

Jihadism, Narrow and Wide: The Dangers of Loose Use of an Important Term

by Mark Sedgwick

Abstract

The term “jihadism” is popular, but difficult. It has narrow senses, which are generally valuable, and wide senses, which may be misleading. This article looks at the derivation and use of “jihadism” and of related terms, at definitions provided by a number of leading scholars, and at media usage. It distinguishes two main groups of scholarly definitions, some careful and narrow, and some appearing to match loose media usage. However, it shows that even these scholarly definitions actually make important distinctions between jihadism and associated political and theological ideology. The article closes with a warning against the risks of loose and wide understandings of such important, but difficult, terms.

Keywords: jihadism, definition, terminology, ideology, counter-terrorism policy.

Introduction

The term “jihadism” has become increasingly popular since 2000, and especially since 2008. It is used in two main ways. Sometimes it is used very narrowly, as by Omar Ashour, who defined jihadism in 2011 as the belief that “armed confrontation with political rivals is a *theologically legitimate* and *instrumentally efficient* method for socio-political change” (emphasis MS) [1]. Sometimes it is used very widely, however, interchangeably with terms such as “Islamism” and “violent extremism.” “Jihadism” may even seem to be replacing “Islamism,” a possibility foreseen by Martin Kramer more than ten years ago in an article in which he noted how “Islamism” was then replacing “fundamentalism,” and wondered what new term might one day replace “Islamism” [2]. On the whole it is “extremism” that has replaced “Islamism” in Western political discourse, as Jeffrey Bale has recently observed, [3] but “jihadism” is a strong contender in the media (contrary to Bale’s view).

This article looks at the implications of the two different senses in which the term “jihadism” is used, narrow and wide. It argues that the crucial difference between them is that the narrow sense proposed by Ashour and others implies that jihadism is *part of* the problem, while the wider senses of the term imply that jihadism *is* the problem. This is a difference that has important implications for how we understand the problem of jihadism, and thus also for how it is handled. As this article will further argue, it is better to understand jihadism as *part of* the problem. All jihadis, from Iraqi fighters in the armies of the so-called Islamic State (IS) to individual murderers in European cities, have something in common. Equally, however, there are things that distinguish one type of jihadi from another.

Jihad, Jihadis, Jihadists, and Jihadism

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “jihad” has been in use in English since the 1860s. It is, of course, derived from *jihad*, an ancient Arabic term, and its meanings in English remain linked to its meanings in Arabic. These are disputed, as they have been for centuries. At one extreme it has been argued that the term denotes religiously obligatory campaigns of conquest directed against non-Muslims, who, *qua* non-Muslims, should in principle be conquered. At another extreme it has been argued that it denotes any commendable effort made in a good cause, such as stopping smoking or planting trees to prevent environmental degradation [4]. There are a variety of positions between these two extremes. These disputes

reflect prescriptive rather than analytic disagreements, disagreements about what Muslims should or should not do rather than disagreements about how analysts and policy makers should understand what is going on. This article concerns itself not with the prescriptive but with the analytic.

The term “jihad” was joined in 1920 by “jihadi,” an adjective that was initially used by scholars as an English translation of the Arabic word *mujahid*, a substantive denoting a person participating in a jihad. It was first used in connection with discussion of the Sokoto Caliphate established in West Africa by Usman dan Fodio (1754-1817) [5]. This is the sense and context in which the word “jihadist” was used for the first time in English, when the American historian John Ralph Willis coined the term in 1967 to describe Dan Fodio [6]. The terms “jihadi” and “jihadist” in the sense of *mujahid* do not raise any significant problems of definition, since their meaning depends very closely on the central term, “jihad.” Anyone who fights in what he thinks is a jihad is a *mujahid*, a jihadi or a jihadist. Whether or not the conflict in question is “really” a jihad is a prescriptive question, not an analytic one.

