

*Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State*. Olivier Roy. Oxford University Press, 2017. 136 pp. Hardcover \$19.95 / ISBN: 9780190843632.

Why have so many Western jihadis deliberately sought death by joining jihadi struggles in the Muslim world or by committing terrorist attacks in their home countries? In *Jihad and Death*, Olivier Roy explores the intricate relationship between jihadism and seeking death, a connection that, according to him, is not only new, but also “terribly modern” (1). Now focusing particularly on the Islamic State (ISIS), Roy builds on key insights from his previous works, such as *Globlised Islam* (2004) and *Holy Ignorance* (2010), in order to explore the issues of radicalization and extremism, and the role of religion therein. He does so by adopting a “cross-cutting approach” that seeks to understand jihadi radicalism and terrorism alongside other forms of youth protests and mass violence, while rejecting a “vertical approach” that attempts to explain jihadism from an Islamic (or Salafist) genealogy running from the Quran to contemporary ideologues such as Osama bin Laden and Abu Mus’ab al-Suri. This explicit rejection already indicates that Roy’s book should also be understood in the context of the (sometimes quite fierce) debates between Roy and his French colleague Gilles Kepel. In *Jihad and Death*, Roy repeatedly criticizes Kepel (both explicitly and implicitly) for overemphasizing the role of Islam and Salafism as well as the problematic integration of Muslims in Western Europe. Roy, instead, argues that neither Salafism nor social frustrations among Western Muslims can explain radicalization and extremism. Rather, he asserts, we should see jihadis primarily as rebellious youths who choose jihadism as the paradigm for their revolt. Accordingly, Roy argues from the first chapter onwards, jihadi terrorism is not the consequence of the radicalization of Islam (through Salafism), but rather of the Islamization of radicalism (6).

In chapter 2, Roy draws from his database of one hundred French radicals to provide a profile of Western jihadis. Except for the increasing participation of women, this profile has remained remarkably constant throughout the last decades, he claims. Western jihadis are overwhelmingly second generation immigrants and converts, typically lack religious education, are often involved in petty crime, became “born-again Muslims” at some point during their youths, distanced themselves from their families and friends, and radicalized relatively quickly. Their biographies indicate that the conflicts in the Middle East do not account for their radicalization, Roy argues, as their connection to these conflicts is imaginary rather than based on real ties. Moreover, socio-economic and psychopathological indicators cannot explain their radicalism,

nor are mosques, preachers, and Salafi networks usually involved. Instead, Roy claims that the generational facet is crucial to understanding the phenomenon. It concerns youngsters who are deeply immersed in youth culture, as becomes apparent from their dress habits, musical tastes, sports activities, use of street language, etc. Moreover, these youths often radicalize together with peers (friends, siblings, recently married spouses), whereas parents and the extended family are typically uninvolved. They are uprooted young rebels who find in Islam their framework for thought and action (32).

Why these rebellious youths embrace this particular framework is discussed in chapter 3. According to Roy, many scholars misinterpret jihadism by focusing on Islamic theology, texts, and ideologues. These issues, however, are hardly relevant, he claims: most jihadis have only basic knowledge of Islam and they “do not descend into violence after poring over the sacred texts” (42). We should rather focus on their *religiosity*, Roy argues, which involves the experience, appropriation, and practice of religion. The religiosity of jihadis often deviates from Salafism, he claims, as is illustrated by their disregard for everyday norms and their divergent views on women and sexuality. Instead of perceiving Salafism as a cause of jihadi radicalism, Roy argues that both are products of the same societal and generational mechanisms, and especially of the loss of a culturally grounded religion. Due to immigration, globalization, and secularization, he explains, religion has become subject to deculturation, especially in Western countries such as France, where a strict application of *laïcité* has accelerated the delinking of religion from its social bond. This particularly affects second generation immigrants, who piece together a religion without social and cultural embedding (63). For disaffected, rebellious youths in search for a cause, jihadism might then be an appealing paradigm for action, just like leftist extremism had been for rebellious youths in the 1960s. Jihadism offers them an allegedly authentic religion that is globalized and individualized, and thus fits their personal quest for truth. Moreover, it empowers them by offering them a role as the avenging heroes of the suffering Muslim community. Yet, Roy emphasizes, rather than being connected to real-life conflicts in the Muslim world, jihadism offers them an imaginary world. Jihadi struggles are disembedded from local cultures and societies, as is illustrated by the nomadic, deterritorialized jihad of many of these youngsters. Moreover, jihadis, including members of ISIS, are not really interested in establishing well-functioning sharia societies, Roy asserts. Ultimately, they are nihilists more than utopians, a “no-future generation” that rejects society and is fascinated by the upcoming apocalypse, which results in their embracing of death through martyrdom (53). Hence, Roy claims, rather than explaining their radicalism and violence from Salafism, these are better understood

by comparing them to other forms of youth violence, such as generational and revolutionary radicalism (e.g., leftist extremism since the late 1960s) and generational nihilism (e.g., suicidal mass killers and millennialist cults). This demonstrates, Roy concludes, that the struggle of jihadi youths is connecting personal revolt, rooted in the perceived humiliation of their virtual community, to the jihadi narrative of a return to the golden age of Islam. Their terrorism theatricalizes this narrative according to a contemporary aesthetics of violence, which turns the youths into the (alleged) heroes of the *umma* (73).

