



Deciphering Jihadi Culture (11/30/17)

- 00:00:20 Alice Greenwald: Good evening. And welcome. My name is Alice Greenwald, and I'm the president and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. And as always, I want to extend a special welcome to our museum members who are here this evening and to those tuning in live via our web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.
- 00:00:43 Tonight, we are joined by Thomas Hegghammer and Cole Bunzel for a discussion about culture within jihadist groups. Thomas is currently a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, as well as an adjunct professor at the University of Oslo. He recently edited a volume about jihadi culture and is frequently consulted, given his expertise in the subjects of terrorism and violent Islamism. Thomas has previously spent time in the United States on various fellowships, including ones at Princeton University, the Harvard Kennedy School, and Stanford University.
- 00:01:25 We are also very pleased to welcome Cole back to the museum for a second program. Cole is a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern studies at Princeton University, where his research focuses on the history and theology of Wahhabism and the jihadi Salafi movement. He is one of the foremost scholars of the Islamic State and holds fellowships with George Washington University's program on extremism and the International Center for Radicalization and Political Violence at King's College London.
- 00:01:58 Given the focus of this evening's program, I did want to advise you that some of the video that we will be showing is potentially disturbing media, but it is being shown as part of the evening's discussion. They are being

presented for educational purposes only and in no way do they indicate endorsement.

I want to thank Cole and Thomas for sharing their time and their insights with us. We are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for their support of the museum's 2017-2018 public program season.

00:02:34 And without further ado, please join me in welcoming Thomas Hegghammer and Cole Bunzel in conversation with 9/11 Memorial senior vice president for education and public programs Noah Rauch-- thank you.

Noah Rauch: Alice. Thank you all for joining us. We have tonight not one but two experts in jihadi groups and jihadi culture. Welcome, Thomas, welcome, Cole.

00:02:55 We have a lot to get through. Cole, I thought I'd start with you, to help us... Walk us through the current jihadi landscape. On the one hand, we have the Islamic State losing almost all of their territory. But we see attacks around the world. We see this horrific attack last week of a Sufi mosque in Egypt, which killed over 300 people. We have Ayman al-Zawahiri putting out a video, sort of publicly splitting with their Syrian affiliate. So can you help us make sense of what's going on over there?

00:03:22 Cole Bunzel: All right, so there's a whole lot going on in the jihadi universe. I certainly can't cover it in two minutes, certainly not a full hour. But most recently, of course, the... What's changed is the fact that the Islamic State has lost a great deal of territory. Its claim to fame back, beginning in 2014, when it declared the caliphate, was that it controlled territory, which was different from Al Qaeda, which did not control territory. And therefore it could lay claim to re-establishing the caliphate.

00:03:53 But over last couple of years, it has lost... gradually lost territory to the point where today, it is... It's resembling much more an insurgency in the

way that it did when it was founded in 2006. So the way that the Islamic State is currently framing its struggle is that it is repeating the experience that it had between around 2006 and 2013, which is when a lot of people derided the group as a kind of paper state, as something that was laughable, that made a claim to statehood, but really didn't control any territory.

00:04:29 So the way that they frame their struggle is that they're going through this again, but they will come back stronger. So they've basically telegraphed to us that they wish to re-enter this kind of insurgent mode, which is not exactly desirable for them, because it's embarrassing. They have to essentially say that "The apocalypse that we've been predicting is not going to happen." But it is basically their new kind of strategy.

00:04:56 On the other end of the spectrum is Al Qaeda, which a lot of analysts have been assuming lately is kind of experiencing a resurgence, that it has not only kind of stayed together through the rise of ISIS, but that it is resurging, that it is... It's starting new affiliates, it has an affiliate in India. The affiliate in Syria seems to be doing well.

00:05:21 But there are also signs that the Al Qaeda leadership, the central leadership, doesn't really have control over what's going on, particularly in Syria, where yesterday, the leader of Al Qaeda issued a video statement in which he said that the affiliate there, that basically... It publicly split with Al Qaeda back in 2016. Zawahiri said that he did not give permission for this to happen. So you see this great division right now going on in Syria. You see the jihadis having difficulty in Iraq and Syria and the Islamic State. But at the same time, the broader jihadi movement, as we understand it, does not seem to be kind of suffering. It's still a movement that seems to be rather strong. That is where I'll leave that.

00:06:10 Noah Rauch: Thomas, is that your take, as well?