Other senses of the word “jihadist,” however, do raise analytic problems. One other sense of “jihadist” is as the adjectival form of the substantive “jihad,” as the English equivalent of the Arabic adjective *jihadi* rather than as the English translation of the substantive *mujahid*. In this sense, the alternative form “jihadic” was coined by the Jamaican ethnologist and poet Michael Garfield Smith in 1969 to describe the governmental forms of (once again) the Sokoto Caliphate, [7] but the term “jihadic” failed to catch on. “Jihadist” in the sense of “jihadic” is clearly more abstract and analytical than “jihadist” in the sense of *mujahid*. Whether or not a form of government reflects jihad is not a prescriptive question. Equally difficult is a related sense of “jihadist,” describing that which supports or encourages jihad. Andrew Hess applied the term in this sense in 1970 to fifteenth-century Ottoman *ghazavat* literature that glorified past jihadists (*mujahids* or *ghazis*) and thus encouraged current ones [8]. The *ghazavat* literature was the forerunner of today’s online jihadist *nashid* (plainsong) genre.

It was in this sense that the word “jihadism” was used in English for the first time, in 1986, when the Israeli historian Haggai Erlich wrote of the threat posed to late-nineteenth-century Ethiopia by what he called “Mahdist jihadism” [9]. Erlich used the term to denote an inclination towards jihad. It was not the existence of the Sudanese Mahdists that posed a threat to Ethiopia, but the possibility that they might decide to wage a jihad against the Ethiopians [10]. Erlich’s “Mahdist jihadism,” then, had something in common with familiar terms like “Soviet expansionism” or “Prussian militarism.”

Some uses in English of terms derived from the Arabic *jihad*, then, have been unproblematic analytically, as when the campaigns of the Sokoto Caliphate are described as jihad, or those who took part in them are described as jihadis or jihadists. Whether the campaigns of the Sokoto Caliphate were “really” jihad in a theological sense is perhaps an interesting question for a theologian, but it is not a question that needs detain the historian or analyst. Some uses of the group of terms derived from jihad, however, have been more problematic analytically. It is not self-evident that the governmental forms of the Sokoto Caliphate were jihadic, that certain fifteenth-century Ottoman poems encouraged jihad, or that the Mahdists were jihadist in the way that the Soviets were expansionist or the Prussians militaristic. These are all difficult analytical questions that might be argued one way or the other.

Narrow Understandings of Jihadism

“Jihadism” in Erlich’s sense, or in the sense in which Hess used “jihadist” in 1970, is analytically problematic, but still capable of precise definition. Such a definition was in fact given in 1994 by Nikki Keddie, who was the second scholar to use the term “jihadism.” Like Erlich, she used the term in reference to the Mahdists, in

a discussion of what she generally called “jihad movements” [11]. Her definition of jihadism was movements that “called for holy war against external non-Muslim enemies or practiced jihad against local rulers and enemies whom they considered not truly Muslim” [12]. This definition reflected the generally accepted scholarly understanding of the group of movements across the peripheries of the Muslim world that, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, used the discourse of jihad as well as armed force against enemies external or internal. The use of armed force was not new, as rebellions of one sort or another were frequent events in the Middle East, but the revival of the discourse of jihad *was* new. The most famous of these earlier jihadist movements was the original Wahhabi movement. The Mahdists and Dan Fodio are also generally understood as part of the same phenomenon, as are the Cyrenaican Sanusis. Some of these movements focused on external non-Muslim enemies, like the Sanusis, who fought the Italian colonizers. Some focused on local rulers and other enemies, like the Wahhabis, who focused first on rivals such as the Banu Khalid and then on the Ottomans, whom they considered not truly Muslim.

Keddie’s late pre-modern and early modern jihad movements have given rise to little controversy amongst scholars, largely because they have generally been studied individually rather than comparatively. There have been few comparative studies save Keddie’s own article and the 1979 PhD thesis of Ruud Peters [13]. Standard, non-comparative scholarly explanations of Wahhabism and Mahdism differ in ways that parallel contemporary discussions. Explanations of Wahhabism focus on the religious and ideological more than on the political and material, while explanations of Mahdism focus on the political and material more than on the religious and ideological. Keddie, in contrast, identified a number of common socioeconomic and religious causes for the movements she studied [14]. It would be interesting to compare these analyses with contemporary events, but this article will not attempt such a comparison.

