

The Separability of Jihad

Written by Stephen Chan

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/26/the-separability-of-jihad/>

STEPHEN CHAN, NOV 26 2017

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There is a scene in the Zimbabwean novel, *The Stone Virgins*, by the late Yvonne Vera which is so elegant it is only some pages later and after some reflection that the reader realises a ritual execution has taken place. The scene describes a beautiful tango. Anyone who has learned to tango will recognise the steps. Almost hear the music. The male partner makes a movement with his hand, upwards and curved as he spins his partner. As they come out of the spin he steps to the side like a matador with his hand stretching out and slightly rising in a flourish. In fact, there is a movement like this in every style of Tai Chi. People studying the ancient Chinese art for the sake of health will not appreciate the martial intent. A blade has cut a throat, and the next movement is to step aside to let the body fall.

How it is done was best depicted by Eva Green in the otherwise terrible film, *300 Rise of an Empire* where, as a warrior Persian Princess, she decapitated Spartan warriors smoothly with a knife. You can see they die with the first incision. The removal of the head is almost gratuitous. Those who have never been or worked in an abattoir, and who receive their meat cellophane wrapped clean and innocuous at the supermarket, will not know that the butchers seize each sheep as it comes forward from a chute. It is done by hand. One arm seizes the neck of the sheep, almost cradles it, and the other applies Yvonne Vera's tango slice. Both arms then seize the sheep and hang it on a meat hook, its head dangling from the cut, as the carcass is sent out in the most macabre exhibition of Fordism for the next butcher to begin the skinning and then others the dismemberment. The wrapping and packaging are done by machine.

This is basically the method of *halal*. A singular incision must cut through jugular vein, carotid and windpipe. In fact, despite controversy, it is largely merciful. The animal dies or at least loses consciousness as the incision reaches the carotid. The only real difference between that and the most traditional slaughter method of *kosher* is that the Jewish version requires both sides of the neck – jugular, carotid on both sides and windpipe in the centre – to be severed in a single stroke. The objective in both is the draining of blood. When ISIS executes its victims in the propaganda videos, this is how it is done. Every Western special forces soldier recognises it. They've been taught to do it too.

The rituals of cleansing

The Biblical book of Leviticus, meant to have been written shortly after the exodus from Egypt in 1290 BCE, was probably compiled by the priests of Ezra after the return from Babylon in 539 BCE. This meant the rituals of cleansing, purportedly designed to preserve hygiene under primitive conditions, had lasted as cultural practice for a considerable time. The rituals are extensive and pervasive. There is much washing of hands. The rituals are also gendered in that women at the time of menstruation and shortly afterwards are required to undertake especial cleansing and bathing. Menstruation was a sign of both womanhood and the female condition, which was one of uncleanliness.

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Such rituals pervade Middle Eastern practice. The Zoroastrian practices of ancient Persia require many such rituals, and a huge number of these have found their way into the 19th century religion of Bahai, viewed as heretical in modern Iran, as recorded in the prophet Baha-u-llah's short scripture, the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, where page after page is devoted to hand and other washing.

The problem here is that slaughter of animals and the draining of blood by cutting through the throat's systems was also meant to promote cleanliness and hygiene. Blood is a contaminant if exposed to the air and left to attract microbial infestation. In that regard it is like urine. The problem is that, in the slaughter of prisoners and hostages by ISIS, the method of slaughter is in fact associated with cleansing. At the very least, it is a problem of irony.

A gross genealogy of jihad

I use the term, 'gross', as debate on jihad among Islamic scholars can be dense. There is in general an antipathy against a vulgar use of the term to denote war and rebellion – even though rebellion as a cause of war can be complex. War and violence in any case are a 'lesser' jihad. The 'major' jihad is to do with struggle, especially spiritual struggle. To take a Christian analogy, Jerome's struggle in the wilderness as he set about translating the scriptures into Latin would have been jihad. However, I use the term here in its contemporary and common manifestation to denote rebellion that turns to international war. Note that, typically, rebellion is described as having just cause. This is the subject of debate. What seems unjust are the deliberate indiscriminations in the conduct of war – targeting mass non-combatants – that both Augustinian precepts and the Geneva Conventions prohibit.

