvin’s “Al-Qaeda and Anarchism: A Historian’s Reply to Terrorology”**

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James Gelvin begins with a story. Let me follow suit. At a recent seminar, I presented material from my book, *Arguing the Just War in Islam*.<sup>1</sup> Following the presentation, a student approached with a question. From the perspective of strategic studies, he said, there are contradictions in the strategy articulated by al-Qaida leaders. Why are they fixed on territory? Why would they want to tie their movement to locations in Afghanistan or Iraq? Do they really want political control? As he put it, the project of international terror is best served through maintaining maximum flexibility. The genius of al-Qaida is its lack of institutional baggage; to put it another way, the movement has an entrepreneurial cast. Why give that up?

The puzzlement seemed genuine. But the answer is not complex. The contradictions only exist because of the lens through which this student views al-Qaida. Change the lens, and the problem is solved. The group’s strategy makes sense, once we consider Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and others as Muslims. Al-Qaida is, first and foremost, a Muslim, that is to say a religious or religio-political movement.

These days, this is a difficult point to make. At least since 9/11, popular and scholarly discussions of al-Qaida move between two poles. From one end of the spectrum, we hear that al-Qaida and similar groups have nothing to do with Islam. Bin Ladin and others may speak about the Qur’an and the Prophet, but they are at best ill-educated and weak-minded people; at worst, they are criminals whose invocations of Islam are cynical and manipulative. At the other pole, people argue that jihadi movements represent authentic Islam, and that anyone who dissents is either ill-informed or an apologist.

The truth lies between these extremes. Thus, we should consider al-Qaida as deeply, though controversially, related to Islamic tradition. Bin Ladin and other leaders claim the mantle of Islam. They speak in ways that suggest a serious engagement with Muslim sources. Nevertheless, theirs is not the only or even the “mainstream” interpretation of those sources. In the end, jihadists are engaged in an argument with other Muslims regarding the nature of Islamic practice. We understand that argument best if we think of it as a variation on the longstanding inquiry associated with Muslim jurisprudence or, as I prefer, Sharia reasoning. All Muslims agree on the importance of *al-sharia*—that is, they agree that there is a “path” or way to live that accords with human nature, and is consistent with divine guidance.

They further agree that the best way to discern the contours of that path involves reading and interpreting approved sources—the Qur’an, and “sound” reports of the Prophet’s practice, understood as “signs” that point to the approved way. Finally, Muslims agree that the proper way of interpreting these sources, in conversation with the consensual judgment of previous generations, is to find analogies between textual, historical precedents and the circumstances of contemporary believers. It is here that disagreement can occur, and God receives glory as believers engage the sources and one another in the effort to submit all of life to the will and pleasure of the Creator and Lord.

Al-Qaida’s leaders claim the mantle of Islam, and do so through the terms common to Shari’a reasoning. Whether their arguments are good, or their judgments right, is not the first point to consider. Assuming our interest lies in understanding the group’s intentions, and in predicting the moves they are likely to make, the first consideration is that they speak as Muslims.<sup>2</sup> If we analyze jihadi strategy in terms of Islamic tradition, we can make sense of the “contradictions” cited by the student in my opening story. As Usama bin Ladin put it in the summer of 2003, five things are required for Islamic obedience. One of these is that Muslims gain control of territory and govern it in accord with divine guidance. Without the establishment of such a geopolitical unit, “the religion ceases to exist.” We need not look far into the practice of Shari’a reasoning to find precedents for bin Ladin’s argument. When the authors of the 1998 World Islamic Front Declaration suggested that Muslims were in a unique crisis (for which they cited a saying of the Prophet usually placed in the chapter on “last things” in collections of *ahadith*), and then noted that, in circumstances analogous to these, the great scholars of past generations opined that fighting becomes an individual duty for all Muslims able to carry it out, they were engaged in Sharia reasoning. And we can best understand them in that vein.<sup>3</sup>

What would this mean for the task of classifying jihadist movements? I should say that Gelvin’s “revised version” of anarchism makes that option less problematic than most similar suggestions. To that end, I should be interested in responses to his proposed definition of the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the analogy founders at a critical point. So far as I can tell, Gelvin does not revisit his earlier suggestion that the leaders and adherents of jihadist groups pursue “violence for its own sake.” (4) I am not sure this follows, given Gelvin’s own account.<sup>4</sup> I am sure, however, that the description is incorrect for al-Qaida. The evidence suggests that jihadis are political actors, with identifiable goals. Further, the evidence indicates that bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and others are religious or more particularly Muslim political actors, who articulate their goals in terms drawn from Islamic tradition. Their aims may be unrealistic, and their rhetoric certainly suggests that jihadists measure risks and benefits in ways different from many other political agents. Further, the jihadist vision of legitimate political order is unpalatable to most people, whether they are Muslims or not. But jihadists are political agents, and they justify military or para-military activities in connection with political goals. If we follow Muslim discourse, we are compelled to note that jihadists are engaged in an argument about the propriety of particular tactics, first with one another (as in the Fall 2005 exchange between al-Zawahiri and the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi regarding the targeting of Muslims in Iraq), and second with other Muslims, who wonder whether the jihadist practice of indiscriminate targeting indicates a lack of the kind of intention necessary to the concept of holy struggle.

