

## *Introduction: What Is Jihadi Culture and Why Should We Study It?*

THOMAS HEGGHAMMER

This book is the first in-depth exploration of the cultural dimension of jihadism. We wrote it because so many others cover the operational stuff. There is no shortage of works on the operations, structures, and resources of radical groups, and many studies of jihadi ideology focus on political objectives, strategic thinking, or views on tactics. But militancy is about more than bombs and doctrines. It is also about rituals, customs, and dress codes. It is about music, films, and storytelling. It is about sports, jokes, and food. Look inside any radical group – or conventional army for that matter – and you will see daily life inside it filled with a range of artistic products and social practices that serve no obvious strategic purpose: Think of the songs of leftist revolutionaries, the tattoos of neo-Nazis, or the cadence calls of the U.S. Marines. This soft dimension of military life tends to get much less attention than the guns and the blaze, no doubt because it is seen as less consequential. After all, who cares what warriors do in their spare time?

This book does, and it will show that jihadis have a rich aesthetic culture that is essential for understanding their mindset and worldview. Readers who have not studied or frequented radical Islamists will find parts of this subculture surprising. We will see, for example, that jihadis love poetry, that they talk regularly about dreams, and that they weep – a lot. We will also see that jihadism has fostered an entire music industry, as well as a massive body of film productions. Jihadis may have a reputation as ruthless macho men – and there is some truth to that – but they also value personal humility, artistic sensitivity, and displays of emotion.

Aside from being inherently interesting, the cultural practices of rebel groups pose a social scientific puzzle in that they defy expectations of utility-maximizing behavior. Jihadis are usually hunted men; they are sought by their enemies and dispose of limited time and resources. We should expect them to spend all their time honing their

bomb-making skills, raising funds, or studying the enemy's weaknesses. Yet they "waste" time on poetry recitation, hymn singing, and other activities that serve no apparent strategic purpose. And it is not just that they do it – they do it *a lot*, which suggests it is significant to their whole enterprise. Non-military products and practices fill a surprisingly large proportion of life in the jihadi underground. This is especially true of groups operating in high-repression environments, like Western cities, where outdoor military training is impossible and operations rare. But even in war zones and training camps we see jihadis spend hours each day praying, listening to hymns, telling stories, watching jihadi videos, and interpreting dreams. Moreover, these products and practices feature prominently at the earliest stages of the recruits' induction into jihadi groups. Many new recruits seem to indulge in jihadi music and videos long before they see any fighting and before they sit down to learn the finer points of doctrine. All of this suggests that non-military products and practices matter for how groups recruit and operate.

This book has two objectives: one limited, the other far-reaching. The first is to introduce readers to the jihadi aesthetic universe. We do so by describing, chapter by chapter, seven prominent genres or elements of jihadi culture: poetry, music, iconography, cinematography, dream interpretation, martyrology, and social practices. Our ambition here is limited insofar as we seek only to explore a selection of genres, not to exhaust the topic. The second and most important objective is to highlight the wealth and significance of jihadi culture and inspire others to do more research on it. We believe there is room and need for an entire research program on the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of jihadism, and later in this introduction I sketch out some possible lines of inquiry.

The big idea in this book is that what scholars have tended to refer to as "ideology" is really two different things: doctrine and aesthetics. Many academics today would say that jihadi poetry and hymns belong to the realm of ideology, for which we already have a lively research program. However, the literature on jihadism has mostly treated ideology as synonymous with doctrine, that is, a set of ideas transmitted through language and internalized through cognition. Students of jihadi ideology – this author included – have tended to examine texts, dissecting their theological or political reasoning in the hope of identifying salient tenets, objectives, and preferences. While things like poetry and

*What Is Jihadi Culture and Why Should We Study It?*

3

music have not gone entirely unstudied, they have certainly received much less attention than doctrinal treatises. Yet poetry and music must do something more or something different than simply convey doctrinal principles, because otherwise activists would not bother creating them, but write terse prose instead. If hymns are doctrine in musical form, what does the sound do? If poetry is theology in flowery language, are the metaphors and cadence all fluff? This book does not purport to know exactly what that “something more or something different” is – though I present some hypotheses below – but it does argue that the only way to find out is to devote more intellectual attention to the cultural-aesthetic dimension of jihadi ideology.