The application of the term “jihadism” to modern jihad movements dates from 2002, when it was used in a report of the American think tank RAND. The report’s characterization of jihadism as “a radical cult of violence” and “a muscular religious offensive that elevates the concept of jihad from a struggle within one’s soul to an unlimited war against the West” [15] reflected the spirit of the times, but did little to advance analysis. The next scholarly definition was coined in 2006, when Thomas Hegghammer distinguished between three varieties of Islamist violence: that of local revolutionaries seeking the overthrow of their own governments, especially during the 1960s and 1970s; that of regional separatists in areas such as Palestine and Chechnya, especially in the 1980s and 1990s; and, since 1996, that of Osama bin Laden and his followers, who privileged the global struggle against America over both local revolutionary and regional separatist struggles [16]. This third and last variety of Islamist violence is what Hegghammer called “global jihadism.” The first two of these varieties of violence were jihadism in Keddie’s terms, as all “called for holy war against external non-Muslim enemies or against local rulers ... considered not truly Muslim.” The third, global jihadism, was new, unknown in Keddie’s period of analysis.

Ashour’s definition of jihadism, already quoted above (the belief that “armed confrontation with political rivals is a theologically legitimate and instrumentally efficient method for socio-political change”), follows Keddie and Hegghammer. The “socio-political change” that Ashour’s definition identifies as the objective of jihadism might be the defeat of Keddie’s “external non-Muslim enemies,” the replacement of “local rulers ... considered not truly Muslim,” or the triumph of Hegghammer’s strategy of “global jihadism.” Ashour is less interested than Keddie or Hegghammer in the objective of the jihad. His contribution is to draw attention to the fact that a jihadist must believe that violence is both “theologically legitimate” and “instrumentally efficient.” To consider violence theologically legitimate but instrumentally useless does not produce jihad, and nor does considering violence instrumentally efficient but theologically illegitimate. That Ashour draws attention to this point may reflect his earlier ground-breaking work on the end of the jihad fought

by the Egyptian Islamic Group (EIG), which showed that a change of view on instrumental efficiency—the conclusion that the jihad was getting nowhere—mattered most in leading the EIG to end its jihad, and was then justified in theological terms [17].

Keddie, Hegghammer and Ashour were not especially concerned with political ideology. Ashour did describe the belief in the legitimacy and instrumental efficiency of jihad as “a modern Islamist ideology,” but here he is using “ideology” more in the sense of “conviction” than in the sense of “political ideology.” The relevant political ideology for him is Islamism. Here he appears to follow the scholarly consensus in understanding it as the ideology descended from that developed by the Muslim Brothers in mid-twentieth-century Egypt. Islamists may favor two roads to power: violent, like the EIG, or non-violent, like Islamist parliamentary parties from the Justice and Development Party (PJD) in Morocco to the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PAS) in Malaysia. Islamism, then, does not of itself produce jihad.

Wide Understandings of Jihadism

The widest understandings of jihadism are found in a journalistic context. In this context, the term “jihadist” has been used interchangeably with terms such as “militant,” “Islamists,” or “terrorist,” suggesting that these terms all mean much the same thing. A review in early 2015 of four British and American publications, two non-tabloid and two tabloid, [18] showed that all these terms were used to identify both IS and Europeans going to join it, and also to identify a variety of other groups and individuals from Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Mourabitoun in Mali, to al-Qaeda and various lone actors in the West. In all four publications, there were frequent references to “jihadist ideology” and “extremist ideology,” generally without any explanation of what it was, other than violent [19]. One unusual Op-Ed in the *New York Post*, however, provided a sort of definition, explaining that “Jihadists are driven by an ideology ... that yearns to ‘restore’ a mythical caliphate, one governed by the most austere version of Sharia law” [20]. If “caliphate” is replaced by “state,” this could equally serve as a definition of “Islamism” or even “fundamentalism.” The implication is that jihadism is an ideology, that it is that particular ideology that produces jihad.

Although Western politicians are careful to avoid the term “jihadism,” they sometimes seem to understand “extremism” in terms that are not so different from these. British Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, recently referred to the “poisonous and extremist ideology” of IS, which he identified “not just in Iraq and Syria but right across the world, from Boko Haram and al-Shabaab to the Taliban and al-Qaeda” [21]. The implication, once again, is that jihadism is an ideology, that it is that ideology that produces jihad.