Thomas Hegghammer: Yes. And let me, let me first start by thanking the 9/11 Memorial & Museum for, for inviting me. It's a huge honor and

pleasure to come here. Also, I was just given a wonderful tour of the museum by, by Jessica. It's, of course, powerful for everyone. And for me, as it did for many others, 9/11 has kind of defined my professional career. Well, everything I've done in my adult work life has revolved around what happened here 16 years ago.

00:06:55 In the summer... I started working on this in the summer of 2001. I remember being tasked with looking into something called the bin Laden network. I also remember thinking, "Why... why am I doing this? These guys, this is just a bunch of guys up in the mountains. This is probably not going to amount to anything." And then, then the planes struck, and since then, I've been obsessed by this question of finding out what happened here and why did they do it.

00:07:30 And so this book that we're going to talk about today is part of that broader effort of trying to find out what's driving this phenomenon. And I will add, if someone had told me back then that I would be sitting here 16 years later, and we would be talking about a jihadi movement that's much larger than what we had back then, I would not have believed them. I have been astonished by the growth of the movement in the past decade.

00:08:04 And I'm not particularly optimistic of... About the future, either, in this regard. As Cole mentioned, we're dealing with a movement, so organizations come and go. Al Qaeda, we talk about Al Qaeda still as, you know... But it's something else than it was. So the original Al Qaeda, you know, has kind of gone away. It has gone.

00:08:34 Some of the other affiliates that Al Qaeda kind of created or spurred in the 2000s have also partially come and gone. Now ISIS has come and partially, partly gone. The remains of them still linger, but the point is, organizations come and go, leaders, not least, come and go.

00:08:55 But the movement remains. And I think one of the reasons is the culture that we're going to talk about. The culture is the glue that binds these actors together and that keeps it... keeps it alive. And it's very hard to kill

a culture. And so that's why I think we're, unfortunately, stuck with this problem for many more years to come.

Noah Rauch: So we're going to get to the culture in a minute, and get to your book. I'm curious-- sort of, what do you attribute that sort of huge growth to, in the aftermath of 9/11, in terms of this jihadi culture, this jihadi movement?

00:09:34 Thomas Hegghammer: The depressing answer is that I do not know. I don't know. It's... You know, the million-dollar question in all of this is that the world has... has spent incredible amounts of resources fighting this phenomenon, yet it has only grown. And... I mean, there are, of course, various, you know, hypotheses we can put out there for why this might... for why it has evolved in this way, but I think... I'm not sure why. I don't see a clear answer to that question.

00:10:19 Part of it...Part of it could be... Technology-- that the internet has sort of made it possible to, that is, spread propaganda at an exponential rate or capability, and that this is kind of... and that this has made it easier for transnational groups like that, the jihadis, to operate. It is, of course, possible that some of the things that have been done, you know, militarily speaking in the war on terror has been, have been counterproductive. This is, of course, a big and sensitive political question, and...

00:11:13 And it's...And I think it's... There's consensus, I think, among many analysts, that certain aspects of the war on terror have been counterproductive. I think, for example, the invasion of Iraq had... It fueled the movement. Other things are less obvious. It's kind of natural to think that some of the... some of the military, the things... other things that have been done, like drone strikes and other things, that they have fueled the movement.

00:11:49 But it's, there I think it's less clear, because... We don't know what, what would have happened if we did not do those things. Because abstaining from such operations would have allowed some of the organizations to

thrive and carry out more attacks, so that issue, the question of the role of our own actions is, I think, unclear. The bottom line here is that, is that I don't have a clear answer to this. I don't know why it has grown as much as it has.

00:12:19 Noah Rauch: Well, I want to shift now. I don't have an answer, either, for what it's worth. I want to shift now to the book, to "Jihadi Culture: The Art and the Social Practices of Militant Islamists." And I want to get into what it is, how it's constructed, and the role that it plays for these groups-- the glue, as you just termed it. And on the very first page, you write, "Militancy"—jihadi militancy-- "is about more than bombs and doctrines. It's also about rituals, customs, and dress codes. It's about music, films, and storytelling. It's about sports, jokes, and food."

00:12:51 And when I close my eyes and I imagine an ISIS fighter and an Al Qaeda fighter, that's not what I'm thinking of. And so I'm curious sort of how you... I mean, in terms of this book, how you define culture, and sort of the walls that you put around it, and then how you are able to sort of peek into this, into their world to sort of get a sense of all these different aspects that you talk about.

