



“Jihad in Modern Islam”

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

While jihad has its roots in classical Islam, its modern form “is the answer to the crisis of Islamic civilization which began in the second half of the nineteenth century,” said Professor Aron Zysow. Zysow, a scholar of Islamic law now at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, addressed a group of senior Congressional staffers on February 26, 2007 as part of the CSIS Middle East Program’s Congressional Forum on Islam.

Zysow noted that the notions of jihad date from early Islam but that the laws governing jihad are relatively undeveloped in comparison with other areas. The classical law of jihad distinguished between two kinds of jihad: an offensive jihad, which is the obligation of the community of Muslims, and a defensive jihad against invaders, which individual Muslims have an obligation to fight. There are more rules restricting the conduct of an offensive jihad, and a narrower responsibility to wage one. Many modern jihadis rely on the more accommodating notions of defensive jihad to mobilize the masses of Muslims not only in Muslim-majority countries, but also to attract Muslim fighters from the diaspora in Europe and elsewhere.

While jihad is not central to the faith of most Muslims, it has come to dominate the thinking of a minority of them. Jihadis regard the fight as the means to revitalize the Muslim world and to correct what they regard as the anomaly of Muslim weakness. It was virtually inevitable that they would come to argue that Islam is everywhere under attack and that defensive jihad was no longer confined to one region or another but extended to the entire world. In the absence of Islamic governments committed to this global war, jihadi theorists have had to develop models of organization and authority to replace the state.

Zysow explained that the amount of literature on jihad has expanded tremendously in the last several decades, especially with the rise of the Internet. Many radical theorists of the past decades have gained a popular audience only in recent years as their texts have been uploaded. The ability of the Internet to propagate jihadi literature has further eroded the authority of traditional religious institutions and official religious bodies. In many cases “the Internet provides the spark” for action.

Despite the proliferation of theorists and writings from jurists and non-specialists, the parameters of defensive jihad remain fairly universal, said Zysow. The classical texts and interpretations of the Quran are quite clear on the subject, and they favor interpretations that argue for fighting rather than peacemaking. For this reason, it is

difficult for Muslims to subdue the jihadi movement on a theoretical or intellectual level. There is a call in the Quran for all Muslims to “protect their faith,” and many interpret the struggle as a way to resist Western influence and maintain their Muslim identity. Such a view is becoming increasingly appealing to Muslims in Western countries, especially in Europe, where Muslims see themselves and their faith as unwelcome. Some believe that the West has launched a global war on Islam, thereby making every Westerner an aggressor and a legitimate target for violent action.

The crisis of identity for Muslims which began at the end of the nineteenth century continues, and for some jihad is the answer to that crisis. Jihadi theorists have an overwhelming number of texts and legal rulings that back up their interpretations. Unfortunately for the United States, its response must be extremely delicate and largely under the radar, argued Zysow. Zysow concluded by observing that much of this will need to be worked out by Muslim theologians and theorists, and there may be little the United States can do to hasten the resolution of these issues.