Some scholars appear to be advancing similar definitions, but on closer examination are generally not intending to do so. Salwa Ismail, for example, wrote of “‘Jihadist’ ideology” as combining the idea of replacing *jahiliyya* (society in a state of ignorance) with the *hakimiyya* (sovereignty) of God, with the use of the concept of jihad to justify the use of violence [22]. It would appear that what Ismail actually meant by “Jihadist ideology” was the ideology that the jihadists subscribed to, not the ideology that was responsible for the jihadism. Similarly, David Charters defined “jihadism” as “a revolutionary program whose ideology promises radical social change in the Muslim world [and] give[s] a central role to jihad as an armed political struggle to overthrow ‘apostate’ regimes, to expel their infidel allies, and thus to restore Muslim lands to governance by Islamic principles” [23]. Jihadism for Charters is a program, then, and the program has an ideology, but it is the program that gives a role to armed struggle, not the ideology. A further example is provided by Jarret Brachman, for whom “jihadism” is a “current of extremist Islamic thought whose adherents demand the use of violence in order to oust non-Islamic influence from traditionally Muslim lands en route to establishing true Islamic governance” [24]. It is clear that what distinguishes jihadism from other currents of Islamist

thought for Brachman is the emphasis on violence, not the political ideology.

Ismail, Charters and Brachman link jihadism with Islamist ideology, then, but do in fact distinguish jihadism from Islamism, even though at first sight they might appear not to. Some other scholars link jihadism with the more theological ideology of Salafism, which is of course generally on poor terms with the Islamism of the PJD, PAS and the like. These definitions follow on Gilles Kepel's 2002 identification of the current wave of jihadism as "jihadist-Salafism," [25] which itself builds on the work of Quintan Wiktorowicz, who in 2000 had identified the split between jihadis and non-jihadis as the most important split in the Salafi movement [26]. Neither Kepel nor Wiktorowicz, however, argued that Salafism *produces* jihadism, or that a non-Salafi cannot be a jihadi. They merely observed that some Salafis are jihadists, and many jihadists are Salafis, much as Ismail, Charters and Brachman in effect observed that some Islamists are jihadists, and many jihadists are Islamists.

There is, then, in fact little scholarly support for the wide understandings of the *New York Post* Op-Ed writer and of David Cameron. Most scholars do generally distinguish between jihadism on the one hand and ideologies such as Islamism or Salafism on the other hand. This is an important distinction to make.

The Global and the Local

The distinction between local, regional and global is also an important distinction to make. It may be the most important distinction that is lost when wide understandings of jihadism replace the narrow. During the Cold War, many political movements that are now understood as nationalist and therefore local were seen as part of a single global Communist threat. Once all movements for political change involving Communists were defined as part of one global phenomenon, that global phenomenon was not hard to find. A classic case was the Mossadegh government in Iran during the early 1950s, which is now generally understood to have represented liberal nationalism against monarchical power and entrenched foreign (mostly British) economic exploitation, which is very much how the Truman administration initially saw it. Once the Mossadegh government was understood as part of a global Communist threat by the Eisenhower administration, however, the result was the American promotion of the 1953 military coup that put an end not only to the Mossadegh government but also to any possibility of evolutionary political change in Iran, and so accidentally helped to lay the groundwork for the 1978-79 Iranian revolution [27]. With hindsight it is clear that the view of the Truman administration was the right one, and that it would have been better to have made a clear distinction between the global threat presented by the Soviet Union and the local threat presented (or perhaps not presented) by the Mossadegh government.

British Prime Minister David Cameron, in conflating IS, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, may be repeating the error of President Eisenhower. Yes, all these movements are jihadist in the narrow sense that they consider jihad both legitimate and instrumentally efficient, but while al-Qaeda is clearly global in Hegghammer's sense—in terms of targeting the West in general and the U.S. in particular—other groups appear to be much less global if two questions are asked. The first question, following Hegghammer, is whether they target a global or a local enemy, whether they operate globally or locally. The second question, following current European security concerns, is whether they recruit globally or locally.