In chapter 4, Roy turns to the organizations which are responsible for scripting this narrative. Focusing on ISIS, he describes how the group emerged out of real crises in the Muslim world, and especially the Sunni Arab revolt following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. ISIS diverged from al-Qaeda, Roy indicates, because ISIS primarily targeted Shia Muslims and aimed to reterritorialize the jihad. By establishing a caliphate and turning its jihad to the West (after the defeat in Kobane in 2015), ISIS established a “brand” that was ahead of the competition on the jihadi market. Yet, combining a territorialized jihad in Iraq and Syria and a global, deterritorialized jihad against the West also appeared difficult. Whereas ISIS was initially able to take advantage of regional conflicts, it ultimately had difficulties in finding local tribal support and was only able to bind frustrated Sunnis individually. Moreover, the global jihad at the center of ISIS’s focus is largely disconnected from the conflicts in the Middle East, which are primarily regional and dominated by Shia-Sunni polarization. Due to the narrow social and political base of its jihadism, Roy assesses, ISIS’s strength is limited to playing into our fears, and especially the fear of Islam.

Roy concludes by providing some recommendations. We should not portray the conflicts in the Middle East as a conflict between the West and Islam, as such portrayals reinforce ISIS’s fantasies. There is no homogenous Muslim culture, the conflicts are primarily among Muslims themselves, and their causes are often political rather than religious. Moreover, Roy reasserts that Salafism is not the problem. Rather, the problem is the gap between institutional Islam in the West (organizations, mosques, imams) and the younger generations. An overly strict application of *laïcité* does not provide a solution in this context, he advises, as it assigns the reformation and reclaiming of religion to the radicals and the marginalized. Religion is there, and society has to “make do with it” (98). Accordingly, the prism of religion should not distort our view on how to deal with jihadis. Instead of seeing them as brainwashed subjects that can be “deradicalized,” Roy emphasizes their agency by claiming that radicalization “is *in fine* a choice.” Jihadis should therefore be viewed as militants and mass murderers, he recommends, and be treated accordingly.

In sum, Roy's argument as outlined above yields significant insights for scholars, policy makers, and the broader audience. In particular his exploration of the profiles of Western jihadis and the imaginary they embrace provides a valuable addition to our understanding of jihadi radicalism and terrorism. Roy draws our attention to the hitherto understudied, yet highly important dimensions of jihadi radicalism and terrorism by, for example, convincingly demonstrating the significance of the generational dimension and of the religious transformations caused by immigration, globalization, and secularization that provide the context in which jihadi imaginaries can become appealing for disaffected, rebellious youths. Accordingly, Roy's elaboration of his thesis (which he first made in 2008) that jihadi terrorism does not arise from the radicalization of Islam, but from the Islamization of radicalism, provides a valuable and challenging perspective in current debates about Western jihadis.

However, Roy's frequent engagement with these debates in *Jihad and Death* also has its limitations. At some points, Roy seems to get caught up in his disputes with Kepel to the extent that some passages seem to be primarily aimed at dismissing his rival's arguments rather than supporting his own (e.g., 75–78). More importantly, Roy's forceful rejection of other perspectives sometimes comes at the expense of nuance. Although Roy's "cross-cutting approach" is definitely fruitful and promising for future comparative research on jihadism and other forms of youth protest and suicidal violence, other approaches remain necessary too, including the research focusing on Islam and Salafism that Roy criticizes. There are, after all, numerous examples of Western jihadis who did pour over Islamic texts before embracing violence. Mohammed Bouyeri, to mention just one of them, had not only read, but even translated writings by authors such as Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and Sayyid Qutb before he killed the Dutch cineaste Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in 2004 (see Peters 2005). Moreover, one might wonder whether the link between jihad and death is not more firmly established in Islamic tradition than Roy realizes. An illustrative example is provided by a statement of Mohammed Merah, the perpetrator of the 2012 Toulouse and Montauban shootings, to which Roy refers to underline the modern nature of jihadis seeking death. In Roy's terms, Merah "uttered a variant of the famous statement attributed to Osama Bin Laden, also routinely picked up by other jihadis: 'We love death as you love life'" (2). However, Roy is apparently unaware of the fact that this statement is actually a direct quote from Khalid ibn al-Walid, the famous companion of Muhammad and the commander of the Muslim troops after the Prophet's death. In a letter to the Persian emperor, Khalid ibn al-Walid warned his addressee to convert to Islam or to be

defeated by people “who love death just as you love life” (al-Tabari 1993: 44). This example raises the question as to whether the connection between jihad and the deliberate pursuit of death is really as modern as Roy claims. There are several traditions about early Islamic fighters seeking death, traditions of which ISIS is definitely aware (e.g., *Rumiyah* 2017).

These observations do not undermine the importance of Roy’s argument, yet they do illustrate that matters are sometimes more nuanced than Roy acknowledges in the heat of the debate. Moreover, they illustrate that the perspectives of Roy and his fellow scholars are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Instead, research on Islamic texts, doctrines, and ideologues, too, is crucial to fully understand the jihadist imaginary and its potential appeal to Western youngsters. Jihadism is a complex phenomenon that requires multifaceted explanations. Despite that issue, Roy’s book is an original and highly needed addition to the valuable work that has already been done on Western jihadis and their fascination with struggle and death.

### *References*

- Peters, Ruud. 2005. “De ideologische en religieuze ontwikkeling van Mohammed B. Deskundigenrapport in de strafzaak tegen Mohammed B. in opdracht van het Openbaar Ministerie opgesteld voor de Arrondissementsrechtbank Amsterdam.” [http://www.sociosite.org/jihad/peters\\_rapport.pdf](http://www.sociosite.org/jihad/peters_rapport.pdf) (accessed December 20, 2017).
- Rumiyah* 6 (English version). 2017. “Examples of the Sahaba’s Eagerness to Attain Shahadah.” Al-Hayat Media Center, 4 February, 40–43.
- Al-Tabari, Muhammad ibn Jarir. 1993. *The History of al-Ṭabarī, Vol. XI: The Challenge to the Empires*. Trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship. State University of New York Press.

P. G. T. Nanninga  
*University of Groningen*