If the anarchist analogy is problematic, how shall we proceed to think about the phenomenon of al-Qaida and other jihadist groups? In an interesting critique of U.S. and U.K. strategy in the “war on terror,” Sir Adam Roberts warns against the tendency to think of this phenomenon as unique. In particular, Roberts thinks there are lessons policymakers can learn from “the long history of terrorism and counter-terrorism”—not least, that the tendency of policymakers to moralize lends itself to a failure to think realistically about ends and means.<sup>5</sup>

For our purposes, Roberts reinforces the importance of finding historic analogies. The jihad advocated by bin Ladin and others is new, in the sense that it is contemporary. But it is not unique. In a way familiar to scholars engaged in the comparative study of religious ethics, let me begin by suggesting some “close,” that is to say, Islamic precedents, and then follow by suggesting broader analogies from the history of religions.

With respect to Islamic precedents, we need not look far. Much of the discourse surrounding jihadist groups cites the example of the Kharijites or “secessionists,” the point being that bin Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and those with them present a similar challenge to the Muslim community. Stories of the Kharijites in precipitating fitna or strife surrounding the assassinations of ‘Uthman (third caliph after the Prophet, d. 656 C.E.) and Ali (661) abound in Muslim political writing.<sup>6</sup> Given their refusal to submit to ordinary procedures of command and control, and their readiness to fight and kill anyone who disagreed with their priorities, the group clearly presents a threat to order. One might even be tempted to think of them along the lines of Gelvin’s anarchists!

Nevertheless, most accounts stress that the Kharijites were Muslims. A famous policy statement attributed to Ali bears witness to this, picturing him responding to the group’s interpretations of Islamic sources, and instructing his own supporters to exercise extreme care in the use of armed force intended to quell the Kharijite disturbance. The idea is that they are colleagues in faith, even if their conscience is in error. If possible, one wants to bring them back into the fold, so as to restore the unity of Muslims. The set of reports surrounding this exchange establish precedents for the “judgments pertaining to rebels” discussed in standard works of Shari’a reasoning. Established governments may, perhaps even must, deploy military might to quell disturbances caused by rebel groups; but the means employed should correlate with the goal of restoring unity.

Contemporary Muslims offer a critique of al-Qaida along these lines. The Kharijites represent a kind of “excessive zeal.” They are motivated by a desire to serve God, but their understanding of Islamic practice is problematic, and in their readiness to use force, they kill the innocent with the guilty. In the end, such people do more harm than good. Al-Zawahiri and others reject the label, of course. They prefer to see themselves as the representatives of true Islam, and others are then depicted as Murjiites—those who are lax or lukewarm.

For the time being, let us take the notion of jihadists as present-day Kharijites seriously. This means we are dealing with the problem of zealotry. In terms of comparative religion, we have an abundance of examples of this phenomenon, by which a person or a group identifies examples of injustice, and takes matters into his (or their) own hands. In some cases, religious traditions see this as praiseworthy—for example, in the praise rendered to Phineas, whose execution of sinners in Numbers 25 is subsequently praised in the late second century B.C.E. Wisdom of Sirach (45: 23–24) and invoked in connection with the beginnings of the Maccabean revolt

(I Macc. 2: 19–26). In other cases, it is to be condemned and resisted, as in the long-standing just war notion that rebels are to be treated as criminals.<sup>7</sup> What sorts of reasons help in explaining such differential approaches? And what sorts of strategies are recommended by historical religious traditions, in connection with the phenomenon of true, but misguided belief, especially when its adherents engage in unauthorized violence?

By invoking the history of religious zealotry, I am suggesting we view jihadism through a very long lens. In the manner suggested by Adam Roberts' discussion of terrorism and counter-terrorism, we would consider various instances of zealotry and the responses of religious and political leaders to those, in relation to our contemporary setting.

