COMPARATIVE BOOK REVIEW OF
UNHOLY WAR: TERROR IN THE NAME OF ISLAM
AND
THE CRISIS OF ISLAM: HOLY WAR AND UNHOLY TERROR

CAPT WILLIAM R. MARHOFFER, USCG
COURSE 5605
DOING NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY
SEMINAR A

PROFESSOR
COL RUSSELL E. QUIRICI

ADVISOR
CAPT CRAIG A. RANKIN
**Comparative Book Review of Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam and The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror**

**National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000**

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Comparative Book Review of

Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam. By John L. Esposito, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002; and

Introduction: The horrific attacks of September 11, 2001 – ostensibly carried out in the name of Islam – focused American attention on militant Islam and raised important questions about the fundamental nature of the world’s second-largest religion and the violence carried out in its name. Is Islam, as asserted by President Bush, a religion of peace? Is the violent jihad (a central concept of Islam, which can mean both to strive to lead a good Muslim life in the path of God and to rise up in arms against unbelievers) proclaimed by Osama bin Laden consistent with the tenets of this religion? In a March 2003 Discovery Spotlight television report, New York Times commentator Thomas L. Friedman remarked, “Until we understand the roots of 9/11, I don’t think we’ll ever be safe.”1 In keeping with Sun Tzu’s counsel to know one’s enemy, contemporary American military strategy must be informed by an understanding of the beliefs and goals of our self-proclaimed Muslim enemies.

In Unholy War and The Crisis of Islam, professors John Esposito and Bernard Lewis, respectively, introduce the non-Muslim reader to Islam’s principles, customs, and history, with a particular focus on the defining element of jihad, in order to better understand the mindset and motivations of terrorists claiming to act in the name of Islam. They also explain the growing grassroots Islamic identity that appears increasingly hostile to the West generally and America in particular. Esposito and Lewis, both respected American scholars having written or edited between them some 40 books on Islam, present clear and dispassionate explanations of the teachings of Islam – from the Quran, the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and Islamic law developed over the past 13 centuries – on jihad and legitimate warfare, the use of violence, and the terrorist tactics employed today by al-Qaeda, Hamas, and other nominally-Islamic militant groups. Both authors distinguish between Islam as an expression of faith and political Islam,
referred to varyingly as radical, fundamental or militant Islam or Islamism, which increasingly is expressed through violence. By examining the history of conflict between Islam and the non-Muslim world (principally the West, or Christendom in Lewis’ words), Esposito and Lewis answer the question “Why do they hate us?” with theological and historical explanations for the broad-based anti-American sentiment and dogmatic rejection of Western ways found throughout the Islamic world. This paper will examine the common themes of these two books and analyze the arguments made by their authors regarding the nature of the threat of militant Islam and prospects for avoiding a broader clash of civilizations.

**Common theses:** The two books present remarkably similar, undiluted conclusions regarding the fundamental question of whether Islam requires or condones acts of terrorism. Both authors argue that the majority of Muslims are appalled by violence committed in the name of their faith, and that extremists such as Osama bin Laden have truly hijacked Islamic discourse, using it to legitimate acts of terrorism in furtherance of their own radical ideologies. Both books begin with (perhaps inescapable) reference to bin Laden’s declaration of *jihad* against America. Lewis’ opening paragraph captures the link between Islam and the motivating ideology of al-Qaeda with the statement, “For Usama bin Laden and those who follow him, this is a religious war, a war against infidels, and therefore, inevitably, against the United States, the greatest power in the world of infidels.” Esposito begins by examining the evolution of bin Laden’s radicalism and the manner in which bin Laden’s August 1996 Declaration of Jihad cleverly incorporates references to history and traditional Islamic symbolism as well as contemporary grievances and perceptions to draw support among mainstream as well as militant Muslims. Esposito, too, portrays bin Laden as motivated by religiously tinged ideology, claiming “Global politics were for bin Laden a competition and jihad, a clash of civilizations between the
Muslim world and the West, between Islam and a militant Judeo-Christian conspiracy.”

Esposito then sketches the history within Islam of militant figures and groups who created a legacy of *jihad* waged to reform, revitalize, or redirect the faith – many of whom cited Western oppression of the Muslim world as justification for Muslims to wage defensive *jihad* against Western infidels and their Muslim apostate collaborators.

