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Understanding and Teaching the Modern Middle East

Edited by

**OMNIA EL SHAKRY**

The University of Wisconsin Press
For Nadeem, always
Teaching the Global War on Terror

Darryl Li

There are few debates that have generated as much heat and as little light in recent decades as those on the topic of “jihadism.” From the September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, DC, to the rise of the self-styled Islamic State in Iraq and Syria over a decade later, the specter of jihadism has served as a kind of universal enemy. Jihadism is something that apparently everyone can agree the United States must fight in a “war on terror” on behalf of humanity, civilization, and tolerance. But if the purpose of pedagogy is to instill critical thinking skills, then this idea of universal agreement should raise a red flag. Politics is in many ways fundamentally about disagreement, about the existence of competing interests in the world that are sometimes negotiated and fought over.

This chapter has two goals. The first is to show how jihadism is an empty and unhelpful concept that is often used to promote anti-Muslim racism. The premise here is that Muslims have long had wide-ranging and rich debates under radically different historical circumstances over the practice of jihad—how it should be defined, understood, and carried out. Yet it is precisely because those debates are so open-ended that jihadism as a category is neither useful nor benign, for several reasons: (1) The category of jihadism requires elevating some notions of jihad—often those most controversial among Muslims—over others. It thereby implicitly takes sides in debates among believers rooted in Islamic traditions, even as it claims the credibility of detached and objective social science; (2) Making some notions of jihad stand in for jihadism as a general phenomenon conflates and rips out of context very different situations of political violence that happen to involve Muslims and artificially separates them from comparable situations of non-Muslims engaged in political violence; (3) Jihadism discourages critical thinking by reinforcing the idea that only violence meted out by Western states is presumptively legitimate; (4) Finally, jihadism purports to provide grounds for distinguishing between “good” and “bad” Muslims but, in practice, sets up a trap of toxic authenticity whereby Muslims are subjected to unending and insatiable demands to condemn and repudiate acts by other Muslims to prove that they are loyal or moderate.

The second goal of this chapter is to provide some basic background on one specific subset of contemporary jihads: transnational groups that engage in armed confrontation against the United States of America in the name of a global Muslim community and without geographical constraints, the best known being al-Qa’ida. Such groups have a membership base, field of struggle, and goals that are not based in a single country; yet transnational groups must always be understood and taught in the context of both local and international (as in interstate) developments. What made al-Qa’ida distinctive was not that it opposed the United States, that it invoked Islam, or that it was willing to target civilians. Many other groups in history shared at least some of these characteristics but usually within the framework of a local or nationalist war, such as the Moro Rebellion in the Philippines or the Viet Cong. In contrast, al-Qa’ida’s membership was multinational, it explicitly rejected a nationalist framework, and it envisioned a global battlefield that mirrored and challenged the global scope of American power, striking targets in places as far afield as Kenya, Tanzania, and Yemen, as well as within the US homeland. This chapter unpacks the dynamic of asymmetric armed struggle between a global superpower and a dispersed transnational network that has come to be known as the Global War on Terror.

Jihad, Jihadism—from Meanings to Uses

There is jihad and then there is jihadism. The Arabic term *jihād* comes from a root that connotes striving and the exertion of effort. The word “jihad” and its variants appear in the Qur’an numerous times with both armed and unarmed connotations and accordingly, jihad is a concept that has a place in the divine law of Islam, also known as *shari’a*. There are extensive debates among Muslims on the peaceful
versus the violent meanings of jihad. For example, within mystical traditions in Islam (Sufism) the term "jihad of the soul" has been used to describe efforts to be a better human being, to overcome temptation, and to attain higher levels of piety and devotion (Sufis have also historically been engaged in more than their fair share of violent jihads). It is important, however, to avoid falling into the trap of uncritically organizing discussions around the categories of violence versus nonviolence only or approaching the question of Muslims who engage in violence with defensiveness. Violence is central to politics and history across places and times, so treating "violent jihad" or "violent Muslims" as a category is underdescriptive and takes other forms of violence for granted. For example, the label of "violent Muslim" should logically encompass a Muslim working for the New York Police Department who believes their job to be consistent with their faith (a position that has plenty of support among religious scholars); but such a person would be largely overlooked in terms of how that category is most often thought. In other words, violence by Muslims only registers as a problem when it defies mainstream assumptions of the liberal state.

