

**Jeevan Deol and Zeheer Kazmi (Eds). Contextualising Jihadi Thought.**

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**Reviewed by Richard Phelps**

The attention given to a handful of Islamist intellectuals such as Sayyid Qutb notwithstanding, observers have largely given the ideological influences on militant Islamists short shrift. Amid such a background comes a diverse collection of sixteen essays in this edited volume aimed primarily at specialists, which explore and contextualise militant thought in conflicts across South- and South-East Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well as the thinking of individual ideologues. The essays represent a significant contribution in advancing or revising our understanding of jihadist thought. The geographic breadth of focus denies the book a single message, yet this may in fact be the point.

Jeroen Gunning notes in relation to the two leading Egyptian groups, Islamic Jihad and Gamaa Islamiyya, “organisations with similar ideologies often behave very differently” (p.227). In line with this, the growing emphasis in other studies of terrorism on the functioning of small network dynamics is crucial, since ideology is not the be all and end all. The tendency to reduce jihadist thought to an intellectual pedigree of only a handful of figures (Banna, Qutb, Azzam) has been significantly undermined by this volume. Flagg Miller’s examination of the audiotapes of Abd al-Rahim al-Tahhan – a Syrian preacher who is the most prominent among the speakers found on a trove of 1,500 audio tapes retrieved from Bin Laden’s house in Afghanistan in 2001 – is a major contribution. A little-known figure who currently lives discreetly in Qatar, Miller’s chapter on al-Tahhan is arguably the most significant study since Byrnjar Lia’s biography of Abu Musab al-Suri – although his chapter would have benefitted from further biographical exploration of the man.

Robert Crews’ essay examining the ideology of the Taliban in Afghanistan is particularly thoughtful. Pointing to the perceived low level of literacy among its followers and its leaders’ parochial rural backgrounds, the conventional tendency among most analysts has been to overlook any meaningful ideological component to the Taliban. As such, it is written off as anti-intellectual and its messaging is often dismissed as propaganda incapable of providing an understanding of how the movement perceives itself and the world and how this may be subject to internal variation and change. Not so, Crews argues, “the central Taliban cause is ‘about ideas’” (p. 346). Its own messaging describes it as a “movement” and its cause as a “revolution”. Tactical shifts such as the adoption of suicide bombing, roadside bombs, and beheadings highlight the fact that “[n]either geography nor illiteracy has isolated these mobile communities from wider historical processes” (p. 349).

Other essays move also to territories that have been hardly explored. Greg Fealy and Ken Ward’s chapter examines jihadist thought in Indonesia. Although acts of violence such as the 2002 Bali bombings have received significant attention, the role of ideology there has not. Whereas Scott Atran’s book *Talking to the Enemy* explored the highly localised social dynamics between the individuals involved, the authors here examine an impressive selection of Indonesian primary sources, such as the prison writings of the Bali bombers, to gain an

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understanding of ideological influences. Revealingly, a treatise titled *Sowing Jihad, Reaping Terror* that was authored by followers of the Malaysian terrorist leader Noordin Mohammed Top lists over 200 sources – of which many are publications written in Arabic and almost none of which are local Indonesian religious texts.

Elsewhere, examining the ideology of Lashkar-e-Taiba (“LeT”), Faisal Devji observes although it is often presented as proxy of the Pakistani military in its war over the border region of Kashmir, the LeT’s view of the Indian subcontinent is profoundly different from the concept that underwrites the state of Pakistan. The group wishes to eradicate the border between Pakistan and India rather than simply readjusting it to include more Muslims on the Pakistani side. Confronted with the demographic reality in which the subcontinent’s Hindu population dwarfs the Muslim population by hundreds of millions, LeT responds by envisaging a future state that is fragmented into numerous Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh statelets – such as the kind which existed in colonial times (p.287).

The eclectic nature of the grouping together of these essays is as much a strength as it is a weakness. They range from the Saudi disengagement programme for prisoners, to discussions of historical terms such as *Khariji* and *Murji’i* that jihadists and their opponents use to denote one another. Almost everywhere where it exists, Islamism has worked in conjunction with nationalism and other local ideological currents, rather than in opposition. Though one or two of the essays (such as an examination of Islamism in Britain and an anthropological essay about Afghanistan) appear to contribute little, this does not detract from an otherwise informative volume.

**About the reviewer:** Richard Phelps is an Adjunct Fellow of the Quilliam Foundation.