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## NIHILISM OR ISLAMIC JIHAD?

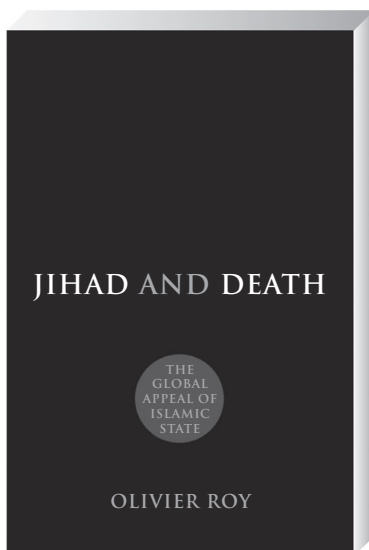
Oliver Roy's theory on the roots of European jihadism

Oliver Roy's most recent book on the nature of contemporary jihad is a summary and further development of his idea, the "Islamization of radicalism". It claims that Islamic religion is not the main motivating force behind jihadi violence; in fact, jihadists possess only a low level of religious knowledge. Instead, it is their pre-existing radicalism and nihilism that find Islam as a framework to channel their frustration and fulfil their revolutionary and nihilistic desire for death and destruction. Disagreeing with scholars who explain this form of violence via a line of thought descending from authentic, sacred religious texts through Ibn Taymiyya and Sayeed Qutb to Osama bin Laden, he uses a cross-cutting approach, and compares jihadism to other forms of violent radicalism, like self-destruction and doomsday cults, claiming that these are somehow similar to Islamic radicalism.

On the nature of religious fundamentalism, his position is that this alone will not result in violence. Fundamentalists may promote a radical break from society, but do not necessarily turn to violence. As an example, Hasidic Jews or Benedictine Catholics are comparable to "most Salafists", by which he means the non-violent ones. Arguably, it would be useful to differentiate between types of fundamentalism based on the difference between the actual fundaments, where the respective movements want to return, but Roy's contextual approach leads us away from discussing core doctrinal foundations. Touching on the problem of "religious radicalization" and "moderate religion", he writes that it hardly makes sense to write about a moderate theology, since there is no moderate religion only moderate followers.

One of his central thoughts that raises questions in the reader is the distinction between terrorists and jihadis. His hypothesis is that terrorists are a subset of jihadis, and the main distinguishing factor appears to be the geographical location of their death. "Terrorists" commit their attacks in the West, whereas "jihadis" go to wage war in the Middle East, and fight for the foundation and expansion of the Caliphate. Another difference would be the level of their connectedness, since jihadis are recruited over the internet, but nearly all terrorists are connected to jihadist organizations, like al-Qaeda or ISIS.

This imaginary differentiation between the subgroups of jihadis is harmless as long as no government policy is founded upon it. However, it is somewhat disturbing to think about certain Western European gov-



ernments' completely flawed and mistaken approach of letting jihadis back to their countries and trying to "integrate" them, instead of doing their best to keep them as far away from Europe as possible. It appears as if the word "jihadi" had less negative connotations than the popular euphemism "terrorist", they almost appear as timeless revolutionaries, embedded in a so-called nihilistic "youth culture", using and abusing the framework of an otherwise harmless ideology to channel their fervour.

Perhaps the hardest statement to agree with is "What fascinates is pure revolt, not the construction of a utopia. Violence is not a means. It is an end in itself." The appropriate jihadi label reminds us of their goal, which is global Islamic world order based on the sovereignty of Allah and sharia law. It is their goal which is important and not their means (violence) or theatre of operations. Roy also maintains that "everyone and everything" is an enemy for the Islamic radicals, but this is questionable. For instance, we can look at jihadists (some of them would be called "terrorists" by Roy) who let those hostages go who are clearly Muslim, and can recite the Quran, and kill only the *kuffar*. Their violence is not indiscriminate at all, it is carefully selective, and their targets are only the kafir civilization, heretics and apostates. Collateral damage is possible, but they should never be looked at as intended targets.

Another debate where Roy clearly positions himself is whether the content of Islamic religious texts is important in the radicalization of individual Muslims. His claim is that while "an Islamophobic segment" thinks that there is no such thing as moderate Islam, traditional Muslim authorities, liberal Muslims, and secular state authorities "try to draw a dividing line between a good Islam, that rejects terrorism and gives jihad a spiritual definition, and a radical Salafi, Wahhabi Islam that is the seedbed of terrorism and jihadism." Indeed, this is the core of the problem, and a main dividing line between agreeing and disagreeing with Roy. On several occasions throughout the book, Roy mentions the lack of proper religious knowledge of Western jihadis, and their poor command of Arabic as one of its main reasons.

This is a somewhat surprising critique from a scholar who himself does not speak Arabic. So, the question boils down to the core problem whether it is possible to comprehend the message of Islam without speaking Arabic and going through the traditional learning process with some religious authority whose knowledge we accept as more authentic than ours, or not. However, if we accept Roy's idea that "the question is not: 'What does the Quran really say?'" but rather: 'What do Muslims say about what the Quran says?', then we end up needing to choose from one Muslim theologian's opinion or the other's.

The lack of a professional command of Quranic Arabic makes this choice all the more difficult, and the unfortunate reality is that neither the traditional Muslim authorities, nor liberal Muslims, nor secular state authorities are in the position to tell what is true Islam and what is not. None of their opinions is more authentic than those of others, although some can be more appealing to our ears, especially if they reject so-called "terrorism" and define jihad as a spiritual struggle. The usual problem these traditional authorities and liberal or secular Muslims encounter is that their definition of terrorism is quite ambiguous, and they have limited success in supporting their claims with authentic and truly authoritative religious sources. Therefore, these are simply opinions, and even if they were shared by the majority of Muslims, Islam is not a creation of a majority decision, but of divine revelation and Muhammad's example.

The book certainly brings the debate on contemporary jihadists forward and has several points that can be welcomed by critics and enthusiasts alike. The fact that volunteers travelling to the Middle Eastern jihad fronts are called what they are, jihadists, and not terrorists, insurgents, foreign fighters, or militants is already positive, even if their terminological sepa-

ration from so-called “terrorists” on Western home fronts can be disputed. In the conclusions part the author stresses another important point, that deradicalization programs are unlikely to be a successful strategy. He also acknowledges that jihadism is not rooted in former colonial history or economic problems, but then positions Islam only as a framework for the channelling of a pre-existing nihilism, and definitely not as the cause of political violence.

Roy’s book leaves one wonder why exactly Islam is the preferred framework for today’s nihilists, and certainly leaves the question unanswered, what we can do to protect ourselves from this “Islamized radicalism”. Even if we agree with Roy’s assessment that Western, second generation “jihadists and terrorists” alike are in fact nihilist rebels in search of a cause, we must not forget that Western-born nihil-jihadists are but a fragment of the world’s community of global jihad, and we are left guessing why young Muslims grown up in entirely different social and cultural circumstances also end up fighting side by side with them for the same political goals.

*Olivier Roy: Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State. New York, NY. Oxford University Press, 2017, 130 pages, ISBN 9781849046985*