While both books document a long and varied history of Muslim hostility toward the West, *Unholy War* more clearly stakes out two fundamental theses: first, that today’s militant Islamism is but an outward sign that Islam is undergoing yet another of its episodic internal battles over the question of authority and legitimacy, namely, who is empowered to (re)interpret Islam today; and second, that key to this struggle is the unresolved controversy over the true nature and role of *jihad* in contemporary Islam. Esposito argues that Islam has a rich tradition of militant social reform and religious revivalism starting with the example of the Prophet Muhammad himself, and that whenever the Islamic world has been in decline there have arisen calls for Islamic revival and *jihad* to restore the prominence and achieve the primacy of Islam throughout the world. Seen in this light, bin Laden and al-Qaeda represent only the latest, most ambitious, and most spectacularly visible in a procession of would-be reformers seeking to reinterpret the concept of *jihad* and to apply it to redirect the faithful to expand and enrich the land of Islam (*dar al-Islam*).

**Major Points:** Both *Unholy War* and *The Crisis of Islam* portray militant Islam as a political ideology seeking the creation of a new sociopolitical order based upon the utopian vision of a perfect Islamic state. As an aggressive, global force justifying coercive means to attain this end, Islamism is therefore akin to such twentieth-century “isms” as fascism and communism. Wielding a dangerous combination of traditional Islamic revivalism and such deadly new attributes as global reach, suicide bombings, and mass killing of bystanders, the Islamists intend to impose Islam on the whole world because they view Islam as the answer to all of the world’s problems. Yet Islamists such as bin Laden are far from traditionalists or reactionaries; untrained in Islamic scholarship, they readily interpret the Quran to suit their own purposes,
thus usurping the traditional roles of the *caliph* or *imam* (the leaders, respectively, of the Sunni and Shii Islamic communities), *faqih* (legal expert), *mufti* (Islamic law specialist qualified to issue legal interpretations), and *ulama* (religious scholars or clergy). Furthermore, they are quick to appropriate the technological advances of the West in the furtherance of their cause, even as they denounce Western spiritual decay and cultural decadence.

Lewis and Esposito portray a worldview common among Muslims of Islam under siege, its culture debased and its lands occupied in a world dominated by its historic enemies, militant Christianity and Judaism, thus legitimating the call of all true Muslims to global *jihad* in defense of the worldwide Islamic community. Esposito charges bin Laden with selectively using religious texts and doctrines to justify a *jihad* of violence and terrorism by appealing to the Islamic teaching that “*jihad* in the defense of Islam and to correct an unjust political order is legitimate and required.”

This charge highlights the centrality of the conflict within Islam over interpretation and implementation of *jihad*, for Lewis and Esposito agree, “the powerful symbolism and revolutionary meaning of *jihad* dominates modern Muslim politics to an extent unparalleled in history…. Peaceful or violent, all share a common commitment to an Islamic revolution, a *jihad* or struggle to implement an Islamic order or government.”

According to Islamic law, warfare against infidels and apostates qualifies as *jihad*. Because *jihad* is a religious obligation, its conduct is scrupulously regulated by the *shariah* (“path,” the Islamic holy law), which forbids killing noncombatants, as well as women, children, monks, and rabbis, all of whom are granted immunity unless they participate in the fighting. The tenets of Islam thus contradict bin Laden’s illegitimate 2000 *fatwa* (legal opinion on Islamic law that can be issued only by a *mufti*) calling for the killing of innocent people: “to kill Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim.” The questions of who can legitimately declare *jihad* and what constitutes a valid defensive *jihad* remain key issues of contention within Islam, with the answers, for now, resting as matters of individual conscience. While the nature of *jihad* today may be subject to debate, Lewis aptly observes that organizations now
claiming the name of *Jihad* “in Kashmir, Chechnya, Palestine, and elsewhere clearly do not use the word to denote moral striving.”

Lewis and Esposito identify of a number of factors motivating Islamists’ rage against America and making today’s Islamism a uniquely dangerous threat to both the West and moderate Muslims. Those pertaining to U.S. government policies addressed in bin Laden’s published declarations of *jihad* include demands for the removal of American troops from Saudi Arabia, withdrawal of military support for Israeli oppression of Palestinians, cessation of sanctions against Iraq, and an end to support for tyrannical regimes in Muslim nations. Lewis and Esposito illuminate several less known factors, however, that warrant discussion:

1. **The sociopolitical nature of Islam.** Islam is an all-encompassing way of life, founded to implement God’s will and a just social order, and so guiding not only individual but community life. The very notion of secularism is foreign to Islamic thought, as the Islamic community has, since the days of the Prophet, existed as both a polity and a religious community. As noted by Lewis, the *shariah* “deals extensively with…what we in the West would call constitutional law and political philosophy.” Accordingly, in Islamic tradition, religious truth and political (and military) power were “indissolubly associated: the first sanctified the second, the second sustained the first.” Moreover, Islam provides not only a faith but also an identity and a loyalty eclipsing all others. Esposito observes, “Muslims were a community of believers, in a special covenant with God that transcended all other allegiances. They were to realize their obligation to strive (jihad), to submit (islam) to God, and to spread their faith both as individuals and as a community.” Thus the religious justification for *jihad* to propagate the faith is based upon Islam’s proselytizing mandate to impose on all mankind a divinely ordained, perfect (e.g., Islamic) social order and governance.

