Why Terrorists Weep: The Socio-Cultural Practices of Jihadi Militants

Thomas Hegghammer

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Let me start by thanking Richard English and the CSTPV for inviting me. It is a tremendous honour to speak in the memory of the man who basically created the academic field of terrorism studies. Paul Wilkinson is the reason many of us even have jobs in academia today. He carved out a space for terrorism studies in the academy and made it respectable. His formula was simple: do great research, stay objective, and make ethical policy recommendations.

Unfortunately I only met Paul once, back in 2002, but I remember it very well, because he was so incredibly friendly. I had come here to look at CSTPV's resources and met him in the corridor. This was just months after 9/11, so he must have been insanely busy, and I probably looked about 14 years old at the time. Still, he took the time to speak with me and encourage my research. I remember him stressing that we need to understand jihadi ideology better. That is not why I have chosen today's topic, but, looking back on that conversation, it does feel a bit like I am coming back to St Andrews to report on what I have learned.

My lecture today has a fancy title, but it is basically about what jihadis do in their spare time. Before you sneak out the back door and tweet "underwhelming", let me say that this is the most interesting topic I have ever worked on, and it is much more important than it seems. My main message today is this: the non-military activities of terrorist groups can shed important new light on how extremists think and behave. In fact, I'll go so far as claiming that this topic is one of the last major, unexplored frontiers of terrorism research, one that merits an entire new research program. Although I'll be talking mainly about the culture of jihadi groups, the perspective and concepts I present can be applied to any type of rebel group.

The talk has three main parts: First I'll explain how I got interested in this phenomenon and what it is exactly. Then I'll

explain why it's worth studying and how it can be done; Finally I'll present some findings from my own work on jihadi culture.

Background

My starting point is the truism that military life is about much more than fighting. Look inside any militant group – or conventional army for that matter – and you will see lots of artistic products and social practices that serve no obvious military purpose. Think of the cadence calls of the U.S. Marines, the songs of leftist revolutionaries, or the tattoos of neo-nazis. Look inside jihadi groups and you'll see bearded men with kalashnikovs reciting poetry, discussing dreams, and weeping on a regular basis.

It took me a long time to even notice these things. I've studied jihadi groups for almost fifteen years, and for the first ten, I was addressing standard questions, like, how did group A evolve, what has ideologue B written, who joins movement C, etc. The thing is, when you study one type of group for a while, you take certain things for granted. I *knew* that these groups were weeping and reading poetry, but it didn't really register - it was background noise to me, stuff I needed to shove aside to get to the hard information about people and events.

Then it occurred to me one day that these practices are not obvious at all; in fact, they are really quite strange. For one, there is the incongruence of hard men doing soft things. It is curious, for example, that Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi should be known simultaneously as "*al-dhabbah*" (the slaughterer) and "*al-baki*" (he who weeps a lot). Second and more important, these "soft" activities pose a big social science puzzle, in that they defy expectations of utility-maximising behaviour. Terrorists are hunted men with limited resources; they should be spending all their time on "useful" things like training, raising funds, or studying the enemy. Yet they "waste" time - quite a lot of time actually - on activities like the ones I've mentioned. So I started paying attention to these things, and the more I looked, the more I saw.

But when I turned to the academic literature for help to make sense of it, I didn't find much to read. Studies of terrorist groups tend to focus on the hard stuff of rebellion or "the great men and events" of terrorist history. We've devoted much more attention to attack histories, organizational

structures, and financing sources than to the softer side of rebel life.

There is of course a substantial literature on ideology, but if you look closely, it is almost always ideology in the sense of *doctrine*, meaning, a set of ideas transmitted through language and internalized through cognition. People in the jihadi studies field – myself included – have tended to examine *texts*, dissecting their theological reasoning, hoping to discover what it is that makes readers tick. Things like poetry and music have not gone entirely unstudied, but they've certainly received much less attention than doctrinal documents. But poetry and music *must* do something more, or something different, than simply convey doctrine, or people wouldn't bother creating them. They could simply write terse prose instead. If hymns are doctrine in musical form, what does the sound do? If poetry is theology in flowery language, is the cadence all fluff? There must be more to ideology than doctrine.