Within the jurisprudence of shari' a, or fiqh, jihad is generally understood as religiously justified combat against non-Muslims and is governed by various rules. But a discussion of jihad cannot be reduced to juristic categories for several reasons. First, the vast majority of Muslims in the world today do not live under fiqh-based legal systems. To the extent these rules directly govern their lives, in many countries this is in the realm of family law. A few states, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, have Islamic penal law, but even those states do not apply the classical fiqh of jihad in their military operations. Second, even when states decide to use certain parts of shari' a, they are applying them in a modern governmental structure where procedures, ways of weighing evidence, and forms of legal interpretation may not be part of these classical traditions. This is akin to using a new computer to run old software designed for a different era; it may work, but outcomes may be even less predictable and beyond what the original designers intended. In other words, today's "Islamic law" is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Third, there was likely never a time in the history of Muslim societies where rulers applied shari' a by itself; different forms of law, such as legislation and custom, always existed alongside and influenced shari' a, including in matters of jihad. Searching for a single scripturally correct definition of jihad does little to explain why some Muslims participate in activities that they call jihad. Muslims, like everyone else, make their decisions based on a wide variety of factors; they engage, cite, and wrestle with religious texts, but the texts themselves cannot automatically predict how people will act.

Thus, it is necessary to draw a distinction between jihad as a technical juristic term and jihad as it has been invoked by different Muslim authorities—be they rulers, jurists, mystics, political parties, or social movements. Throughout history up until the present, states have described their wars as jihads, with or without reference to the rules of fiqh: in recent decades, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq are among the many states to have done so. Non-Muslim states also have a long history of supporting jihad: during World War I, the Ottoman Empire declared a jihad against the British, French, and Russian empires at the urging of its own ally, Germany. Drawing more notoriety have been nonstate groups invoking jihad, but even these should be carefully distinguished. For example, many groups invoking jihad work within a roughly nationalist framework in terms of their membership and political framework: these include Hamas in Palestine or Hizb Allah in Lebanon, both originally founded to confront foreign occupiers. Others use the term jihad to describe rebellion against one's own rulers when deemed oppressive or corrupt, as with insurgencies in Egypt and Algeria in the 1990s. Finally, there have been armed transnational solidarity movements that have invoked jihad, whereby volunteers join conflicts in other countries to fight alongside fellow Muslims: this occurred in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq, and other locales. Thus, any time one reads about a "jihadist" group, it is important to pay attention to their specific political goals.

As against all of these different types of jihad, jihadism is a much more recent concept, and one primarily developed in the West. It is generally used to refer to contemporary nonstate groups who label their own use of violence as jihad. This category tends to leave out states that also claim the mantle of jihad. But putting aside such a glaring omission, the preceding paragraph should make clear that treating this panopoly of nonstate groups as anything like a single ideology or movement is not analytically helpful for the simple reason that jihad itself can mean so many different things. We can further illustrate the problem with the following example. The Republican Party in the United States (also...
known as the GOP) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) arguably share many things in common. Both have the word “republican” in their names, and their memberships are predominantly white and Christian. Both support violence under certain circumstances: the IRA pursued a decades-long armed struggle against Britain, and GOP-controlled governments have waged war on dozens of countries and support domestic police forces that routinely brutalize nonwhites, both citizen and noncitizen. The GOP and IRA belong to “Western civilization” and agree in endorsing republican systems of government over monarchies. They are linked by a set of sacred ideological texts, since members of both have assuredly read and quoted from the Bible as well as from Plato’s The Republic at some point in their careers. They may even share some radicalized supporters: during the Spanish Civil War, Irish Republican foreign fighters joined the predominantly American Abraham Lincoln brigade, named after the first Republican US president. In my home city of Boston there are people who have given money to the IRA and have also voted for the GOP. One could, on the basis of all of the foregoing links, conceivably label them as part of a common and violent ideology and movement called “republicanism”—even if the resemblances and connections highlighted here between the GOP and IRA don’t really shed much light on either group. Yet this kind of superficial, decontextualized, and tendentious thinking is precisely what occurs when diverse groups of Muslims engaged in political violence in the name of jihad are clustered together under the heading of “jihadism,” a label that justifies and generates a field of study with its own experts, conferences, books, and research institutes.