2. **The legacy of the Crusades and imperialism.** For many Muslims, Christianity is the religion of the Crusades, imperial domination, and hegemonic ambitions; they view Christendom as the historic and irreconcilable archrival of Islam. Although the Crusades were a limited and ultimately ineffective response
to the capture of the holy places of Christianity and the spread of Islam (as late as 1683, the Turks still threatened the gates of Vienna and ruled in Belgrade and Budapest), later European efforts to reverse the Muslim advance into Christendom successfully rolled back the frontiers of the Islamic world. The post-WWI dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and annexation of its Middle Eastern Arab provinces by Britain and France under League of Nations mandate proved particularly demoralizing, undermining the traditional Muslim belief that the rapid spread of Islam was proof of God’s favor. Esposito notes, “Some Muslims...concluded that Western dominance and Muslim dependency were the result of unfaithfulness and departure from the path of Islam. This was a powerful argument that encouraged holy warriors to struggle (jihad) to bring the ummah [Muslim community] back to the straight path.” European colonialism thus incited calls for jihad both for religious reform and political mobilization to overthrow un-Islamic rule – calls repeated today by militant Islamic groups from Algeria to the Philippines.

3. **The failures of modernity.** Muslim resentment toward the West, fueled by colonial subjugation and perceived exploitation, is exacerbated by the poverty and tyranny prevalent throughout the Muslim world. This resentment is compounded by frustration as various political and economic modernization theories – most imported from or imposed by the West, and ranging from nationalism to pan-Arabism to socialism – failed to yield expected improvements in economic well-being and political freedom. Lewis observes, “The record, with the exception of Turkey, is one of almost unrelieved failure.” Thus, many Muslims are convinced of the futility of modernization, even viewing modernity itself (in its Western guise) as the source of their problems. Lewis continues, “[B]oth capitalism and socialism were tried and have failed; both Western and Eastern models produced only poverty and tyranny.... As a consequence, much of the anger in the Islamic world is directed against the Westerner, seen as the ancient and immemorial enemy of Islam...and against the Westernizer, seen as a[n]…accomplice of the West and a traitor to his own faith and people.” This legacy of bankrupt ideologies and tyranny has established Islamism as the last, best
hope for many Muslims yearning for both an explanation for past failures and a program for restoring the just social order promised by Islam.

4. **The impact of the Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets.** The 1979 invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union proved a watershed event in the “globalization” of militant *jihad*. First, it was the primary turning point in the radicalization of Osama bin Laden into a *mujahid* (warrior for God). Second, as observed by Esposito:

   The Afghan jihad against Soviet occupation marked a turning point as Muslims in record numbers traveled to Afghanistan to join in the jihad against the oppression of Muslims. The experience and success of that jihad created a new, more global jihad sentiment and culture…and…a sense of solidarity, which subsequently brought Muslims from various parts of the world to participate in jihads in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir, Central Asia, and Chechnya.¹⁶

The eventual rout of the Soviets (for which bin Laden vainly assumes proprietary responsibility) later emboldened bin Laden and the Arab Afghan resistance fighters with whom he founded al-Qaeda to challenge the apostate Saudi regime and its infidel supporter, America. Lewis states:

   In their view, they had already driven the Russians out of Afghanistan, in a defeat so overwhelming that it led directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Having overcome the superpower that they had always regarded as more formidable, they felt ready to take on the other…¹⁷

5. **The effect of Wahhabism.** Lewis and Esposito describe the Wahhabi strain of Islam (named after the eighteenth century Islamic revivalist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab) as an extreme, illiberal interpretation that would undoubtedly have been marginalized as a fringe element were it not for the unholy alliance between Wahhabism and the royal House of Saud. The Saudi rulers embrace Wahhabism as a source of political and religious legitimacy for their rule; in return, they use their vast oil wealth and prestige as Custodians of the Two Holy Sites (Mecca and Medina) to promote and export the puritanical, rigid, and exclusivist Wahhabi vision. Wahhabism has always been marked by intolerance; as noted by Esposito, “Anything the Wahhabis perceived as un-Islamic behavior constituted unbelief (kufr)…which must be countered by jihad…. [T]o fight the unbelievers and reestablish a true Islamic state was required.”¹⁸