I am not the first to have had this intuition; others have too. Manni Crone, for example, has studied the role of "aesthetic technologies" in the radicalisation of Muslims in Denmark. Claudia Dantshke has talked about a "jihad-based youth culture" in Germany with its own music, apparel, and iconography. Marc Sageman and several others have stressed the importance of the "counterculture" dimension of jihadism in the West. But these works treat jihadi culture as a factor affecting radicalization; they don't examine its constituents parts in depth.

To be sure, there are in-depth studies of individual elements of jihadi culture. For example, there's Behnam Said's work on hymns (*anashid*), Iain Edgar's work on jihadi dream interpretation, and Elisabeth Kendall's work on al-Qaida poetry. Outside the strictly jihadi universe there's Joseph Alagha's work on the music and dance of Hizbollah, and Alex Strick van Lindschoten and Felix Kuehn's book on the poetry of the Taliban, and more. Still, there have been few attempts at linking the study of these various elements and exploring culture as a category of rebellious activity.

That is why I decided a few years ago to do more research on this. I have since been collecting primary sources, interviewing militants and reading a large number of autobiographies. I am now close to finishing an edited volume on jihadi culture, and I have other manuscripts in the pipeline. I realised pretty early on, though, that jihadi culture is far too

big a domain to be covered by one person alone. That is part of the reason why I am insisting on the need for a collective effort in the field.

Definition

Before we go any further, I need to define what I'm talking about. I've already used several different terms: "socio-cultural practices", "what terrorists do in their spare time", "non-military practices", and more. Whatever we are dealing with is clearly slippery.

I have chosen to use term "jihadi culture", because it's the least inappropriate I can think of. It does, however, require some elaboration, because the term "culture" is loose and contested. I define jihadi culture as *products and practices that do more than fill the basic military needs of jihadi groups*. This is very close to what the anthropologist Edmund Leach called "technically superfluous frills and decorations". Here's the famous passage from his study of the Kachins:

> "If it is desired to grow rice, it is certainly essential and functionally necessary to clear a piece of ground and sow seed in it. And it will no doubt improve the prospects of a good yield if the plot is fenced and the growing crop weeded from time to time. Kachins do all these things and, in so far as they do this, they are performing simple technical acts of a functional kind. These actions serve to satisfy "basic needs". But there is much more to it than that. […] the routines of clearing the ground, planting the seeds, fencing the plot and weeding the growing crop are all patterned according to formal conventions and interspersed with all kinds of technically superfluous frills and decorations. It is these frills and decorations which make the performance a Kachin performance and not just a simple functional act. And so it is with every kind of technical action; there is always the element which is functionally essential, and another element which is simply the local custom, and aesthetic frill."

Now think of a rebel group. It has certain "basic needs", such as the capacity to deploy violence and the ability to muster material resources. These needs can, conceivably, be fulfilled in a minimalist, no-frills fashion: you train, fight, raise funds, purchase weapons, write a communiqué, get some sleep, repeat the next day. To put it simply, these are the "functionally essential" elements of rebellion; everything else is culture. A militant group cannot operate without military expertise or weaponry, but it should be able to do without music or dream interpretation. Soldiers need durable clothes, but they do not need clothes of a particular colour. The group may need to communicate its political objectives to enemies and recruits, but it does not need to do so through poetry. Thus, the litmus

test for whether something sorts as jihadi culture under my definition is how functionally essential it is to the military effort.

This is all well and good, but where exactly does culture stop and the functionally essential begin? This question is very difficult to answer fully, but we can be a little bit more specific. Most elements of jihadi culture will be observable products or practices. Products are artifacts such as poems, songs, images, and films. Practices are acts, often (but not always) involving the consumption of a product: It's the singing of a song, the performance of a ritual, the wearing of certain clothes, or the talking about dreams. Some elements of jihadi culture, like ceremonies, combine multiple products and practices.