In contrast to searching for a magically correct dictionary meaning of jihad that explains jihadism, it is more useful to think of jihad as a term used by some Muslims when they wish to endow a struggle with religious, and specifically Islamic, legitimacy. Sometimes their arguments reference shari’a jurisprudence; other times they do not. This distinction between fixed abstract meaning of words and their use in context is also helpful for thinking about “terrorism,” a word often associated with jihad. An enormous amount of ink has been spilled debating definitions of terrorism and complaining about the lack of a single usable definition. What is reasonably clear, however, is that “terrorism” is a label applied to political violence that the speaker wishes to delegitimize. Studying and discussing the uses of the label can be more productive than arguing over whether someone really fits it or not.

Jihadism—Pedagogical Challenges

There are numerous challenges to teaching on this topic as part of a history class, not least of which is that many of the issues touch on current affairs and require a critical perspective on US state and society. It is worth highlighting three in particular.

The first challenge is a tendency to pronounce upon what is properly “Islamic” without the requisite authority to do so. While such statements may be appropriate for pedagogical contexts that are explicitly oriented toward believers, this chapter is not written with such lessons in mind. Rather, the idea is to help develop clearer ways for thinking and teaching on jihad regardless of whether students are believers or not. Such an approach, however, does not preclude making empirical observations, for example, that the vast majority of Muslims in a given context may share a particular interpretation or position or that most scholars condemn certain acts or groups.

Second is the predicament of Muslim students, who are sometimes asked to speak for Islam, even though there are over one billion Muslims in the world who hold different opinions about multiple issues. This is especially disturbing when such students are made to feel that they must condemn violence described as jihad to demonstrate that they are “moderate” or “loyal.” Important in this regard is the rise of “Countering Violent Extremism” (CVE) programs that attempt to use schools to prevent “radicalization” but also turn them into de facto instruments of state security policy, monitoring and surveilling student attitudes. This challenge extends outside the classroom—even if a lesson is conducted with sensitivity and nuance, US students are often already exposed to an ambient level of anti-Muslim animus, such that teaching on this topic may trigger or justify harassment or bullying. Such attacks also affect those racialized as Muslim, including non-Muslim Blacks, Arabs, and South Asians.

Finally, any thoughtful discussion of jihadism is often hindered by the widespread taking for granted of state violence. Merely stressing that not all Muslims are violent or that groups invoking jihad do not represent all Muslims is not enough; a thorough exploration of the topic of contemporary meanings of jihad also requires a critical discussion of state policies, especially those of the US government. This can be challenging, as primary and secondary education often involves teaching students to accept and even revere institutions of state violence.
such as the military and the police. Even when schooling exposes students to critiques of state violence—such as structural violence against black people and other communities of color—it is often on terms that stress the process or procedures through which violence is exercised instead of structural issues. But when jihad is invoked to justify violence against the state, it is often by people who fundamentally reject the legitimacy of that state. In order to understand the motivations and contexts of such jihad groups, letting go of the presumption that state violence is legitimate (and that no other violence ever is) is also important.