00:13:15 Thomas Hegghammer: Right. Well, let me say, first of all, that... I am aware that some people might, when they see... when they kind of hear quotes like this, and when they see me and others studying this kind of softer side of jihadism, that it might be viewed as romanticizing the movement or glorifying it, or glossing over the... their barbarous acts, and so on. And I am aware of that, that it can be viewed in that way.

00:13:54 So I want to say at the outset that... The objective of this exercise, the reason why I'm looking into this thing, is certainly not to glorify or romanticize these people. Rather, it is an effort to understand them better so that we can reduce the problem, so that we can fight these groups better, to put it bluntly.

00:14:26 And so... and I would argue that this inquiry, you know, it's part of a... It's a type of inquiry that people have done previously with actors or

countries that we have disliked. Studies of Nazi Germany, for example. Studies of... There's a famous book, "The Chrysanthemum and the Sword," about the, kind of, the culture of Japan written just after the Second World War. There is an intellectual tradition for exploring the culture of our enemies, and that's, I think, where this book fits.

00:15:10 Now... What the book does is explore what I think is a new... an unexplored dimension of militant activity. Up until now, most studies of jihadism-- and, in fact, of other militant groups, as well-- have fallen into one of two categories. They've either been on things relating to operations-- the attacks or the organizational structures, their fundraising techniques, and that sort of thing, the functional stuff-- or they have been about doctrine-- the doctrines of the groups, sort of the core ideas motivating their fight, and the, kind of the core message in their recruitment propaganda.

00:16:04 But there is a lot more to their activity than this. There's notably all this stuff that I call culture wedged somewhere in the middle. It's neither clearly functional... I mean, there's nothing obviously functional about poetry or listening to music, yet they do it a lot. Also, it's not clearly doctrinal. You can articulate a recruitment message in plain text. You don't have to do it in a song or in poetry. So what this book does is explore this kind of cultural dimension that has not been explored before.

00:16:45 So... and I've already given you some of the... kind of a hint at what's the sort of defining characteristic of jihadi culture, in my view, which is this idea of superfluosity that... And in the book, I try to offer kind of a more academic definition, which is to say that these are products and practices that do something other than fill a basic function, military function.

00:17:13 So it's... so it's the... It's the music in the song, or it's the cadence or the rhyme in the poetry. And the question, you know, then becomes, what does this stuff do? Why... In theory, you could... A group can produce a recruitment message in terse prose-- dry, concise language. But very few groups do. They wrap it in... Add other things like music or poetry, or, or put it on a photo montage with special iconography. These frills and

decorations is what culture is. And in the book, I try to find out what it does.

00:18:01

Noah Rauch: And the superfluous practices, this isn't unique to jihadi groups.

Thomas Hegghammer: Absolutely not. I think you find it...Well, you will find it in any human group. Any social group will have a set of products and practices that are not directly functional. And... You know, and there are... We look at sort of military organizations of all kinds. There are certain types of cultural activities and genres that recur.

00:18:33

Music, for example, you find in Al Qaeda and Islamic State, and all these jihadi groups. You also find it in the far right movement. You also find it in the extreme left. You find it in our own militaries, not the least. Both in the... kind of in the formal way, in the orchestra that most Western militaries have, and in the, in the fact that many soldiers listen to music, you know, when they're off-duty, and sometimes even in the field, when they're driving tanks, et cetera. So there are... There's a lot of kind of cross-movement... Comparative, interesting comparative aspects to this topic.

00:19:18

Noah Rauch: So we'll get to the, you know, sort of positing some ideas about the role that some of this culture plays for these groups in a little bit. But I want to start with the fact that on the surface... You know, these practices draw upon sort of the existing Muslim culture, sort of cutting across the board. So I want to know if you could speak to some of that.

Thomas Hegghammer: Yes. This is one of the main findings of the book, and one of the things I did not expect. When I started doing this... Let me say first, say, though, why I started doing this, how I got into the project. And it was basically because I had... After many years of studying jihadis, it started dawning on me that they were doing things that were unexpected.