It's important to note that things don't need to be particularly exotic or sophisticated to be cultural. Even though I've so far highlighted poetry and music, I'm not seeking to identify a jihadi "high culture". I'm equally interested in the ordinary and mundane, such as the cooking, sports, or jokes of militant Islamists. I've even written about their toilet habits. And if silence were an important part of their social interaction (it is not), I'd study that too, even though it is literally nothing.

Moreover, a product or practice need not be unique to jihadi groups to be considered an element of jihadi culture. Jihadis do a lot of things that also non-militant Muslims do, like pray, play sports, or eat with the right hand. The appreciation for poetry and interest in dream interpretation are entirely of the ordinary in the Muslim world. What is specific to jihadis is their particular combination of practices, and the semantics of their cultural products.

As with any concept, things get murkier when we approach borderline phenomena, such as military activities and doctrine. Take the soldier who names his gun and sleeps with it. Is it strictly necessary to be an effective soldier? Perhaps. Or the belief that dreams are a window into the future: Is it necessary to justify the armed struggle? I don't know. And what do we do with documents that mix terse prose and flowery poetry? This is indeed fuzzy conceptual terrain, and I don't claim to know exactly where the borders lie. Still, I'd argue that it is possible to start studying the phenomena that fall in the less disputed center of the category - like poetry and music - and

work our way out to the borders as our understanding gets sophisticated.

Relevance

But why should we study culture at all? The main reason, in my view, is that it has bearing on fundamental questions about human behavior. I've already mentioned the puzzle of costly behavior (hunted men spending time on art). But there are others: How do people make decisions about participating in high-risk activism? What is the relative role of cognition and emotion in decision-making? The topic should therefore interest scholars from a broad range of disciplines, including Islamic studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science and even behavioural economics.

It is also highly policy-relevant, because it may shed new light on why people join and stay in extremist groups, and why some groups and movements survive longer than others. This can in turn generate ideas on how to dissuade recruits and weaken groups. If, for example, it turns out that emotional attraction rivals cognitive persuasion as a recruitment mechanism, then we should, for instance, worry less about doctrinal documents and more about videos and anashid. Governments should perhaps also invest less in trying to develop a cognitively persuasive "counternarrative" and more in messaging that targets emotions. Local authorities might want to focus less on improving the economic situation of youth at risk of radicalization and more on offering "substitution activities" that provide emotional rewards similar to those obtained in the jihadi underground. Also, knowledge of jihadi culture can help police distinguish between radical and orthodox products and practices, avoiding false positives. To add a more nefarious application, knowledge of jihadi culture can help spies infiltrate radical groups by making them more proficient mimics. This is just a small selection of the things we can do with knowledge of jihadi culture.

A research program

In my view, the identification of jihadi culture as a relevant research object opens up an entire new research program with lots of intriguing lines of inquiry. I see at least two broad clusters of research questions that I hope will pique the curiosity of young scholars.

The first cluster is about description, and here I see three main lines of inquiry. First is the exploration of individual groups and elements of jihadi culture. What do Boko Haram members do in their spare time? Is there Uighur jihadi poetry? Do all members of a jihadi group weep, or do leaders do it more? Better case descriptions should then allow us to explore variation in time and space. Do different groups listen to different types of anashid? Do Urdu-language products differ from Arabic-language ones? How has jihadi culture evolved since the 1980s? Third, there is the comparison with other types of groups and communities. How does jihadi culture differ from that of "mainstream" Muslims? How is the Sunni-Shia divide reflected in the culture of militants? This is not to mention the comparison with non-Islamist militants, be it neo-Nazis, leftist revolutionaries, Jewish extremists, Basque separatists, or apocalyptic sects.

The second main cluster is about explanation, and here I propose two different sets of inquiries. The first is accounting for variation, or what social scientists would call treating jihadi culture as a dependent variable. Why, for example, do different jihadi groups have somewhat different cultures? And why do some groups have more elaborate rituals, weep more, or listen more to anashid than others?

The other approach would treat jihadi culture as an independent variable and ask about the effects of jihadi culture on individuals and groups. This is perhaps the most intriguing question of all. What does culture *do* for the jihadis? Why is it that hunted terrorists spend time on poetry when they could be training? How do cultural products and practices affect behavior, and by which mechanisms? And if jihadi culture does affect behavior, do leaders manipulate or curate their group's culture for strategic benefit?