Again, having said that, mass slaughter – evoking casual but powerful uses of the term 'genocide' – is a terrible commonplace in today's world. There have been an estimated 2 million fatalities in the vast killing fields of Democratic Republic of Congo in the last 20 years, and an incalculable amount of gendercide – all of this sparked off by the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, as that conflict and its atrocities spilled into neighbouring territories. My students who were hardened Zambian peacekeeping soldiers in Rwanda sent me anguished letters as to what they found, and the unending numbers they had to bury. I have had personally to count bodies at mass execution sites in African wars and, in the end, simply filed reports of my estimates as, after several hundred, I no longer felt like counting.

I do not want to fall into Mary Kaldor's trap to do with 'new wars' and their lack of rationalities.^[1] Those rationalities are there, even if they seem terrible and terrifying. But I do concede that what makes jihad seem terrifying is the very deliberate presence of rationality, ideology, doctrine and faith – often presented with great learning. It is this marker, 'atrocious with calculation and faith', that is attached to jihad; and it is a movement on from the Nazi exterminations of Jews in World War II which were 'atrocious with calculation and ideology'. The presence of faith generates a global controversy, rather than a proper global debate precisely because faith is connoted with atrocity.

Having said that, I wish now to give a brief disquisition of three 'insurgent', 'fundamentalist' groups that have become somewhat indistinguishable in our vocabulary. Each has become almost a trope for something awful and threatening. Each, however, is quite different from the others – and certainly in the case of the first: to atrocity, calculation and faith we might add some romance (if, for a Western readership, it is not *haram* to do so). The three groups are the Afghani Taliban, Al Qaeda, and ISIS.

The original Taleban

The movement began as a response to Western policy that left Afghanistan in the hands of rapacious warlords – who had been financed and armed, through Pakistan, and with Saudi funds (some US\$40 billion) at the instigation of the US, to defeat the Soviet occupation. When the Soviets withdrew, the warlords preyed on their own people, but the West had achieved its objectives and retained no interest in a beautiful country that no one had successfully governed as a single sovereign entity for any length of modern time.

The following story is dismissed by some as Taliban propaganda. Ahmed Rashid, the celebrated Pakistani journalist, considers it authentic. Even if not true, its use as a legend, as an illustrative and explanatory narrative, filled a need for a justifying foundation. That it should be filled in such a romantic fashion is what is of interest here.

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Mullah Omar was a village priest in the Kandahar area. He was blinded in one eye as a result of fighting the Soviets. One day, the distressed parents of two teenage daughters sought him out. The local warlord had kidnapped the daughters and intended to use them as his concubines at his heavily fortified base. The parents had nobody left to whom they could turn. Omar should have been able to do nothing. But he was outraged and wanted to try. He rounded up a handful of Talibs (theology students). Together they secured one gun for every two of them. Then they assaulted the barracks of the warlord. Miraculously, they won. They rescued the girls and hung the warlord from the barrel of one of his own tanks. The legend was born and young fighters, sick of the despoliation of their country by the warlords, flocked to the banner of Omar and the Taliban was born. In itself, this should have been nothing more than a Robin Hood story – but the romance was allied to faith, and to an army of the faithful, a new nationalism, cleansed, seemed possible. A Taliban army, by now attacking with Toyota pickups mounted with machine guns, assaulted Kabul in 1996.

The warlord who held Kabul was Ahmad Shah Massoud. Like the Taliban, he was a Sunni Moslem, but a northerner and not from the Pashtun areas of the south. An ethnic dimension now opened up. Massoud was much admired in the West, not least as a hero figure by the likes of Bernard Henri Levy, the dandy intellectual gadfly with huge influence in Paris, who sought to ingratiate Massoud with President Mitterand. Massoud did have filmstar looks, and he wore Gucci boots under his traditional clothes. However, under the glamour, he did seem to have a genuine respect for human rights and, in particular, the rights of women. But he could not stand before the Taliban assault and withdrew north to his ethnic base. Osama Bin Laden, who had returned to Afghanistan shortly before the Kabul attack, having first gone there in 1979 to fight the Soviets, and who had enjoyed many adventures in Sudan and elsewhere since, ensured Massoud was assassinated the day before 9/11. Osama knew the US would come for him and he wanted the one formidable local enemy to be taken out of the equation. As it was, when the US and NATO forces did come, they used Massoud's Northern Alliance army as its spearhead, the NATO forces themselves being equipped with an entire two Pashtun interpreters. But most of the northerners didn't speak Pashtun either, and were hated by the south. Afghanistan was always going to sink into a civil war in which the Taliban had huge southern support.