Dividing the world strictly into believers versus unbelievers who must be fought, and declaring Muslims who
resisted as unbelievers who must be fought and killed. Wahhabism rejects a central tenet of Islam – that
Muslims should not fight other Muslims.\textsuperscript{19} The Wahhabi continue to present their literalist version of Islam
as the pure, unadulterated message and “seek to impose their strict beliefs and interpretations, which are
not commonly shared by other Sunni or by Shii Muslims throughout the Muslim world.”\textsuperscript{20} The Saudi-
funded, Wahhabi-oriented \textit{madrasa} system of Islamic schools and seminaries represents for many Muslims
the best or only available education, thus giving the Wahhabi message a disproportionate worldwide
prominence. This systematic indoctrination in bigotry and intolerance produced, not surprisingly, the
Taliban-bin Laden alliance and \textit{jihadi madrasas}.\textsuperscript{21} Lewis illustrates the Wahhabi influence on violent \textit{jihad}
via the following analogy:

Imagine that the Ku Klux Klan…obtains total control of the state of Texas, of its…oil revenues, and…uses this money to establish a network of well-endowed schools and colleges all over Christendom, peddling their particular brand of Christianity.\textsuperscript{22}

6. \textbf{The perception of Western decadence.} The most powerful and pervasive factor engendering
broad contempt for the West in the Muslim world may be the perceived degeneracy and debauchery of
Western, particularly American, society. American television, film, and music present images, however
false or exaggerated, of an immoral society plagued by greed, racism, violence, and sexual excess. This
sinfulness and decadence not only offend Muslims, but also are viewed as threats to the religious and
social values of Islam and the faithfulness of Muslim believers. This decadence, asserts Lewis, is what led
Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini to label America as the Great Satan, for the Satan of the Quran is “a seducer, ‘an
insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men.’”\textsuperscript{23} While the global reach of American cultural “soft
power” may have helped to bring down the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, it often induces fear and
loathing among traditional Muslims and erects barriers to cultural tolerance and rapprochement.

\textbf{Differences:} While \textit{Unholy War} and \textit{The Crisis of Islam} agree on the key issues motivating militant
Islamic \textit{jihad}, each contains areas of unique focus that serve to differentiate the two. \textit{Unholy War}, for
example, better explains the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:
Israel’s crushing victory over the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli Six-Day War symbolized the depth of Arab and Muslim impotence and the failure of modern nation-states in the Muslim world. The loss of Jerusalem, the third holiest city of Islam, which embraces major Muslim holy sites, the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, was particularly devastating to Muslims around the world, making Palestine and the liberation of Jerusalem an Islamic, not just an Arab or Palestinian, issue.

Similarly, Esposito addresses the infamous “sword verses” of the Quran that, in isolation, support the perception of Islam as an inherently violent, warlike religion: “…slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush.” Esposito argues that the subsequent Quranic verse, “But if they repent and fulfill their devotional obligations and pay the zakat [tax for alms] then let them go their way for God is forgiving and kind,” establishes the true meaning of the scripture as a call for peaceful relations unless there is interference with the freedom of Muslims.

Further, Unholy War more thoroughly examines the manner in which Muslim reformers and revolutionaries from medieval times (Taymiyyah) through the mid-twentieth century (al-Banna, Qutb, Farag, and Mawdudi) have reinterpreted the tenets of Islam in response to changing social and political contexts. These struggles within Islam for religious and political authority, reflected in debate over the grounds for declaring jihad, issuing fatwas, and the lengths to which some Muslim leaders go to “shop” for fatwas to legitimate their political agendas, exert significant influence on Islamic militant ideology today.

The Crisis of Islam, on the other hand, addresses more succinctly why America, which did not exist at the time of the Crusades and was never a colonial power in the Middle East or the Muslim world (with the arguable exception of the crushing of the Huk rebellion in the Philippines, which is not cited in Lewis’ book) has come to be seen as the nemesis of Islam and the object of Muslim hatred. Lewis better explains why the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, even in response to Iraq’s naked aggression and for the purpose of defending one Muslim country and liberating another, constitutes desecration in the view of some Muslims:

In the year 20 of the Muslim era, the Caliph ‘Umar decreed that Jews and Christians should be removed from...Arabia, in fulfillment of an injunction of the Prophet uttered on his deathbed: “Let
there not be two religions in Arabia.”…[F]rom then until now the Holy Land of the Hijaz has been forbidden territory for non-Muslims. According to the school of Islamic jurisprudence accepted by the Saudi state and by Usama bin Laden and his followers, for a non-Muslim even to set foot on the sacred soil is a major offense.27

The Crisis of Islam also explains the broad Muslim condemnation of American-led attacks and sanctions against an Iraqi regime posing a clear threat to the peace of its Muslim neighbors: “If Arabia is the most symbolic location in the world of Islam, Baghdad, the seat of the caliphate for half a millennium and the scene of some of the most glorious chapters in Islamic history, is the second.”28 American use of Saudi Arabia as a base for attacks on Iraq thus constitutes, in the historical worldview of pious Muslims, a double desecration of the holy lands of Islam.