We do not claim to have discovered jihadi culture and aesthetics, because substantial work has already been done on individual elements of it. Some of the contributors to this volume, such as Jonathan Pieslak, Iain Edgar, and Afshon Ostovar, have already written on their respective topics (music, dreams, and iconography) elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Other important contributions to the literature include Kendall and Holtmann on jihadi poetry, Said and Lemieux and Nill on jihadi music, Holtmann and Weisburd on jihadi iconography, Farwell and El Difraoui on jihadi films, and Sirriyeh on jihadi dreams, to mention just a few.<sup>2</sup> There is also a related literature on other militant Islamist groups; for example, Alagha’s work on the music and dance of Hizballah, Pelevin and Weinreich’s work on the songs of the Taliban, Alshaer on the poetry of Hamas and Hizballah, and Strick van Lindschoten and Kuehn on the poetry of the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> Looking beyond the Islamist universe, we find many more publications, from Reed’s book *The Art of Protest* via Anton Shekhovtsov’s work on the music of the extreme right to Cheryl Herr’s study of “terrorist chic” in Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> Still, relatively few attempts have been made at linking the study of these various cultural expressions and exploring culture and aesthetics as a category of rebellious activity.

A number of academics have identified the broader phenomenon we are describing in this book – or something close to it. Alagha, for example, has written about Islamist uses of – and debates about – “resistance art” and “purposeful art,” terms connoting ideologically motivated art forms such as dancing, music, and literature.<sup>5</sup> Halldén has described jihadi poetry as part of the “aesthetic dimension of al-Qaida’s culture wars,” and Crone has analyzed the role of “aesthetic

assemblages” and “aesthetic technologies” such as jihadi videos and hymns in the radicalization of Muslims in Denmark.<sup>6</sup> Writing about salafism in Germany, Dantshe pointed out the development of a “genuine Jihad based youth culture” or “Pop-jihad,” with its own music (“Battle-nasheeds”), apparel, and ideological iconography.<sup>7</sup> Several scholars have also talked about the “counterculture” dimension of jihadism in the West and its significant role in drawing young Muslims into extremism. Sageman, for example, notes that “these [jihadi] symbols and rituals amount to a lifestyle, which participants view as ‘cool’. Thus they create a ‘jihadi cool’ counterculture.”<sup>8</sup> Hemmingsen concluded her ethnographic study of jihadis in Denmark by noting that they “perceived themselves as sharing something – something which included world-views, norms, dress codes, language and insights . . . this ‘shared we’ can best be understood as a counterculture.”<sup>9</sup> All these scholars seem to have put their finger on roughly the same thing as we are describing in this book, but they did not examine its constituent parts in much detail. The most prominent exception is Herding’s recent book *Inventing the Muslim Cool*, which does go into depth, but it looks at Western Muslim youth culture more broadly, not militants specifically.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting here that the term “jihad culture” or “jihadi culture” has also been used in the past to describe somewhat different things than what we have in mind in this book. For example, Jessica Stern has written about “Pakistan’s jihad culture” in the sense of a culture of armed struggle, and Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbæk have described the “culture of jihad” in the Lebanese group Fatah al-Islam, but in the sense of a culture of religious warfare.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Cozzens employed the term “culture of global jihad” to describe attitudes, values, and beliefs that we in this book would mostly sort under the label doctrine.<sup>12</sup> Gilbert Ramsey’s book *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web* appears to understand culture in a broader sense of “the entirety of jihadi activity” (my formulation) in the online domain.<sup>13</sup> It is an interesting book that sheds important light on life in the digital jihadi underground, but its definition of culture is substantially broader than ours.

## Defining Jihadi Culture

So what exactly are we talking about? Readers will already have noticed a glaring terminological inconsistency. I have already used

several different terms to describe our research object, including “the cultural dimension of jihadism,” “the soft dimension of military life,” “what terrorists do in their spare time,” “aesthetic culture,” “subculture,” “non-military products and practices,” and “things like poetry and music.” Clearly, whatever we are dealing with is slippery and is not easily captured by existing terminology.

In this book we use the term “jihadi culture” for lack of a better one. It does, however, require some elaboration, because culture is itself a loose and contested concept. The academic literature on culture is vast, and the available definitions equally numerous.<sup>14</sup> Our usage is closest to definition 7a of “culture” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular nation, society, people, or period.”<sup>15</sup> However, we have in mind something slightly more specific than that. We are indeed interested in the “ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life” of jihadis, but only those that do not have an obvious military-strategic purpose. Central to our definition of culture, in other words, is the idea of apparent superfluosity.