Some findings

So, what have I found so far in my own research? What do my guys do in their spare time? Unfortunately I only have time to highlight a few things, but hopefully we can go into more detail in the Q&A.

I should preface this by saying that I've only studied jihadis, that is, groups like al-Qaida, Islamic State, and the foreign fighters who join them. I haven't studied the more locally focused militias like the Taliban, Hamas, or Hezbollah.

I should also say that I've worked mainly with written sources (like autbiographies), audiovisual material, and interviews with ex-militants. I was not possible to do participant observation with groups this radical. Fortunately, though, the internet has made available a large amount of high-granularity primary sources that allow for a form of "ethnography by proxy".

Let me also say that the findings are not mine alone; I've learned much from the other contributors to the edited volume I mentioned earlier, namely, David Cook, Iain Edgar, Bernard Haykel, Nelly Lahoud, Afshon Ostovar, Jonathan Pieslak, and Anne Stenersen.

The first thing to note is that the jihadis really do spend a lot of time on non-military activities. It varies according to context of course; in rural training camps there is a lot of "useful" activities going on, but in urban safe houses there is much less of it.

I can't quantify it, but it seems most non-military activities were orthodox devotional practices: prayer, invocations, ablution, Quran recitation, and the like. I found no support for the claim you sometimes hear about jihadists being hypocritical opportunists who don't really care about religion. Some of them may have been unobservant before they join, but once they're in, they seem very meticulous about observance. Also, jihadi groups don't seem very innovative when it comes to rituals and the like. I frankly expected to find more exotic ceremonies and initiation rites, but almost everything I saw was orthodox devotional practices.

We also see a broad range of practices I would call recreational (since they're elective and aesthetics or entertainment). We're talking anashid-listening, video watching, storytelling, poetry reading, dream interpretation, sports, get-togethers and cooking etc.

There is also a lot of attention paid to what I'd call identity markers: dress and grooming, nicknames, slogans, and particular manners.

As for the weeping, it seemed to occur mostly in devotional settings (especially during Qur'an recitation), but also in speeches and recruitment appeals, and occasionally for other, more ordinary reasons (after losing a friend, for example). In the jihadi underground, weeping is clearly socially appreciated,

as a sign of devotion to God and to the cause. This notion is not specific to jihadis, but part of Islamic tradition. The medieval theologian al-Ghazali, for example, wrote extensively on the benefits of weeping.

There is some geographical variation, especially between jihadis in the West, who have incorporated many elements of Western street culture, and militants in the "East". It also seems that poetry, for example, is appreciated more by jihadis from the Arabian Peninsula than from other places. But many cultural elements, like anashid, weeping, dream interpretation, were "everywhere", which suggests jihadi culture has a core that is truly global.

My co-contributors and I also document a fascinating chronological evolution from the 1980s, when jihadis were sceptical of hymns and imagery, to the 2010s, when audiovisual material is everywhere. David Cook also argues that martyrological descriptions of the afterlife have become more sexualised, and that martyrs are increasingly treated like liminal figures reminiscent of sufi saints. Jihadis have in some sense grown more "liberal" over time, and they have adopted more from the sufi tradition (though they'd never admit it of course). In other words, jihadis have compromised on key salafi principles to accommodate new products and practices. These guys are not the compromising kind, so these new elements must be important to them.

Two hypotheses

This brings me to the issue of explanation - the why of jihadi culture. Most of my work so far has been descriptive, but I'd like to sketch out a couple of hypotheses about what jihadi culture does. It's not a comprehensive treatment, just an illustration of how we can approach it as social scientists.