Finally, Lewis discusses more extensively the extent to which today’s suicide terrorism and mass killing of bystanders deviate from Islamic law and tradition, noting “suicide…is a mortal sin and earns eternal damnation, even for those who would otherwise have earned a place in paradise.”29 Explaining how bin Laden and his ilk justify the murder of innocents when the shariah prohibits warriors in a jihad from killing women, children, and the aged unless they attack first, Lewis notes that “the American people freely chose their rulers and must therefore be held accountable and punishable for those rulers’ misdeeds – that is, there are no ‘innocent civilians.’”30

Recommended actions: While these books offer persuasive insight into the rise of militant Islamism and its resort to terrorist tactics, their recommendations for future action are anodyne. Lewis offers only the insipid prescription, on his book’s last page, that America should encourage democratic oppositions in Iran and Iraq and help those Muslims who share our values. Esposito writes at length on “Where do we go from here?” but offers only a few, indirect considerations for action, suggesting a reluctance to proffer policy prescriptions. To his credit, he advocates a reexamination and reformulation of American foreign policy, warning “short-term policies that are necessitated by national interest must be balanced by long-term policies and incentives that pressure our allies to promote a gradual and progressive process of broader
political participation and power sharing.” Esposito writes of the widely perceived double standard regarding America’s nearly uncritical support for Israel, but fails to call for a tempering of that support or to offer proposals for attaining an Israeli-Palestinian peace. And while Esposito laudably calls for intercultural dialog and a *convivencia* (accommodation for living together) as opposed to acceptance of the inevitability of a clash of civilizations, he offers little guidance (or hope) for promoting Muslim voices of tolerance and moderation over those of extremism and violent *jihad*.

**Conclusions:** *Unholy War* and *The Crisis of Islam* offer valuable insight into the mindset behind the obscene violence of 9/11, presenting clear and balanced explanations for the obvious resentment toward America and apparent dogmatic rejection of modernity by many in the Islamic world – even those Muslims educated in the West and reaping the benefits of Western educational opportunities, technological developments, and social concepts such as participatory government, religious tolerance, and freedom of expression so conspicuously rare in the Islamic world. Both authors assert that Islam is and always has been subject to interpretation, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation in light of prevailing political, social, and religious challenges, and that the militant, exclusionary brand of Islam espoused by fanatics such as Osama bin Laden does not reflect the only, or even the predominant, contemporary vision of Islam.

While the two books place differing emphasis on the historical and contemporary roots of the current enmity of the Islamists toward the West, it is telling that they contain no significant areas of disagreement. Of the two, Lewis’ is the easier read with its more conversational style and focus on the post-9/11 “here and now.” Esposito’s book, however, presents a more thorough and ultimately more satisfying analysis of Islam, enabling deeper appreciation of the causes of Islamic rage and the motivations of contemporary Islamist movements. This book, however, suffers from a structural problem that should have been corrected in editing: *Unholy War* begins in the present day but then jumps about chronologically in a sometimes bewildering manner. On the key question of whether traditional, mainstream Islam legitimates
terrorism, the answer of both authors is a clear “no.” Both declare modern terrorism against civilians, particularly suicide bombing, as a frightening deviation from Islamic tradition and teachings.

*Unholy War* and *The Crisis of Islam* illuminate an Islamist worldview of a clash of ideologies, if not of civilizations, and reinforce this author’s conviction that it will prove impossible to reach lasting accommodation with religious extremists. If we are to avoid a broader clash of civilizations between Christendom (however secularized) and Islam, America and its allies would do well to heed the advice of Sun Tzu and know our enemy. Such knowledge could help to avert the worldwide devastation that would undoubtedly unfold if the ideologies of Osama bin Laden and extremists of his ilk are not marginalized within the world of Islam. While these books’ recommendations for future action tend toward naïve idealism, American values would be well served by a foreign policy that encourages moderate Muslims and liberal opposition movements in Islamic autocracies in order to gain true friends, sharing common values, in the Muslim world.
Notes


25 Quran 9:5.


