

4-1-2016

Acharya, Arabinda. Ten Years After 9/11: Rethinking the Jihadist Threat. London: Routledge, 2013.

Abdul-Karim Khan Ph.D.
University of Hawaii System, khana@hawaii.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Khan, Abdul-Karim Ph.D. (2016) "Acharya, Arabinda. Ten Years After 9/11: Rethinking the Jihadist Threat. London: Routledge, 2013.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 27.
DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1317
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol7/iss2/27>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

**Acharya, Arabinda. *Ten Years After 9/11: Rethinking the Jihadist Threat.*
London: Routledge, 2013.**

The main theme of this book, as explained in its introduction, is that the threat from “terrorism has morphed from organized entities with clear command and control structures to ‘networks’ or ‘franchises,’ or to individuals acting on their own in ‘leaderless jihad’” (p. 3). Not all terrorists are created equally. Just as the causes of terrorism differ from country to country, so do the courses, consequences and responses. “Thus, there cannot be a single overarching war against terrorism. Similarly, the strategies and tactics to engage the adversary cannot be same for all and therefore a friend-or-foe categorization can be counterproductive” (p. 7).

Chapter 1 (“9/11 and globalization of violence”) explains how the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the American and allies’ military strikes have globalized violence to the extent that the wars of terrorism and counterterrorism have become “a perspective, an orientation, and a discourse for ‘our time,’ the ‘way things are today,’ and ‘how the world has changed.’” And just as ruthlessness and brutality characterize terrorist gangs, similarly “overtly militaristic policies of the US ... have demonstrated extreme use of hard power with very counterproductive consequences” (p. 11). Several European Union countries have already distanced themselves from the United States’ global war on terrorism.

The United States, working unilaterally and without regard for the rule of law and human rights, has globalized the war on terror by becoming engaged in conflicts around the world that had nothing to do with 9/11. “This is despite the fact that many conflicts, such as in Kashmir, in the Philippines and Southern Thailand, and Indonesia, were different and predated 9/11. These conflicts were rooted more in their respective sociological, historical, and political contexts rather than just religion and radical ideologies” (p. 20).

The globalization of terrorism and counterterrorism has consequently led to extreme vigilantism and anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States and Europe where “popularity of right-wing political groups is at an all-time high. In effect terrorism and counterterrorism have merged into a horrific cycle of mutual provocation” (p. 23). The author, Arabinda Acharya, also believes that so far only symptoms of terrorism have been addressed, but the real sociopolitical and economic “root causes of violence and conflict are ignored” (p. 25).

In Chapter 2 (“Construction of the adversary”), the author is asking policy makers to “know thy enemy.” The chapter draws a valuable distinction between the local and global jihadi groups. Abdullah Azzam and his protégé, Osama bin Laden, used al-Qaeda as a core and global inspirer for the worldwide Muslim groups to continue the global jihad at the local levels. Acharya, however, debunks Samuel Huntington’s theory that there is a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West simply by arguing the vast majority of people in the Muslim world do not believe in such a theory from an Islamic point of view. An Islamic struggle with the west is an al-Qaeda dream that American and Western prosecutors of counterterrorism must not allow to come true.

Most local jihadist groups are neither related to nor directed by al-Qaeda even if they use the al-Qaeda brand name. Acharya does not deny the fact that there are homegrown, self-radicalized, “do-it-yourself” jihadists and other “soldiers of fortune” who “can become far more dangerous when they reach out for support from more established terrorist networks” (p. 35). The author fully recognizes that the threat from homegrown and local groups is real but many jihadi groups around the world are discovering that their association with al-Qaeda is more of a liability than asset (p. 49).

Chapter 3 (“Strategy of the global jihadist movement”) emphasizes the need to understand the core ideology the jihadists have been preaching in the pursuit of recruits and financial resources. The global jihadist movement, like any violent or peaceful sociopolitical or religious movement, cannot function without a coherent and communicable ideology. There is no clear consensus among the jihadists and their Muslim antagonist scholars over an ideological framework. However, the global jihadists have constructed their agenda as a worldwide confrontation with the West or, as Osama bin Laden framed it, as a war of destiny between infidelity and Islam, which eventually will lead to the establishment of a universal Islamic caliphate on earth. The jihadists are engaged in a zero-sum game, which they know they cannot win militarily. Their jihad has become an ideological warfare wherein they manipulate Islamic teachings for mass mobilization by “extracting and using selective verses from the holy text” (p. 50).

Even though jihadism is not synonymous with Islam, jihadists nonetheless “are fighting on behalf of Islam against the enemies of God, epitomized by the US – the ‘Hubal of this age’ and literally ‘satanic’ being in league with the devil” (p. 53). Acharya believes that even though “suicide is forbidden in Islam and considered an egregious sin in Islamic culture and tradition,” in the twisted world of jihadists they justify suicide attacks that kill innocent civilians, especially women, children and the elderly that Islam clearly forbids (p. 60).

Chapter 4 (“Tactics of the jihadist movement”) deals with the jihadists’ tools and skills. They believe they can defeat the United States just like they forced the former Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan after a decade-long jihad (1979-1989). While they have failed in their strategy to convince the average Muslim of their jihadist ideology, they have, however, succeeded in creating terror wherever they strike. Some of their dramatic and most damaging strikes have proven skills at organization, command and communication, and strategic selection of times and targets. Jihadists’ successes against pro-American Muslim governments (the near enemy) have encouraged recruitment of homegrown terrorists in the West and United States (the far enemy). Instant news of their terrorist strikes through means of globalized information technology has enabled the jihadists to convey the main message of their strategic successes and time-tested tactics. The news creates chaos among victims on the one hand and courage among prospective recruits on the other.