**Al-Qa'ida—Basics and Clarifications**

The rest of this chapter focuses on providing the context for the Global War on Terror, especially the emergence of the group known as al-Qa'ida, which was widely blamed for the attacks in New York and Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001. When teaching about al-Qa'ida, it may help to keep in mind how this transnational armed group developed in relation to both the local context (Afghanistan) and to the international context (the Cold War and post–Cold War US hegemony).

Al-Qa'ida’s leader, Osama bin Laden, first emerged into global prominence when he was accused of orchestrating simultaneous bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and attacking a US warship in Yemen in 2000. To this day, little is known about al-Qa'ida’s origins, and commentators debate whether to think of it as a clearly defined organization, a loose network, an ideology that has been franchised to other groups, or something else. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, al-Qa'ida appears to have numbered a few hundred people, mostly Arabs of diverse nationalities, operating in Afghanistan under the rule of a group called the Taliban. When teaching about al-Qa'ida, several major themes can be emphasized.

First, al-Qa'ida set forth a number of political goals whose desirability and feasibility can and should be debated in pedagogical contexts. As articulated by bin Laden in his public statements, these goals concerned ending US influence in the Muslim world, especially its military presence in Saudi Arabia (home of the holiest sites in Islam) and its support for dictatorships such as in Egypt and for the state of Israel. Al-Qa’ida’s focus on the United States is sometimes referred to as the “far enemy” strategy, in opposition to the “near enemy” strategy of attacking regimes in Muslim-majority countries that were deemed to be repressive and corrupt apostates. Many of those who joined al-Qa’ida had backgrounds in other organizations that were focused on “near enemy” regimes, especially the Egyptian state under Hosni Mubarak. The far enemy approach was born from the argument that such regimes would never be defeated without also attacking their sponsor, the United States. Al-Qa’ida also had vaguer commitments, such as supporting the idea of a “caliphate” that would unite the world’s Muslims. As for the oft-cited notion that al-Qa’ida hates America because of its freedoms, bin Laden ridiculed this argument, once asking sarcastically, “Tell us why we did not attack Sweden, for example?”

Second, al-Qa’ida emerged in the wake of decades of armed conflict in Afghanistan that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and was in significant part driven by external powers, including the United States. From 1979 to 1989, the Soviet Union fought a war in Afghanistan in support of a local Marxist regime. The United States and Saudi Arabia together spent some $6 billion to support a coalition of armed anti-Soviet factions known as the mujahideen (the Arabic-origin term for “those who are engaged in jihad”). Much of that aid was channeled through Pakistan, which allowed the mujahideen factions to operate bases along the border shared by the two countries, and which also hosted millions of Afghan refugees. This is a reminder that non-Muslim states such as the United States have also supported jihad when it was in their interests to do so. US president Ronald Reagan publicly welcomed mujahideen leaders at the White House and referred to them multiple times as “freedom fighters”—these speeches can be useful resources for teaching about different perspectives on jihad. Analysts have also criticized the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan for putting their own narrow geopolitical interests over those of ordinary Afghans. They effectively empowered mujahideen groups that were less politically accountable, either because they were seen as more militarily effective or to keep the factions weak and dependent. As a result of the way powerful state sponsors co-opted and divided the Afghan mujahideen factions, they turned on each other after the fall of the Marxist regime in Kabul. This internecine fighting did much to discredit the Afghan jihad with many Islamist groups around the world. It also set the stage for the emergence of a new group called the Taliban. The term “Taliban” refers to students in Islamic schools, many of them refugees who grew up in Pakistan and who had been too young to fight against
the Soviets. They presented themselves as an alternative to the corruption and infighting of the mujahideen factions and promised to unify the country. They also enjoyed extensive support from Pakistan, which had tired of the infighting it had previously encouraged among the mujahideen. The Taliban captured Kabul in 1996 and ruled much of Afghanistan. The Taliban and mujahideen factions may both be classified as "Islamist" or "jihadist" by the outside world, but they were enemies—another reminder that quasi-religious labels can sometimes obscure the political conflicts at stake.16