A first hypothesis is that jihadi culture serves as a *resource for costly signs of trustworthiness.* This idea is inspired by the literature on trust and signaling. High-risk activists face a severe trust problem when dealing with new recruits or interlocutors. The person may be unreliable or, worse, an infiltrator. Given that trustworthiness and authenticity are unobservable properties, "trusters" have to look for observable signs that are correlated with those properties. A "sign" can be the way a person looks, behaves, speaks, or something else. Because impostors are actively mimicking those same signs to pass themselves off as

trustworthy, the sign-reading exercise – or "vetting" – is difficult. Central to the trust game is the notion of sign cost, because some signs are easier to mimic than others. Talk is famously cheap, while congenital features like skin colour are very hard to mimic. Signaling theory predicts that trusters will look for signs that are too costly to the mimic but affordable to the genuinely trustworthy.

In the case of jihadi groups, displaying knowledge of jihadi culture – for example, a deep command of jihadi anashid – may be a costly sign because it takes time to acquire it. Familiarity of jihadi culture can thus be a proxy for time previously spent in the underground. From a truster's point of view, the greater the range of possible signs to look for, the better. Because the jihadi cultural corpus is so rich and complex, it may well be a useful resource for vetting signs. There is some empirical evidence that this is the case, both in offline and online recruitment contexts. It may also help explain why certain jihadi groups have proved notoriously difficult to infiltrate for intelligence services - it's just too difficult to learn all the cultural nuances.

A second hypothesis is that cultural products and practices are emotional persuasion tools that reinforce the cognitive persuasion work done by doctrine. Jihadi culture may help shape the beliefs and preferences of activists, ultimately affecting their decision to join, stay in, or perform certain tasks for the group. A common denominator of things like music, imagery, storytelling, or weeping is that they evoke or involve emotion. Primary sources are full of examples of people reporting a particular feeling while listening to anashid, watching videos, or reading poetry. We also know that individuals are exposed to cultural products early in their recruitment trajectories, and that some explicitly say they were drawn to jihadism more by the videos and the music than by the ideological tracts.

There are also indications that group leaders use cultural products deliberately for recruitment purposes. In 2000, a jihadi strategist nicknamed Abu Hudhayfa wrote a letter to Usama bin Ladin suggesting that al-Qaida should videotape a jihadi wedding and use it for propaganda:

> "the political division could undertake the appropriate preparations by way of featuring speeches, anashid, poems etc […] Such an [advertising] product would therefore have profound meanings and psychological rewards that [though their impact] may vary from one person to the other, they would nevertheless flow into a principal [strategic] objective, namely causing [Muslims'] feelings to be moved."

Similarly, the Yemeni-American jihadi preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, in a famous tract titled "44 Ways to Support Jihad", wrote the following about anashid:

> "Muslims need to be inspired to practice Jihad. In the time of Rasulullah (saaws) he had poets who would use their poetry to inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers. Today nasheed can play that role. A good nasheed can spread so widely it can reach to an audience that you could not reach through a lecture or a book. Nasheeds are especially inspiring to the youth […] Nasheeds are an important element in creating a 'Jihad culture'[sic]."

Of course, not all elements of jihadi culture evoke or involve emotion to the same extent. It is easy to see why jihadists might want to have anashid to seduce recruits, but it is less obvious why they are so concerned with dreams or why they dress the way they do. These two hypotheses clearly only take us so far. Much more research is needed to understand the why of jihadi culture - of rebel cultures more broadly.

I didn't see anyone sneak out the back door, so I hope I have persuaded some of you that what terrorists do in their spare time matters. If have inspired a student or two to write about jihadi culture or the culture of other groups, I take that as a huge bonus. Personally I've found the process of studying this stuff to be a lot of fun. I asked myself why that is, and I think it is because it really brings out the humanity in people we usually conceive of as brainwashed fanatics.

On this note, let me end with a quote by Daniel Genis, an ex-convict who writes really interesting articles about culture inside American prisons. It's on a grim topic, but ends with an important insight:

> "There's even names for scars. There's a 'telephone cut,' which goes from your ear to your mouth, which you get for using a claimed telephone. There's a ''buck eighty,' which is a scar [that] requires 180 stitches. There are 'curtains, which are two cuts down the face, which make your eyes look like they have curtains. There's the ''hook,' which puts a hole in the cheek. These things sound horrible, but in reality they [..] show a culture of incarceration has arisen and it shows that human beings really are more than animals — we make culture wherever we go."

Thank you for your attention.