We define jihadi culture as *products and practices that do something other than fill the basic military needs of jihadi groups*. This understanding of culture is very close to what the anthropologist Edmund Leach called “technically superfluous frills and decorations.” The following passage from his classic study of the Kachins (an ethnic group in northern Burma) is a good illustration of what we seek to capture:

For example, 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 for its continued survival. These needs can, conceivably, be fulfilled in a minimalist, no-frills fashion: you train, fight, raise funds, purchase weapons, write communiqués, 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 a variety of soft hats. 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 our definition is whether it is functionally essential to the military effort.

Militant Islamists do a lot of these unnecessary things, as do probably all other military organizations on the planet. Sometimes they also do things that are not only superfluous, but also outright counterproductive. As we shall see in Chapter 9, jihadi memoirs contain many examples of people insisting on some practice – such as excessive fasting, refusing to lie on the stomach, or shooting in the air to celebrate – even though it made them more vulnerable to enemy attacks. Another indication that something is culture is that it has a starkly different value in another military organization. Functionally essential tasks are largely the same across all militant groups, for there are only so many ways to fire a gun. Culture, on the other hand, varies. Hence poetry can be highly valued in Hamas, while the Israeli military frowns upon poetry as unmanly. (The IDF once refused to let a soldier read poetry on military radio so as not to ruin the organization’s image.)<sup>17</sup>

This is all well and good, but what does it mean specifically? Where exactly does the functionally essential stop and the culture begin? This question is very difficult to answer fully, but we can be a bit more specific. Most elements of jihadi culture will be observable products or practices. Products are artifacts such as poems, songs, images, and films. They are static in form and portable from one context to another. Practices are acts, often (but not always) involving the consumption of a product. It is 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 combine multiple products and practices. The ceremony of the martyr’s wedding, for example (see Chapter 9), combines

singing of *anashid*, dancing, shouting “*allahu akbar*,” firing guns in the air (if possible), and the future martyr being well-groomed.

It is important to note that things do not need to be particularly exotic or sophisticated to be cultural. Even though we have so far highlighted poetry and music, we are not seeking to identify a jihadi “high culture.” We are equally interested in the ordinary and mundane, such as the cooking, favorite sports, or jokes of militant Islamists. We are even interested in their toilet habits (see Chapter 9). And if silence were an important part of social interaction among jihadis (it is not), we would 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. In fact, as we shall see in this book, most elements of jihadi culture are not specific to jihadis; the appreciation for poetry and a penchant for dream interpretation are entirely of the ordinary in the Muslim world. What is specific to jihadis is the particular combination or cluster of practices that they entertain, as well as the ideological tinge to the products they consume. (Poetry as a genre has nothing jihadi about it, but poems praising suicide bombers do.)

The most challenging part of any definitional exercise is treating borderline phenomena, and in the case of jihadi culture, there are several. One is the fascination many jihadis have with war, weapons, and military effects. Military activities really are a very big part of life in a jihadi group, especially those that have training camps or operate in conflict zones. To say that war and weaponry is not part of jihadi culture defies common sense; after all, the willingness to perpetrate violence is one of their defining traits as a social group. Besides, it is not always clear which military practices are functionally essential. Take the soldier who names his gun and sleeps with it. This is a near-universal practice in military organizations, including in jihadi groups.<sup>18</sup> Is it strictly necessary in order to be an effective soldier? Perhaps. That said, the jihadi fascination with things martial sometimes clearly goes beyond the purely functional. In Western cities, for example, radical Islamists often wear military-style camouflage jackets over their Middle Eastern-style robes, even if they are just going to the grocery store. Most jihadis also seem to like exchanging stories about Muslim battle exploits from early Islamic history, even though nobody

fighters with swords or on horseback anymore. These practices are easier to describe as cultural, but many others defy easy classification.

The same applies in the domain we may call the art of war. There may be more than one way to perform a military task, and a given group may have a preference for one or the other method. Is that variation an expression of culture? For example, when the Islamic State group in Syria executes prisoners by beheading instead of shooting – is that functional or cultural? Bear in mind that some Islamic state supporters defend the practice invoking efficiency, arguing that it is humane because the victim supposedly dies immediately (at least when it's done from the back of the neck in a single stroke).<sup>19</sup> The point to this gruesome example is that there are many military practices where the notion of functionally essential can be debated.