The Internet is the great enabler allowing jihadists to turn sections of the Web into an open university for jihad. “The main audiences are the younger generation in the Muslim world that can now peruse, at their own pace, one big *madrassa* on the Internet” (p. 68). Some of the websites, with convenient access and complete anonymity, are virtual training camps that offer instructions in all sorts of bomb making techniques. Despite a worldwide watch of terrorists’ websites by several top intelligence agencies, the jihadists are still able to recruit and radicalize the youth in Muslim societies that are victims of both the near and the far enemies of Islam. Successful indoctrination and outreach programs are glaring success stories of jihadists’ fundraising, target selection and hideouts around the world.

Jihadists also plan for economic warfare with the intent of financially bleeding the enemy to bankruptcy. Their tactics include, but are not limited to, targeting oil and energy resources and disrupting the global supply chain. They would like to acquire biological and other weapons of mass destruction but, so far, they have not succeeded. But citing the FBI’s National Infrastructure Protection Center (NIPC) warning of February 2003, Acharya cautions that al-Qaeda possesses a crude capability of using chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear

weapons, and that a terrorist attack on a Western city using these weapons is “only a matter of time” (p. 80).

Chapter 5 (“Fighting the jihadist threat”) explains why, 10 years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, fighting the jihadist threat has not worked as successfully as it should have given the enormous number of innocent lives lost in terrorism and counterterrorism. In the future, terrorists will become more difficult to deal with because they are not located in a fixed place or people, and difficult to be identify and preempt. “Rather, given the radicalized milieu, the more killed, the more terrorists would be created” (p. 83). Even the grand strategy of the United States failed to understand the nature of conflict with al-Qaeda. The U.S. war on al-Qaeda became an open-ended military operation fighting a global insurgency wherever and whenever it was found. The United States went after several insurgent and terrorist groups; some even did not pose any threat to the American interests.

Given its unachievable lofty and broad objective, this global war on terror could end up in complete failure. The U.S. grand strategy involved a kind of deterrence, preemption and prevention that became overreaction to the threat with the result that “the world is left to fight an almost perpetually elusive target, with a constantly moving center and focal point, thereby making it progressively harder to counter” (p. 91).

The global war on terror, especially, in the Muslim World, is unwinnable without the full cooperation of the Muslim masses and states. They are proactively engaged against terror networks that have both local and global agendas. The United States going global and alone has so far failed to engage the Muslim world, where the United States is not seen as an honest agent of peace and justice. “The more than a decade long fight,” Acharya believes, “has been characterized by wrong identification of the enemy and the inability of the ... US administration to use soft power to reach out to the Muslim masses” (p. 102).

Chapter 6 (“Ten Years after: Bringing the conflict to an end”) is a candid criticism of what has been lacking in the United States’ war on terror. Although the United States and regional states have decimated al-Qaeda’s top leadership, training camps, capacity and recruitment, the terror group’s anti-U.S./West ideology will sustain for years to come. Most of the jihadi movements have so far sustained not because of any strength of their ideology but rather because of America’s extremely indiscriminate killing of innocent people, which has helped jihadists in legitimizing their war against the United States. Moreover, the U.S. grand strategy is based on an aggregation that considers the war on terror is a “war against all terrorists or – far worse – all Muslims simultaneously. This creates enormous potential for overstretch, exhaustion of popular will, and ultimate failure” (p. 112).

The jihadists have suffered their greatest setback at the hands of secular and pro-democracy protestors of the Arab Spring who rejected the jihadists’ violent rush to grab power or impose Taliban-style sharia law. The Arab Spring protestors represented common Muslims’ demand for socioeconomic justice, political reforms, and transparent democratic elections that jihadists love to hate. However, Acharya believes that the Arab Spring has also “exposed the limitations of the American power in the Arab world with the fall of Washington’s traditional (authoritarian) allies in the region.” He also believes that a number of attributes of the Arab Spring “support the argument that the protests could be the undoing of the jihadist project” (p. 115). The Arab Spring nonviolent and pro-democracy demonstrations have “derailed the projects of the jihadist movement on many fronts ... and could mark the beginning of an alternative narrative to the jihadist ideology” (p. 118).

In conclusion, Acharya counsels the use of minimum effective use of force, finding solutions to the real problems the jihadists use as motives for recruitment, engaging Muslim leaders and communities, and exploiting the internal ideological and tactical contradictions. He believes that misrepresenting and manipulating the holy text of Islam is the terrorists' Achilles heel as Muslim scholars preach against their illegitimate ideology. That is how "the strong challenge to jihadism comes from within the Muslim community itself" (p. 121). Citing the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, Acharya believes Muslim nations reject the violent extremism of al-Qaeda and other jihadi movements and their killing of Muslim and non-Muslim innocent people. "If this trend continues," Archaya believes, "it would dry up jihadists' pool of recruits and operations would be harder to undertake" (p. 126).

Any book that deals with ongoing regional developments is destined to be left behind by new events like those currently happening in Syria and Yemen and the newer players like ISIS, and strange alliances and counter-alliances. Despite the fact that this book is now three years old, it still serves its readers well by exposing terrorists' ideology, tactics, strengths and weaknesses.

This well-documented book is also a good critique of U.S. counterterrorism measures, which, according to the author, have so far failed to identify the true nature and identify of terrorism. The U.S. war on terror is disproportionately militaristic and has caused the death and destruction of thousands of innocent Muslim men, women and children. The United States and the West need the aid, not alienation, of the Muslim world in defeating the ideology and structure of terrorist movements.

Abdul-Karim Khan PhD
University of Hawaii System
khana@hawaii.edu