- 00:20:05 Two things struck me in particular. One was, you know, this contrast between the hard and the soft, between their brutal image on the one hand and the soft activities, like poetry and weeping-- I'll come back to that—they weep a lot, the other. And... Also, this unexpected thing that... We are dealing with hunted men who have limited resources and have security forces and police coming after them.
- 00:20:41 You'd expect these people to be utility maximizers, to spend all their time doing very useful things, like preparing operations and training and collecting weapons and so on. But they don't. They "waste" a lot of time on these cultural activities. That's puzzling. So, so... and... and.... and this... And so this whole project's inquiry has kind of been an exploration of these kind of "useless" things that they do. And they do a lot of odd things, like the weeping I mentioned, and the dream interpretation, et cetera.
- 00:21:15 Now, that's just the background. And so, and going into this, I had certain expectations. I expected to see a lot of kind of strange practices. Why did I expect that? Well, because there are many sort of radical groups and cults out there that do strange things. Think of the Ku Klux Klan and the cross burnings, et cetera. We also know that gangs, organized crime groups, have elaborate, you know, sometimes sadistic initiation rites, for example. I was expecting to see some of this in jihadi groups.
- 00:21:54 But I didn't. What I found was that most of the things, almost everything that they do, all their social practices, rituals, the elements of jihadi culture, they're all... They're not unique to the jihadis. Take the... kind of the rituals, for example-- they're all orthodox practices of, that you find also among conservative, religious, but non-violent Muslims. And many of the genres of the jihadi culture, like the poetry or the anasheed-- these sort of religious hymns-- are cultural genres that go centuries back.
- 00:22:43 There's a historical depth to this. And many of these things that strike, perhaps, non-Muslims as puzzling, like the interest in dream interpretation and so on, these are actually quite common among non-militant Muslims, as well. So I found, so the jihadis basically... They do

mainly things that also other non-militant Muslims do. And this is important.

00:23:11 First of all, let me say that this is not to say that jihadi culture is equal to or is the same as the kind of... You know, say, orthodox or mainstream Islamic cultures. It's different, because the content of the culture is different. But I'm talking about the genre. So, the form of these cultural elements. So they do poetry, as do non-militant Muslims, but the texts of the poems revolve around jihad and fighting, et cetera. Same thing with the songs. So the genre of anasheed is the same, but the lyrics are specifically... You know, are more martial than others.

00:23:56 But the point here is that they are not innovating very much, and that... There is an apparent authenticity to their culture. And I think this is crucial for understanding the appeal. Jihadists can make a reasonably credible claim, especially to young, relatively uneducated audiences, especially, perhaps, among diaspora Muslims-- who kind of feel culturally dislocated, detached from their parents' culture, and not quite included in their hosts' culture, and so on-- the jihadists can make a credible claim to publics like these to be representing true Islamic culture.

00:24:47 Because they can say, "Look, we can do anasheed. "Well, look, see here in the text? They did it 1,400 years ago. See the poetry that we have? It's very similar to what you can read in this 1,000-year-old text." And so on. They are... It's a backward-looking culture that makes a strong claim to authenticity, and this, I think, is key to understanding their appeal.

00:25:12 Noah Rauch: And new recruits also don't have to give up their cultural identity to join. They already sort of speak the language, so, you know...

Thomas Hegghammer: That's right, and one of... A good way of understanding this specificity is to compare the jihadis with other, non-Islamist extremist subcultures. Take, I mean, like, the skinhead movement. Most of the elements of skinhead culture is, are new. They represent break... you know, a break, sort of an esthetic break with sort of mainstream culture. And things that they do, like, they wear Dr.

Martens boots, and they wear, you know, black shoelaces until they have spilled blood, then they can put on red shoelaces.

00:26:02 This sort of thing, you know, these are modern inventions. There is no historical depth whatsoever to these cultural practices. This is completely different with the jihadis, where they can... they can... There is historical depth to many of their... Not all, but many of their practices. But let me add here, too, that this is not to say that their culture... is a copy of a historical kind of martial Islamic culture. It's a modern thing.

00:26:35 There never has... there never was in the past a kind of a jihadi culture like this. It's a modern medley of old genres, elements of jihadi, jihadi culture. But the fact that the elements are old, I think, gives the movement an advantage in its recruitment.

Noah Rauch: Well, let's look at an example of sort of an old element. Cole, maybe you can set this up. The poetry, slide one, which we can show on the screen in a minute.

00:27:06 Cole Bunzel: Sure. So one of the things that I look at a lot in my work-- and I focus primarily on ideological aspects of the jihadi movement-- is their appeal to doctrine through poetry. So a lot of the doctrinal works that ISIS produces, that ISIS leaders produce-- the same goes with Al Qaeda-- they're peppered with poetry. A lot of it is their own poetry. Ayman al-Zawahiri, for example, the current leader of Al Qaeda, he often will, in his speeches, just kind of almost extemporaneously, it seems, like, recite poetry that he is authoring. Most of it isn't very memorable. I don't know anybody who's taken an interest in him, in particular.