Al Qaeda

The story of Osama Bin Laden always had an element of rich-boy-playing-warrior. However, he did commit most of his Saudi fortune to his causes. In his Afghan sojourn, he did finance much development. And he did become a good fighter. He was wounded fighting the Soviets. In his propaganda videos he has clear command of his AK47. Before his return to Afghanistan in 1996 he had declared war on the USA, both because of its presence in the 'holy places', i.e. on Saudi soil for Gulf War I, and his view of US attacks on other parts of the world. It is still a matter of controversy who first initiated Al Qaeda and exactly when, but Osama certainly had become its leader by 1996. Translated as the 'base' or 'foundation', Al Qaeda was meant to be not an Afghan organisation, but a foundation for global jihad. Luring the US into Afghanistan was meant to be the first major step of this jihad, both dispiriting US policy-makers and the public who would find themselves in a quagmire, and hoping the US would commit atrocities for global broadcast to a huge prospective jihadi audience. In short, the US would provide foundations for a global rebellion based on just cause.

Within a conscious step-by-step strategy, two things were noticeable. The first was that Al Qaeda did not conceive of its self-organisation as monolithic. There was to be no organogram with central command. It was deliberately designed as a cell organisation and members would be franchisees of an ideology, a faith, and an operational doctrine against a shared enemy. There would be no Caliphate until it was evident the US had been defeated or so thoroughly demoralised it withdrew from world hegemony, and especially its powerful outreach into the Middle East.

ISIS

The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or ISIL, the L standing for the Levant, the countries of the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean) began life as a wing of Al Qaeda in Iraq. When it sought to muscle its way into Syria, during the meltdown occasioned by the failure of the Arab Spring and the chaos of repression and uprising, other Al Qaeda groups protested that their turf was being trespassed. Despite warnings from senior Al Qaeda leaders – but

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by this time Osama had been killed and the franchise nature of the group militated against fully accepted central leaders – the Iraqis continued, recruited some 80% of the fighters from the Al Nusra Front (the Syrian Al Qaeda franchise), and declared itself as having both a new name and a central leader. He called himself Caliph Baghdadi, his name indicating he had come from Baghdad, where he had also taken a PhD. The idea of the Caliphate, an Islamic form of theocratic state, was a direct challenge to the prevailing Westphalian state system. Unlike Al Qaeda, who had intended to fight the West to a standstill before declaring a Caliphate – a state model for the rest of the Islamic world – Baghdadi began with the Caliphate and declared that the traditional form of Islamic state organisation would lead the defeat of infidel states. It wasn't just that his enemies were infidels. They were states in the current state system. Baghdadi's was a major statement in international relations.

The ideology in common

ISIS therefore seeks to fight Jihad for a new international state system. In a way this is more important than the one-dimensional accounts of its ideological origin, alongside the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Saudi Arabia, in Wahhabism. Its political ambitions differ from those of the Taliban and Al Qaeda; and Saudi Arabia seeks to be a Westphalian state while placating as far as it can powerful Wahhabist pressures within. Until March 2015, there was in the Western press a *single* article of more than 3000 words on the beliefs and motivations of ISIS. This was in the *Atlantic* magazine^[2] – so, to a huge extent, the West was fighting something about which it had no articulated knowledge. There has been a plethora of books since, including some by authors with Arabic language and experience. The core of almost all these works is precisely the tensions within Saudi Arabia – simultaneously a US ally, a source of much oil used in the West, a counter-balance after the failure of Iraq to the emerging strength of Iran, and the source – through non-state means – of much of the early finance for Al Qaeda and ISIS. It is an imposing contradiction, in the face of which the US has no known policy.

In 1744, two men led an army out of the desert and briefly seized much of what is now Saudi Arabia. The two who formed an alliance were the tribal leader, Muhammad Ibn Saud, and the preacher, Muhammad Ibn Abd-al-Wahhab. Although the fortunes of the Saudis waxed and waned before the 20th century, and the House of Saud betrayed the Wahhabists in the struggles for the country, they were never to shake the Spartan desert ideology out of their society. In 1979, undisputed rulers of the country which was now recognised as a Westphalian state, and rich beyond their wildest dreams because of oil revenues and the huge inflow of petrodollars after the 1973 oil price rises, the House of Saud was radically shaken by a Wahhabist uprising against their opulence and the presence of foreigners, meaning US oil companies, on holy soil. A group of insurgents seized the holy mosque in Mecca and, clearly with much financial support and military training, held out against sustained Saudi assaults for three weeks. All of Mecca had to be evacuated. It was a terrible embarrassment that the House of Saud could not protect the holiest of places. In the end, it was precisely foreigners who overcame the resistance of the insurgents – although accounts differ as to whether they were French special forces who had officially converted to Islam for the occasion, Pakistani forces, or even CIA personnel. The captured insurgents were executed in public, but it is thought that – shaken by the event – the House of Saud found it necessary to craft a special deal with the religious establishment of the country.