Third, it is important to distinguish the various Afghan actors that fought for control of the country from the far smaller number of non-Afghan groups on the scene. During the war against the Soviets, thousands of foreign Muslims came and participated in fighting, relief work, and other forms of activism. These volunteers were mostly from Arab countries and were nicknamed the “Afghan Arabs.” They had only a limited military impact; their value to the mujahideen was in raising awareness, sympathy, and funds from other majority-Muslim countries. The Afghan Arabs were not a unified force, and indeed, they were often plagued by the same factionalism that divided the Afghan mujahideen. The most prominent Afghan Arab was the Palestinian jurist ‘Abd Allah ‘Azzam, who mentored Osama bin Laden when the latter was still a relatively unknown son of a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia. During the 1980s there was no indication that Afghan Arabs were contemplating a jihad against the United States. Regarding bin Laden, it appears that he started to turn his attention to the United States only later in the 1990s after Saudi Arabia allowed a large contingent of US troops in the country as part of the buildup to the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq.

For the Afghan Arabs, the jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s was about transnational solidarity to eject a non-Muslim invader from a predominantly Muslim country. The al-Qa’ida program, which came about a decade later, was about attacking a superpower anywhere in the world to combat its influence over majority Muslim countries. Joining the former did not necessarily mean signing up for the latter, and the distinction was far from theoretical: ‘Azzam’s son, Hudhayfa, would later endorse jihad against the United States, but in the specific sense that he traveled to Iraq to fight US forces there, using the same logic as the Afghan jihad. At the same time, he criticized the 9/11 attacks and rejected the al-Qa’ida program.17

On the eve of 9/11, the Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan. Within its territory, it hosted many armed foreign Islamist organizations, of which al-Qa’ida was only one. From the later years of the anti-Soviet jihad through the civil war of the 1990s, these groups found Afghanistan to be a useful place to gain military experience and operate away from the scrutiny of their governments. Most were dedicated to seizing control in their home countries, especially Egyptians and Algerians. There were also groups devoted to providing training to people who wanted to participate in conflicts with non-Muslims elsewhere such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, and Kashmir.18 The Taliban was still in the process of consolidating its control over these groups when the US invasion began. Indeed, al-Qa’ida’s various provocations against the US were a continuous source of friction with elements of the Taliban leadership.

A Globalized Counterinsurgency

The term “Global War on Terror” (GWOT) has often been used to refer to a cluster of policies and initiatives undertaken by the US government and its allies in the name of fighting “jihadism” and its variants. GWOT is not only a war in the legal sense, but an entire outlook or logic for organizing governance. Addressing GWOT in all of its dimensions is beyond the scope of this chapter. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, while certainly major parts of GWOT, occasioned a number of dilemmas and challenges around imperial governance and state-building. This section focuses instead on more specific campaigns to hunt down transnational armed groups outside of these two countries, where the “globalness” of GWOT was made much more manifest.

Although GWOT is often seen as a response to the 9/11 attacks, the United States has been waging a sort of globalized counterinsurgency against transnational armed Islamist groups since the mid-1990s. The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York was blamed on armed opposition groups in Egypt and can be seen as an early and relatively limited instance of the “far enemy” approach: attacking the United States for its support for Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt. Shortly after this incident we find the first reports of US and Egyptian intelligence agents teaming up to abduct Egyptian Islamists in countries such as Croatia, Albania, and Azerbaijan and to forcibly repatriate
them to Egypt; some of these individuals were imprisoned, others simply disappeared. US agencies referred to this practice as “extraordinary rendition” and treated it as a way to capture political opponents without assuming any legal responsibility for their treatment or fate. Extraordinary rendition is symptomatic of how US foreign policy generally operates: much of the violence perpetrated abroad is carried out by other governments at the behest of the United States and with its support.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States developed a complex web of detention practices. It invaded Afghanistan but mostly relied on supporting a coalition of local militias that opposed the Taliban. These forces executed and mistreated prisoners; in at least one incident they locked detainees in shipping containers and left them to die in the desert. The United States found itself in control of thousands of Afghan and non-Afghan captives. Many were sent to prisons run by either the US military or the CIA in Afghanistan; hundreds of those ended up in a US military prison at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba. An unknown number were shipped directly to US client states where they were imprisoned or disappeared. At the same time, US intelligence agencies and their partners continued to abduct suspects from around the world—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mauritania, Italy, China (Hong Kong), Gambia, Macedonia, Sweden, and many other countries. Some were transferred to their home countries, others to CIA-run secret “black site” prisons located in countries such as Thailand, Poland, and Lithuania. US-aligned militias in places as diverse as Somalia, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen continue to do the bulk of detention and interrogation in the Global War on Terror, drawing far less scrutiny than Guantánamo.