00:27:48 But ISIS fighters, even on the street, it's not uncommon to see them in videos reciting poetry. So this is an example of... This was from last summer, when ISIS was losing Mosul, and this is a fighter in Mosul who is threatening the United States, and he's basically signaling that "We, the Islamic community, ultimately we will triumph." And to do that, he quotes from a poem which is by a seventh-century, or at least it is attributed to a seventh-century classical Arabic poet named Hassan ibn

Thabit. And you can see its quite militant and triumphalist message.
Should we...

00:28:36

Noah Rauch: Yeah, we can play it.

Cole Bunzel: Maybe we can't.

Noah Rauch: Maybe we can't play it.

(recorded Arabic singing playing)

Noah Rauch: (inaudible)

(recording stops)

Noah Rauch: So... we'll get to that in a second.

(laughter)

Cole Bunzel: But the thing... I'll just mention one other thing. The reason that this particular poem caught on was that it was... it was first... It was first recited by the official spokesman of the Islamic State, a man named Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, in his very last audio message before he was killed in August 2016. And so a lot of militants in the group started reciting this poem and referring to it.

00:29:21

Noah Rauch: So I'm curious, because in the book, you talk about how poetry is... sort of glorifies the fantasy life of jihad, sort of in a very specific way. So I'm curious, sort of, now that the narrative has shifted--

they've lost all this land, they've lost their so-called caliphate, you know-- how does... how would poetry sort of shift accordingly?

Thomas Hegghammer: Was it...

Noah Rauch: And I throw that to either of you.

00:29:43 Thomas Hegghammer: Yeah, I mean... The poetry can contain any type of message. So it will reflect whatever the group is... you know, wants to say at that point. And now we're seeing... Now the Islamic State is undergoing momentous changes, and that is reflected in the culture. It's reflected in their poetry, in their music, and in their iconography, and their films-- everything.

00:30:11 And it's an illustration of how the culture is a window, can be a window into kind of more... You know, the more substantive political changes happening in a group. And so... And through... and sometimes, you know, the culture can help us find out things about the group that is not... that are not made explicit in the texts.

00:30:40 So, you know, in the case of poetry, it can be explicit. You know, the content or the tone will be... will be... What they're trying to say is clear. But sometimes you have to infer from sort of the iconography we're seeing, or the tone of the music that, you know, that there is pessimism, for example, or that there is... That the atmosphere in the group has shifted. And so the culture is a source of intelligence, basically, in some cases, or a source of insight into how the movement or how the group is doing, and what it is thinking.

00:31:25 Noah Rauch: Well, actually, that next... That next piece is a nice segue into that. Because this sort of looks at... offers some insight into sort of the shifting narrative for them. So if we can play the second one. And, Cole, if you want to set this one up.

Cole Bunzel: Yeah, so, I think, the important thing to understand about... There's a genre of Arabic poetry which is metered, and those 16 classical Arabic meters are adhered to by most all jihadi poets. And the same sort of meter structure is also adopted in what are called the anasheed, or the kind of hymns or chants that they use, which is... Essentially, they're a cappella, because they don't believe that instruments are allowed in music.

00:32:09 So in that next slide that we were just listening to, by way of preview before, this is a new nasheed, a new chant that has been released by the Islamic State that is essentially reflecting on the fact that it has, in fact, lost territory, and is emphasizing a certain... a theme of resilience. The idea is that we are remaining, something that has been actually its catchphrase since 2007. So they're hitting on that theme. And you can hear in the music this almost kind of elegiac mood. So...

00:32:53 (recorded singing in Arabic playing)

00:33:29 (recording fades out)

Cole Bunzel: Another thing that's important to note is that just a couple of years ago, you would never have heard a nasheed from the Islamic State that sounded anything like this. They were all very triumphalist, talking about victory, about the expansion of the group. The most... The most common nasheed that people listened to and was found in all the Islamic State's videos, or many of their videos, was one that's called "Dawn Has Arisen." And it is incredibly catchy. It's actually quite disturbing how catchy it is, because for months, I couldn't get it out of my head.