In terms of the first question, IS, the Taliban, al-Shabaab, and Boko Haram all originally operated only in one locality and targeted local enemies. All save Boko Haram have been involved in military engagements with US forces, but in all cases this involvement was involuntary. IS and al-Shabaab have been targeted by US air power, but have not yet attacked American targets themselves, save for the well publicized and gruesome executions of a few Americans in the region who fell into IS's clutches. The Taliban have attacked

American and allied targets, but only in Afghanistan and adjoining areas. Al-Shabaab has attacked targets that are loosely allied with the US, but again only in Somalia and adjoining areas. Boko Haram is suspected of having cooperated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the group that was formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) but declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2006. However, no actual operations are known to have resulted from this alleged cooperation. Al-Shabaab declared allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2012, but once again no operations are known to have resulted from this. The Taliban attempted to protect al-Qaeda against the US in 2001, but failed to do so. In terms of the first question, then, none of the four groups is particularly global.

In terms of the second question, neither the Taliban nor Boko Haram is known to have recruited outside their own areas of operations. Al-Shabaab, however, does recruit globally, though primarily among the Somali diaspora. It is really a Somali ethnic organization, not a global one. IS, on the other hand, recruits globally, and without ethnic limitation. It attracts global jihadists. It is, however, not primarily composed of global jihadists, but of locals from Syria and Iraq.

A narrow understanding of jihadism, then, allows a distinction to be drawn between global and local jihadism. Since policy responses to local and global jihadism should be distinct and contextually relevant, this is an important distinction to draw.

Conclusion

The term “jihadism,” then, is by its nature more difficult than the more basic terms “jihad” and “jihadist”/“jihadi” in the sense of *mujahid*, all of which have clear descriptive meanings. These terms raise major prescriptive issues, as they have done for centuries, but they do not raise analytic issues. The term “jihadist” in the sense of “jihadic” raises more analytic issues, as it can be argued one way or another whether or not a particular practice is characteristic of, or encouraging of, jihad.

It is the term “jihadism” that is most slippery, however. It is useful to denote the wave of modern movements that legitimize their actions by reference to jihad, just as it was useful to identify the late pre-modern wave about which Keddie wrote, but it does not explain that wave. It may, however, appear to offer an explanation, especially when used loosely and widely in the media, where jihadism, Islamism, and Salafism may be conflated. Such an understanding obscures important differences. Islamism and Salafism are not the same thing, and are in fact often in opposition to each other. Most Islamists are not jihadists, just as most Salafis are not jihadists. Jihadists focusing on local revolution are not the same as jihadists focusing on regional separatist struggles, and both differ from jihadists focusing on global jihad. Some scholars may appear to agree with the wide sense of jihadism as found in the media, but on closer examination they prove to be observing that jihadists commonly subscribe to Islamist or Salafi ideology, not that jihadism, Islamism, and Salafism are all the same thing.

Jihadism closely resembles terrorism in being essentially a means to an end, not an end in itself, except perhaps for single individuals in an existential sense. Much of what has been said of terrorism in this respect is thus also true of jihadism, including the observation that certain ends—and thus certain ideologies—are more likely to be associated with jihadism than others. Jihadism, like terrorism, is generally used in an attempt to promote major political change. This may be the fall of a local regime, or the liberation of a territory from foreign, non-Muslim rule, or even to bring about the retreat of American global power. This political change will generally be considered a means to the further end of establishing a good life, logically understood in Islamic terms, and often, but not necessarily, in Salafi terms. Jihadism, then, is primarily about means, not ends, just as terrorism is primarily about means rather than ends. The ends intended to be served

by terrorism vary, but are often either political in the left-wing sense or nationalist in the separatist sense, or sometimes a combination of the two. The ends intended to be served by jihadism may also be either political or separatist, or a combination of the two.

We should be careful to avoid repeating analytical errors that have had negative consequences in the past in terms of response. We should distinguish local and regional jihadism from global jihadism, even when these sometimes overlap, and we should distinguish jihadism from Islamism and Salafism, even when they too sometimes overlap. The term “jihadism” is a valuable one, but we should make sure to use it carefully, and narrowly.

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Notes

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