In short, the deal was that in return for continued rule, and for continued US presence in an otherwise holy land, that land would be made more holy by an effective clerical control over education, juridical matters, social matters including questions of gender equality, and including questions of social discipline. Furthermore, a blind eye would be turned to non-state Saudi support for ideologically like-minded groups elsewhere, even when they were battling the US.

The educational control is to an extent evident in the ease of adaptation of Saudi schoolbooks on religious studies by ISIS in the captured city of Mosul. Juridical matters pertain to the use of Sharia jurisprudential principles and precepts. Social conservatism speaks to not only a lack of civil liberties and rights to political organisation of critical organisations, but to the restrictions on women. This includes the infamous prohibition on women driving cars. Social discipline along lines of older corporeal practice – although it should be said it is also not dissimilar to 17th century European practice – include punishments to do with lashings and beheadings for what would be non-capital offences elsewhere in today's world.

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The Saudi religious education texts took a line against infidels, and so were particularly attractive to ISIS (although these may have been hurriedly revised after their adoption by ISIS). In short, the controversial, provocative but key question is not how 'medieval' ISIS might be, but how like modern Saudi Arabia it might be or aspire to be.

Much is said about the austere nature of Wahhabism – although the continued opulence of the House of Saud must continue to test patience in the stricter realms of the clergy. That same clergy, however, benefits from wealth and ploughs it back into a huge raft of international endowments, scholarships, symposia and sponsorships. It projects a nuanced conservatism in a soft power that is entirely recognisable along the now classic lines of soft power enunciated by Nye. But there are two other key aspects of the doctrine, much harder and not 'soft' at all. One is that the world is due for a cleansing. At some stage, the true Mahdi, a cleansing figure, will appear to prepare the world for God's day of judgement. The doctrine has this clear eschatology. The second is that, in preparation for the Mahdi, just war or jihad should be waged against apostasy. This is broadly defined. It includes non-Sunni Islam, including Shi'a. And here is the essential point of just conduct in war or jihad: precisely because of apostasy, those so designated do not enjoy the benefit of just conduct towards them in times of war. They may be dealt with atrociously. The Mahdi will appear in the wake of the new Caliphate.

The exceptional Middle East

The end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st saw the erosion of the huge strides towards secularism undertaken in the Middle East: Nasser's Egypt from the revolution of the Free Officers of 1956; the controversial triumph of the Ba'ath party, with Hafez Assad seizing power in Syria in 1970 and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 1979 – all following behind the revolution of Ataturk in Turkey in 1922. In all those areas, forms of Islam are rolling back the era of secularism; and the revolution in Iran in 1979 saw the end to the Shah's rule and, with it, the installation of the reign of the Ayatollahs. The Shi'a in Iran bear some special comment. This comment is not an exoneration of the clerical regime. It does indicate however a degree of pragmatism and, above all, of centralised theocratic direction which is effective as well as pragmatic; some would say also more sophisticated than its Wahhabist antagonists.

The key differences between Sunni, with its Wahhabist faction, and Shi'a lie in issues to do with succession from the Prophet (each therefore claims the authentic line); and with the issue of the Mahdi. In Sunni Islam, the Mahdi is yet to come. In Shi'a Islam, he has come but was then hidden (in 'occultation') and will come again. There are also differences in terms of interpretation both of the Sharia, and the sayings of the wise men of Islam. The Sunni Wahhabists believe the Shi'a are apostate; in addition there are regional cultural issues which are magnified and distorted to prejudices, so that many Saudi Sunni believe that the Shi'a do not wash properly and spit into their food.

The Shi'a, with its majority population in Iran, and as noted in an earlier chapter, look beyond Islam in the sense that they are mindful of a very long uninterrupted legacy from the days of empire rivalling and confronting that of the Romans, of curating and developing Aristotelian and Platonic thought when it was all but lost in the West, and – strange as it may sound – of the multicultural nature of the Persian empire and the cosmopolitan knowledge of different faiths evident in Zoroastrianism, with its influences on Christianity, well before Islam. It is more accommodating of Sufism, which is also considered apostate by the Wahhabists. A different cultural impulse accompanies Shi'a to that of the Sunni faith and there is none of the desert-born Spartan minimalism and austerity of outlook associated with the teachings of Wahhab.