(laughter)

00:34:09 Cole Bunzel: So I'm actually quite glad that they've moved on to something more like this. But what's interesting there, though, is that you

can actually kind of narrate the history of this group and this larger movement, in fact, by means of this cultural media.

Noah Rauch: Well, that catchiness speaks to these... You know, this use in recruitment and retention and motivation of their fighters.

00:34:32 Thomas Hegghammer: Yes. The music is fundamental to the culture. It's... and it's everywhere. It's in all their audiovisual productions. Like, there's not a single... I don't recall seeing a single propaganda video that does not have a nasheed in it. We know that they listen to it in all kinds of situations-- while they're training, when they're in the process of carrying out an operation, when they're resting in their safe houses, when they're driving cars, when they're sitting around the campfire. It's sort of omnipresent.

00:35:12 It's also developed into an entire kind of music industry, with thousands of tunes circulating online and with... And you have soldiers kind of discussing online and in real life, discussing, you know, the latest productions by various groups, just like other kids discuss the latest pop songs. So it's a very important part of jihadi culture.

00:35:47 And it's worth noting here that it seems to me that music is also the largest common denominator, cultural common denominator across militant groups more generally. All radical groups have music, have their own music, and in most of these groups, the music seems to play a very important role.

00:36:13 In fact, as I mentioned earlier, it also seems to be quite prominent in our own military. So basically, we can extend this to say, you know, in all military organizations, music seems to be tremendously important. So we're dealing here with both something that's specific to the movement, and something that's fundamentally human.

- 00:36:39 Cole Bunzel: It might also be worth noting that we have some record of jihadis saying that this is useful in recruitment. So Anwar al-Awlaki, the American former Al Qaeda member in Yemen, he's on record saying that "it's important that we do a lot of these anasheed"-- I think he even used the word-- "so we can promote a kind of 'jihad culture.'" That's exactly what Thomas is talking about.
- 00:37:09 So it's probably the case that with a lot of people who are drawn to this movement, it's not the finer points of ideology that bring them there. It's the music that conveys parts of that ideology. That's probably some of their first contact with this whole... with this general movement.
- 00:37:29 Thomas Hegghammer: Yes, and you're touching there on a very, very significant point. That things like music are... They seem to be instruments for manipulating emotions for the end of recruitment and retention of personnel. They're using music and other cultural things to draw people into the movement and to keep them inside the movement.
- 00:37:59 And the mechanism here, to use a social science term, is probably by evoking emotions, to create "positive feelings" in the recruit so that when the... The person sort of enjoys being with his fellow fighters.
- 00:38:24 And I think one of the strongest, or one of the, yeah, clearest indications that this has an important recruitment function, is that when you look at the chronology of a typical induction into a radical group, the recruitment process, from, you know, the first encounter between a recruit and someone who's already a member of the group, and they're kind of... They're increasing social interaction until the person is kind of a full-fledged member, we'll see in general-- it's not always the case-- but in general, this audiovisual material comes first.
- 00:39:12 The recruit is exposed to this stuff first, and then only later at the texts that outline the doctrine. The audiovisual material is frontloaded in the induction process. And I think that's for a reason. I think it's because, you know, the groups have understood that it's easier to lure people in with things like this than with dry books. So it's kind of... it's sort of... It's the light drugs that get people into, you know, a stronger addiction.

- 00:39:49 Noah Rauch: And is this a relatively recent occurrence, or do you see this going back, you know, to the '90s and the '80s beforehand, as well?
- Thomas Hegghammer: Oh, I think we can, we can trace it back. Although...
- Cole Bunzel: We know that Osama bin Laden himself was in a nasheed group in Saudi Arabia, so...
- 00:40:10 Thomas Hegghammer: Yes, yes, and we have... We have documents similar to the one that you mentioned, where al-Awlaki, Anwar al-Awlaki, is talking about using or instrumentalizing culture. You have similar indications from the 1980s. So Nelly Lahoud, who wrote one of the chapters in the book, she mentions this sort of shopping list from one of the Arab Afghan organizations in Afghanistan in the '80s. And they kind of list, you know, cassette tapes with anasheed, you know, for the... for use towards recruitment, so...
- 00:40:54 But I think, though, that they have learned... The jihadis themselves, the recruiters, the leaders, have come to understand better the power of the culture over time. They kind of discovered it as they have gone along. And one of the reasons I can say that is that-- and here's another important finding in the book-- which is that the culture has become more liberal, or more elaborate, over time.
- 00:41:28 In the '80s, it was much more kind of muted, toned-down. The music wasn't as elaborate as what you just heard, in sort of multiple voices and so on. In fact, in the '80s, there was even debates within the community about whether they should be, you know, dealing with anasheed at all. And same with images.
- 00:41:50 There was debate... You had some jihadi magazines in the '80s that would have images and others that would not, because they considered it, you

know, you know... sinful to have too much images. Whereas, we've gone from that situation, where people used audiovisual stuff with hesitation, to the situation today, which is just this big sound and light show that is jihadi propaganda. It's all... I mean, it's almost all audiovisual, and it's very elaborate.