Another important gray area is the intersection between culture and doctrine. We can all agree that poetry or music belongs in the realm of culture, and that, say, al-Qaida's 1998 "Statement of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders" is a doctrinal document.<sup>20</sup> But many examples of texts or propaganda videos mix terse political and theological arguments with more elaborate language, lines of poetry, historical references, or symbolic imagery. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to say exactly where, within a given document, doctrine stops and culture begins. And even if we were able to isolate the key ideas, beliefs, and arguments from the cultural scaffolding, how would we distinguish between those ideas that are "necessary" for the justification of the armed struggle and those that are not? Most of us would probably agree that the belief in dreams as a window into the future is less "necessary" for justifying al-Qaida's armed struggle than the conviction that American troops should not be stationed on Muslim lands. But for many other beliefs, it is a much more difficult call. Take the belief in afterlife rewards for fighters who die in battle. The core idea that something good awaits the fallen may be considered doctrine, because it provides an incentive for individual participation.<sup>21</sup> However, as we shall see in Chapter 8, this core idea is never expressed simply in the sentence "do it because you will be rewarded." It is always accompanied by a plethora of other more specific beliefs about what exactly happens in the afterlife and what specifically happens to the martyr's corpse when he dies. And these beliefs are often conveyed with supporting iconography or citations of poetry and scripture, complicating our classification task even further.



This is fuzzy conceptual terrain, and we do not claim to know exactly where the borders lie.

In this book we have chosen the safe route of treating mainly phenomena that fall in the relatively undisputed center of the jihadi culture category. If there is such a thing as functionally nonessential products or practices, then poetry, music, iconography, and the like are surely among them. In other words, we start in the middle of the category and hope that we as a scholarly community may work our way out to the borders as our understanding of the topic becomes more sophisticated. We expect and indeed hope that other scholars will criticize our conceptualization so that it can get sharper. It may well be that the term jihadi culture needs to be further disaggregated into more precise and operational terms. It may even need to be scrapped altogether for a better alternative. We are happy so long as the rough phenomenon we have sketched out above, whatever we end up calling it, gets more scholarly attention.

### Actors and Contexts

Who are the people whose culture we propose to study? The term “jihadi,” although now relatively established in the academic literature and news media, means slightly different things to different people. Put simply, jihadi today has both a broad and a narrow definition. In the broad definition, jihadi is a synonym for “violent Islamist” and may in principle apply to Islamist groups of all ideological orientations, so long as they wage violence. That means not only groups like al-Qaida, but also Shiite groups like Lebanese Hizballah and Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated Sunni groups such as Hamas. This is arguably the most parsimonious and logical of the two definitions, but it is the least common.

In the narrow and more frequently used definition, jihadi refers to a subset of particularly violent, conservative, and uncompromising Sunni groups, such as Islamic State and al-Qaida, their affiliates like Boko Haram and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, or their predecessors such as Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armée. These groups are sometimes also referred to as “salafi jihadis” due to their identification with salafism, a literalist approach to Sunni jurisprudence. They also tend to be grouped together for other reasons: their transnational outlook, their rejection of electoral politics, their

reluctance to make truces or political compromises, and their near-exclusive focus on armed struggle as opposed to other political activities. The groups in this category also form what we may call an “epistemic community” in the sense that they see each other as parts of the same movement and partake, through online and offline publications, in a global conversation about theological, political, and strategic matters. Groups like Hamas and Hizballah and their supporters are usually not part of this conversation.

In this book, we are concerned with jihadi groups in the narrow sense. We will study the products and practices of al-Qaida, its various affiliates and associates, the foreign fighters who join these groups, and some of the earlier jihadi groups from the 1980s and 1990s. We will not be studying Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Taliban. This is first and foremost a practical decision, because a wider empirical scope would leave us with an unmanageable number of sources, and we would have to sacrifice a lot of depth for breadth. As we shall see, the epistemic community of jihadism is also a cultural one, in the sense that they have many products and practices in common. It takes only a brief look at other types of groups to spot cultural differences: Hezbollah’s music, for example, has instruments and sounds very different from al-Qaida’s a cappella *anashid*, while the Taliban enjoy traditional Afghan dances, unheard of in the Islamic State group.

Besides, the universe of groups we study in this book is more than diverse enough as it is. We are covering groups of widely different sizes, in different parts of the world, and in different time periods (from the 1980s to the 2010s). Clearly, there will be a broad range of group-specific products and practices, and we should be extremely careful to generalize about “what jihadis do” or “what jihadis enjoy.” At the same time, a certain degree of generalization will be necessary, or else this book would come in thirty volumes. What we can do, however, is reflect for a few paragraphs on the ways in which groups in our empirical universe differ.

One obvious source of variation is time. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the technological environment of militant groups changed dramatically. The Internet, the digital camera, and eventually the smartphone made it much easier to produce audiovisual propaganda and exchange information between activists on different continents. The declining relative cost of air travel and the growth of the so-called foreign fighter phenomenon from the 1980s onward also led to more