Modern pragmatism derives also from the work of the French-trained sociologist and philosopher, Ali Shari'ati, who had a major intellectual influence on the revolution in 1979. He had progressive views on women and, in particular, recognised the agency of women when it came to fighting for a cause, especially a nationalist or liberationist cause. There is a curious echo of this in the Hamas constitution, where there is explicit provision for women to decide of their own volition to fight for the nationalist Palestinian cause, without permission being required from any man, husband or father.

There is also, again as noted earlier, the testimony of former UN Under Secretary General, Giandomenico Picco, who negotiated the end of the Iran/Iraq war – the Iraqis under Saddam Hussein being spurred on and financed, through Saudi Arabia, by the US – and then the release of Western hostages in Lebanon in 1992. As Picco said,

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there has not been since that time a single Shi'a-led or inspired major atrocity against any Western target. The Western argument with Iran, he implies, is a political one, albeit given confessional dress. But the revolution ended Kissinger's aspiration for developing the US alliance with the Shah; there was US embarrassment over the taking of embassy hostages in the early days of the revolution in 1979; there was the need to side with Saudi Arabia in terms of the perceived Shi'a threat to Sunni interests and, in any case, to ensure a balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran; more recently, with perceived Iranian steps towards nuclear capacity, to ensure a balance of power that was carefully controlled between Iran and nuclear-capable Israel.

Many of the above comments need nuancing and reference to other examples. Saddam may have been secular, and he may have included women in his Cabinets and advanced significantly female education, but he also oppressed minorities, the Kurds in particular, and his atrocities were also directed against Kurdish women. Those same Kurdish women, who are largely Sunni, today form effective fighting units against Sunni Wahhabi ISIS. Isis is certainly not above the murder and mutilation and denigration of Kurdish female fighters and Kurdish women in general; and the ISIS treatment of Yazidi women constitutes genuine mass atrocity. Yazidis are not Islamic, although they have certain Sufi leanings and rituals. They are not Christian either, but exhibit a centuries-old syncretic blend of beliefs. They are very easily regarded as apostate by ISIS.

A meditation

The curious reward for Wahhabi martyrs seems drawn from a boy's own spa. Dark eyed virgins will attend every need, including curiously carnal needs in a heavenly setting. By contrast, the propaganda videos for female Kurdish fighters very consciously aim for support from the West and Western women. It is a 'we too wish to be free like you, because we *are* like you' message – except of course they live in a country which will never be free as an independent state, and their Western audiences will for the most part never imagine they need a state which can guarantee them the constitutional right to be free women and equal persons. The binary of fighting woman and black-clad ISIS Islamic assassin is instant, without the need for political interrogation.

The need precisely for such interrogation is so that our treatment of Islam, its sub-divisions, its proposed just causes, and its contentious problematics, is not devolved only to an imaginary – devolved precisely to that realm used so well by recruiters for ISIS, in which everything is flat-packed and assembled according to instructions to form a perfect rubric of justice, justification, simplified politics and apostasy.

Having said that, it is also precisely the fleshly aspects of the ISIS phenomenon that bear at least some passing comment, but which should not substitute for political interrogation that is also informed by religious appreciations and methodology. The need to kill by ritual is common to a battlefield in Syria and a public square in Saudi Arabia – but so too in the public squares of China. The difference is one of the intimacy of execution. The executioner in Saudi Arabia swings a sword. It should be swung as a back stroke, i.e. like a backhand in tennis, so that the jugular and carotid are cut first – but the executioner need never touch his victim. The ISIS method aims for precisely the same target, but as in Yvonne Vera's tango, must almost caress the victim's head and neck to accomplish the execution. Each death becomes an expiation which echoes just cause in its work of cleansing. It is a moment for us of horror. For the executioner, it is a moment of atrocious holiness. In the intimacy with another's death we have a question not only of politics but of the psychology of jihad. It may be a lesser jihad, but its depths are as great as those of the major jihad. It may be in the social origins of that psychology, rather than in foreign policy, that we might best begin some meaningful work on jihad.

Notes

[1] Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

[2] Graeme Wood, 'What ISIS Really Wants', *Atlantic*, March 2015.

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Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where ‘post’ was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).