In addition to the detention network, the United States resorted to various tactics to hunt individuals around the world, including the use of remotely piloted aircraft (drones), long-distance missile strikes, and commando missions in Libya, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and numerous other sites. In 1998, the US fired missiles at alleged al-Qa’ida training camps in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan that they accused of involvement with al-Qa’ida. Under the administration of President Barack Obama (2008–2016), the United States dramatically escalated its use of drones outside of war zones, especially in the tribal areas of Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan. Again, it is important to stress that even in these situations, the United States is frequently working with and depending on local regimes, be they states (such as the Pakistani government) or nonstate militias.

A colloquial translation of the Latin phrase “Si ego certorem faciam... mihi tu delendus eris” (I could tell you, but then you would have to be destroyed by me), this US military patch denotes secret Pentagon “black projects” around the world. Trevor Paglen, detail of Symbology, volume 3, 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

**Al-Qa’ida and Its Affiliates and Successors**

As a result of the US invasion of Afghanistan, al-Qa’ida’s members were dispersed and forced into hiding, mostly in Pakistan. The loss of the territorial haven provided by Taliban rule sharply curtailed al-Qa’ida’s ability to operate, and the group largely reconfigured itself to provide inspiration, guidance, and advice to groups elsewhere rather than executing armed operations itself. In subsequent years, “franchise”
organizations using the al-Qa‘ida name emerged in various regions, such as al-Qa‘ida in the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia and Yemen), al-Qa‘ida in Mesopotamia (Iraq), al-Qa‘ida in the Islamic Maghrib (Algeria). These groups appeared to have operated largely autonomously and in their own contexts but to have found utility in attaching themselves to the al-Qa‘ida “brand.” The most extreme form of fragmentation comes in the “lone wolf” attacks—acts of violence by individuals living in the West who may draw inspiration from groups such as al-Qa‘ida but often lack any operational ties or even direct communication with such organizations. Lone wolves in the United States arguably have more in common with non-Muslim mass shooters than with individuals immersed in collective political action as represented by transnational or even nationally oriented armed groups.

The most important challenge to al-Qa‘ida’s reputation among transnational armed Islamists has been the crisis in Syria and the rise of the self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). If al-Qa‘ida’s program was to attack the United States to facilitate the overthrow of the governing regimes in majority-Muslim countries, ISIS sought to set up its own territorial rule instead and to declare it to be an ideal Muslim state superior to all others. While there is still little reliable research on ISIS at this time beyond studies of its media output, it is safe to say that the group benefited from parallel armed conflicts that eroded centralized authority in the two neighboring states. In Iraq, the remnants of al-Qa‘ida’s local affiliate in coalition with army officers from the former Ba‘th regime found new opportunities in the Syrian war to consolidate and expand authority. In Syria, fighting between the regime and rival armed groups supported by external powers such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey created a power vacuum in the east of the country. From 2014 to 2017, ISIS was able to exert governmental authority on both sides of the border. While thousands of foreign Muslims joined ISIS or came to live under its rule, the organization’s ability and commitment to launching armed operations abroad in Europe and the United States remained confined to encouraging spectacular attacks such as those in Paris in November 2015. ISIS is not strictly a transnational or a local entity—although it included many foreigners, most of its leadership appears to have been Iraqi or Syrian. While it rejected the Iraqi and Syrian nation-states and purported to erase the boundary between them, it was still resolutely focused on consolidating its territorial rule. ISIS and al-Qa‘ida publicly feuded over many issues, but one fundamental strategic question set them apart from one another: whether to seek state-like authority. For al-Qa‘ida, the ISIS path of statehood would only create unsustainable burdens and vulnerabilities; for ISIS, al-Qa‘ida’s lack of a territorial base would doom it to impotence and empty symbolism. By 2018, ISIS had lost most of the territory under its control, raising the possibility of reverting to an underground guerrilla organization.

