



Rethinking Jihad: Ideas, Politics and Conflict in the Arab World and Beyond

Conference Report

The ‘Rethinking Jihad’ conference, held in Edinburgh from 7-9 September 2009, sought to engage critically with the disturbing fact that, much like ‘fatwa’, the term ‘jihad’ has come to be used as a byword for fanaticism and Islam’s allegedly implacable hostility towards the West. The conference showed that, like other religious and political concepts, jihad has multiple resonances and associations, its meaning shifting over time and from place to place. Jihad has referred to movements of internal reform, spiritual struggle, and self-defence as much as to ‘holy war’. Jihad, moreover, reflects principles and concerns by no means unique to Islam. Among Muslim intellectuals, as well as others concerned with the Arab and Islamic worlds, the meaning and significance of jihad remain subject to debate and controversy. With this in mind, CASAW brought together a wide variety of experts from within and outside of academia, to explore the multiple aspects and dimensions of jihad.

The conference attracted over 240 registered attendees, including seven keynote speakers and 34 panel presenters from Britain, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the United States. Attendees included representatives of academic institutions, governments, police, military, NGOs and the private sector as well as Islamist activists and former terrorists who have subsequently renounced violence. It was this unique combination of participants that made the conference so significant.

The keynote speakers were highly experienced scholars and thinkers invited to give broad overviews of a certain aspect of jihad. Unlike most conferences that feature just one or two keynote addresses, the conference featured seven to reflect the multifaceted nature of the subject matter. In addition to keynote addresses from Rached al-Ghannouchi, Fred Halliday, Carole Hillenbrand, Sherman Jackson, Rudolph Peters, Tariq Ramadan and Sami Zubaida, the conference also showcased the work of filmmaker and anthropologist Roxanne Varzi, who screened her film on the Iranian wartime industry of martyrdom: ‘Plastic Flowers Never Die.’

Edinburgh-based Carole Hillenbrand, who opened the conference with her keynote address, took a long view of the evolution of jihad as a theoretical and practical doctrine, from the Qur’an until the present. The Dutch historian Rudolph Peters also adopted an historical perspective to indicate the diverse Muslim interpretations of jihad and the impossibility of arriving at a definitive understanding with reference to the Qur’an alone.

Two of the keynote addresses tackled sympathetically the important new book by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the *Jurisprudence of Jihad*. Sherman Jackson highlighted Qaradawi’s interpretation of the famous ‘Sword verse’ in the Qur’an, which is often given to have abrogated other—more conciliatory—verses and calls for war against unbelievers. Professor Jackson outlined Qaradawi’s refutation of this contention and suggested that the book represents a major new contribution to contemporary understanding of the concept. Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi also discussed the book and highlighted Qaradawi’s contention that whilst every Muslim was a mujahid, not every Muslim was necessarily a muqatil (fighter), and that jihad provided a range of non-military options.

Tariq Ramadan called for a more inclusive approach to jihad based on universal values rather than a conception of ‘us and them’, especially in the context of Muslims in Europe and the West. Fred Halliday, for his part, cast doubt on the explanatory power of ‘jihad’ as applied to conflict in the modern Middle East. Professor Halliday stressed the continuities between anti-imperialist struggles and modern jihads and also argued that the Islamic universalist language of Bin Laden actually contained many resonances with local Arabian culture. In a similar



vein, Sami Zubaida explored the facets of ‘sectarian jihad’ to show that conflicts such as those between Sunnis and Shi’ites in Iraq were the result of politicisation and the intersection of sectarian with social, economic and geopolitical divisions.

Many of the panel papers echoed themes given in the keynote addresses and examined them in more detail. Taken together, the papers were testimony to the almost boundless multiplicity of meaning and nuance attributed to jihad within Islam, while questions from the floor revealed that non-Muslims also have very different ideas about what jihad is. A number of papers drew parallels between the role of jihad, and the related concept of martyrdom, in Islam and in Christianity and Judaism.

The panel discussions ranged from specialised historical studies of jihad in the 1st century of Islam to analyses of modern ‘jihadism’, debates on deradicalisation and the significance of jihadist ‘revisions’ and depictions of jihad in Hollywood films. Alongside relatively familiar topics as the reception of Ibn Taymiyya among modern Salafi scholars, jihad in the thought of Hasan al-Banna, and the relationship between jihad and modern international law, speakers tackled less obvious areas, such as jihad as a form of resistance against Apartheid in South Africa, the approach of Ibn Khaldun to jihad, the discourse of jihad and martyrdom within early Palestinian poetry and the kinds of images of jihad gaining popular appeal through Hollywood movies.

Several speakers approached the relationship between religion and politics more broadly, which was important in setting the theology and jurisprudence of jihad in its appropriate context. Topics included the role of women in resistance in Palestine and Lebanon, Islamist movements and the state in Morocco, and the evolution of the concept of jihad within the context Saudi state-building. A number of participants also described the non-violent aspects of jihad. Examples of such approaches included the concept of the Greater Jihad which is central to Sufism, an analysis of the non-military aspects of the *Kitab al-Jihad* as well as the use of boycott fatwas as a form of non-violent economic resistance.

Too often the diversity and sophistication of debate in the region, as well as scholarship on the religion, politics and history of the Arab and Islamic worlds stand in stark contrast to crude generalisations often found in the media and public debate in the West. Although the Edinburgh conference did not aim to arrive at a definitive understanding of jihad, by bringing together experts and interested parties to share diverse perspectives and ‘rethink’ jihad, the organisers hope that we can move beyond sensationalism and stereotypes. One area which several participants felt could have been better covered was drawing out the contemporary practical implications of some of the theoretical aspects under debate.

Select papers from the conference will be revised and expanded for inclusion in a volume entitled “ReThinking Jihad” to be edited by conference organisers Ewan Stein and Elisabeth Kendall. Several of the conference addresses and papers will also shortly be available for audio streaming from the CASAW website at www.casaw.ac.uk.

The conference also received a substantial and positive write up on Islam Online (Arabic): http://islamyoon.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1254573495424&page_name=Islamyoun%2FIYALayout