It is possible, of course, that taking such a long view obscures certain things, even as it illumines others. The long view is suggested by the fact that the jihad of bin Ladin and others is not unique. Nevertheless, it is new—recent, contemporary, developed in connection with modern social and political settings. In this connection, we might want to further broaden our categories. For example, we might borrow a page from the work of Bassam Tibi, who suggests that jihadist groups be analyzed in the context of totalitarian movements.<sup>8</sup> In Tibi's hands, this analogy focuses on certain distinctively modern features of jihadism. He speaks of an "invented" tradition by which jihadists draw selectively from the sources of Islam, and then move toward a "religionisation" of politics. Their interest is in organizing a mass movement directed towards the founding of a Shari'a state—here, meaning a state in which the saying "Islam is the solution" is implemented so that all aspects of state policy are measured by judgments derived from divine law precedents "in the strict sense." The latter qualification helps to explain the jihadists' drive to narrow the space within which interpretation and argument can occur, with respect to ascertaining the guidance of God. It also helps us to understand the kind of political order one might expect, should the jihadists actually come to power—the kind of order Tony Blair once described as the Talibanization of the Middle East.

It is connection with their totalitarian aims that jihadists develop what Tibi describes as a new practice of irregular warfare focused, among other things, on a strategy of indiscriminate targeting. Given their mass appeal, Tibi believes it is not possible to defeat jihadists merely by military means. Rather, the difference between the open society characteristic of democratic states, and the totalitarian vision of the jihadists, must be made clear so that Muslims and non-Muslims alike understand what is at stake, and that it is in their interest to promote the practice of democracy. In this connection, Europe is particularly important, and the policies of members of the European Union must be reformed so as to maximize the possibility of Muslim integration into open societies. The current approach, based on notions of multiculturalism, allows Muslim populations to exist as enclaves "in but not of" European culture. As Tibi has it, policy should be recast so as to make Muslims participants in a culture that respects plurality, but requires of all participants a commitment to principles of reciprocity and respect for the rights of others.

Whether we take the long view, in which jihadists present an example of religious zealotry, or the somewhat shorter view in which they are a kind of totalitarian movement, our focus is on jihadists as political actors, and on their deployment of military means in connection with political goals. I am not sure about Gelvin's revised account of anarchism, and thus cannot pass judgment on the usefulness of this analogy in thinking about jihadist groups. I am sure that the violence of such groups is

not “for its own sake,” however. The jihadists are political agents. They deploy armed force in connection with political goals. When we understand that fact, we understand the kind of problem they present. For we do not only object to the jihadists’ means, we also object to their end, which is nothing less than the attainment of a totalitarian state. Our question ought to be, what is the best way to respond? In that, we will no doubt find reasons to say that a military response is appropriate. But it is only part of the response we need. It is and will remain important, as well, to point out the historic reasons why constitutional democracy arose, and why it continues to be the best (or perhaps the least bad) alternative developed to date for the administration of human affairs.

## Notes

1. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

2. Indeed, I suggest in *Arguing the Just War in Islam* that taking bin Ladin and others seriously, as people who are conscientiously engaged with historic Islamic practice, provides the key even if our interest lies in refuting their claims. For Muslims everywhere understand that jihadis are pushing the envelope. Most regard the advocacy of indiscriminate targeting, as in the 1998 Declaration of the World Islamic Front, as a violation of Islamic tradition.

3. At this point, it is worth noting that jihadist reference to precedents provides some justification for the “history of ideas” approach criticized by Gelvin. The approach, he writes, “attempts to make up for what it lacks in sufficiency with an overabundance of necessity.” (2) Fair enough; but the approach I advocate is somewhat different. Shari’a reasoning is a practice in which the arguments move in multiple directions—responsible argument refers to textual and/or historic precedents, but in the interests of framing a fitting response to the facts of contemporary circumstance. To think of al-Qaida in this way accounts for their selective reading of historic sources, as well as their devotion to the past. One could say that the tension between these two tendencies is built into the practice of Shari’a reasoning.

4. Gelvin writes that such groups act with an intention to resist “an intrusive alien order” and to preserve “a culture and life-style and the homeland of that culture and life-style” which they “believe to be under attack.” Further, insofar as one of the revisions in this current account has to do with anarchists’ and jihadists’ vision of an ideal community, one wonders how violence is “for its own sake.”

5. Adam Roberts, “The ‘War on Terror’ in Historical Perspective,” *Survival* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 101–130.

6. I provide a summary in *Arguing the Just War in Islam*, chapters three and four.

7. For example, in Luther’s “harsh letter” occasioned by the peasants’ revolt. Cf. the discussion in James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

8. “The Totalitarianism of Jihadist Islamism and its Challenge to Europe and to Islam,” in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 1 (March 2007): 35–54.