**War on Terror Films: The So-So, the Bad, and the Ugly**

There have been no great Hollywood films to emerge out of the War on Terror. This is true about the movies focusing on the US military and is even more so about those that attempt to depict Muslims engaged in jihad. A few have been mildly thought-provoking and are potentially useful for classroom teaching—perhaps as clips more than as whole films.

*Body of Lies* (2008, directed by Ridley Scott, starring Russell Crowe and Leonardo DiCaprio)—One of the few movies to show the extent of US reliance on client regimes, in this case by highlighting the fraught relationship between the CIA and the Jordanian secret police.

*Four Lions* (2010, directed by Chris Morris, starring Riz Ahmed)—Loosely based on the 2005 London bombings, this film follows the bumbling antics of a cell of British Muslims planning a bombing. Helpful for demonstrating how tangential religious motivations can be in such attacks, but in ridiculing lack of religious knowledge it also verges into classism and caricature.

*The State* (2017 Channel 4 UK series, directed by Peter Kosminsky)—Fictionalized account of Britons joining ISIS. Does a decent job of showing a range of possible scenarios and reactions for living under the regime, weakened by an extremely implausible and problematic subplot involving the sexual abuse of captive Yazidi women.

*Timbuktu* (2014, directed by Abderrahmane Sissako)—Fictionalized account of Ansar Dine’s occupation of the Malian city of Timbuktu in 2012.
NOTES

1. Political theorist Roxanne Euben has forcefully argued that jihad "is a form of political action in which . . . the pursuit of immortality is inextricably linked to a profoundly this-worldly endeavor—the founding or recreation of a just community on earth." Roxanne Euben, "Killing (for) Politics: Jihad, Martyrdom, and Political Action," Political Theory 30, no. 1 (2002): 9.

2. For further readings on anti-Muslim racism, see the #IslamophobiaisRacism syllabus at https://islamophobiaisracism.wordpress.com (accessed April 4, 2020).

3. For more on the distinction between "good Muslims," who are defined as those supporting US policies, and "bad Muslims," who do not, see Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

4. These competing meanings of jihad stretch all the way back to the earliest periods of Islamic history. See, for example, Asma Afsaruddin, Striving in the Path of God: jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). "The conceptualizations of jihād as primarily armed combat and of sha'īd as primarily military martyrdom are relatively late and contested ones, and deviate considerably from the Qur'ānic significations of these terms" (emphasis in original).

5. The phrase in Arabic is jihād al-nafs, also translated as "jihad of the self." This spiritual struggle is sometimes described as "greater" jihad, as distinct from the "lesser," armed jihad. "Many traditions claim that the true, 'greater' jihad is not a fight against physical, external enemies, but is rather a fight rather against the self (nafs)." Michael Bonner, Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 51.

6. Fiqh is the jurisprudence through which human believers interpret and develop the divinely inspired shari’a.

7. "Islamic law" is a modern and deeply contested category that may include shari’a and fiqh but can also include informal norms of certain nonstate communities as well as codes, institutions, and regimes that come from the modern nation-state but ground their legitimacy in an appeal to Islam. Iza Husain, The Politics of Islamic Law: Local Elites, Colonial Authority, and the Making of the Muslim State (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 3–16.


9. In premodern times, such uprisings were more likely to be classified by fiqh scholars as baghgy (rebellion), a further reminder that even within Islamic juristic traditions "jihad" and "violence" cannot be equated with one another.

10. As Fred Donner, a scholar of early Islamic history, put it: "It seems doubtful that one can fully understand the attitude of a particular civilization—in this case, Islamic civilization—toward a phenomenon as complex and as fundamental to human society as war merely by examining the juridical and theological definition of war and its status. To do so would be to strip it of most of its human significance, since what really matters in human terms is how the Muslims of a particular time and place dealt with the vital questions of war and peace. The juridical definition, of course, has been a major force shaping the reactions of Muslims toward war over the centuries, but it would be rash to assume that it has been the only one." Fred Donner, "The Sources of Islamic Conceptions of War," in Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions, ed. John Kelsay and James Turner Johnson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 32.

11. For a useful explanation of the problems with claiming that jihad groups are "authentic" interpreters of Islamic traditions, see Caner Dağlı, "The Phony Islam of ISIS," Atlantic, February 27, 2015.

12. See Nicole Nguyen, Suspect Communities: Anti-Muslim Racism and the Domestic War on Terror (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).


18. The most useful account in English of al-Qa’ida’s development in the latter half of the 1990s in the context of other transnational armed groups operating under Taliban rule is Anne Stenersen, Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).


22. ISIS’s rule, especially its use of spectacular punishments, has generated much sensationalist commentary. The most careful and empirically grounded study of ISIS legal systems so far is probably Mara Revkin, “The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State” (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016).

23. Al-Qa’ida’s Yemen affiliate did, however, rule over the eastern city of Mukalla between 2015 and 2016 before withdrawing in advance of an offensive by the UAE military.

KEY RESOURCES

Anas, Abdullah, and Tam Hussein. To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan. London: Hurst, 2019. Memoir of a key figure in the Afghan Arab movement; parts of this will be of interest mainly to specialists, but some of the early chapters in particular give a flavor of the role and experiences of Arabs volunteers in the Afghan jihad.


Rosen, Nir. “Iraqi’s Jordanian Jihadis.” New York Times Magazine, February 19, 2006. This article profiles jihadist fighters who opposed the 9/11 attacks on the United States but also traveled to Iraq to fight the US-led invasion, giving a sense of the very different kinds of agendas that exist under the label of jihad.


Arab Uprisings in the Modern Middle East

Asef Bayat

On December 16, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi, a poor street vendor, set himself on fire in the depressed Tunisian town of Sidi-Bouzid after the police abusively confiscated his scale and vegetables because he lacked a permit. The incident set the stage for the spectacular Arab uprisings that were to engulf the Arab region in a ferocity and scale unseen before. In Tunisia, the uprising involved mostly ordinary people—workers, educated unemployed youths, provincial populations, and later the middle-class professionals—as the street protests moved northward to the capital, Tunis. Within a month a long-standing dictator, Zein al-Abedine Ben Ali, was toppled after twenty-three years of authoritarian rule, opening the way for the formation of a democratic government. Egyptians were watching the events in Tunisia with great interest and enthusiasm. Within two weeks, they began their own uprising on January 25, when tens of thousands of protestors poured into Tahrir Square in Cairo from different parts of the city including the poor informal communities. The crowd, spearheaded by young activists, occupied the central Tahrir Square for the following days and nights, while massive street protests spread into other cities and towns. Unable to tackle the crowd, the police retreated from the public scene, giving way to the military to deploy its forces onto the streets, but the military signaled its neutrality. Within two weeks President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for some thirty years, was forced to step down. Egyptians were still relishing their revolutionary honeymoon when mass revolts overtook Libya, then Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and other neighboring countries. In total nineteen Arab states