00:42:23

Not only that, they have incorporated cultural elements from their enemies. They've incorporated things from Western pop culture. And they've even incorporated things from... elements, from, like, their archenemies inside the Muslim world, the Sufis. So the weeping, for example, is something that mainly comes from Sufism. Or the way they treat martyrs is reminiscent of the way Sufis talk about saints, and so on.

00:42:51

So the point here is that... This shows the culture must do something important for them. Why? Because these are... these are not... These are not the... These people don't normally compromise on doctrine. So, you know, at the beginning, they had doctrinal principle, which said you should be reserved, you should be... You know, you should not deal too much with music and imagery and so on. But they've compromised on those principles to make the culture more colorful. And because these are not the compromising kind, normally, it must mean that it does something very important and useful for them.

00:43:38

Cole Bunzel: On that score, one thing that you see not just jihadi scholars but Salafi scholars talking about is the fact that you shouldn't be listening to anasheed more than you are reciting the Quran. But I have a strong suspicion that there are a lot of jihadis out there who listen to anasheed more than they recite the Quran, because... On the other hand, there is also a group within ISIS, within the ISIS media realm, that is responsible for Quranic recitation. So they don't necessarily see it all as kind of at odds.

00:44:15

Thomas Hegghammer: Yeah, and I think... I mean... Audiovisual products occupy now a larger... I think larger proportion of the intellectual production of jihadi groups. So I put it a little sort of tongue-in-cheek. I mean, I think the jihadi elders worry as much about young jihadis not reading enough books as we do about our children today. The young

jihadis are mainly just... They're not reading the thick tomes anymore. They're just listening to anasheed and watching videos.

00:44:53

Noah Rauch: Well, let's see one of those.

Cole Bunzel: Just one brief point is, I read a lot of the different debates between Al Qaeda and ISIS, because they're often at each other's throats, at least so to speak. And one of the arguments that you see a lot of the ISIS... Excuse me, a lot of the Al Qaeda figures bringing up, is the fact that, "Oh, ISIS is obsessed with this Hollywood culture."

00:45:19

That's the term that they use, this "Hollywood culture," and they're misleading the youth by means of luring them in with this sound and light show. So it could actually become a kind of fault line in the future when it comes to this ongoing dispute between Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Noah Rauch: Well, let's watch a sound and light show.

Cole Bunzel: Maybe we can do the fifth one.

Noah Rauch: Yeah, I was thinking that same...

(inaudible, A.V. system buzzes loudly)

Cole Bunzel: So, and just by way of...

(music plays briefly)

Cole Bunzel: Okay.

00:45:53 (music resumes, laughter)

Lyrics: Brothers in Marawi, diamonds and pearls and palaces,
are waiting the man of Tawhid, Virgins and wine,
neverending time and gardens with rivers beneath,
Holding firm to the rope of Allah
are the brothers in Marawi
Engraved in their heart is
the love for the Lord,
and for him they continue to bleed.

00:46:30 (clip ends)

Cole Bunzel: Anasheed in English don't quite have the same effect, in my opinion. You probably agree.

Thomas Hegghammer: I agree. And that's why they also... they're a tiny proportion of the overall production of anasheed. They're quite rare compared to the Arabic ones. You also have it in other languages. You have it in Urdu and Pashto, Dari, Russian, Chechen. In every language that jihadis speak, there is anasheed. But Arabic is the lingua franca of the movement.

00:47:10 Noah Rauch: But the fact that it's in English says something, right? In terms of its recruitment, in terms of who it's speaking to, in terms of what its goals are. And you see the high production value. You see, you know, the aerial footage in the beginning. You see sound effects, visual effects. And you also see common sort of tropes of jihadi sort of visual culture in terms of fighters who are dressed in black, masked, and things of that sort, which seems to be pretty common.

- 00:47:33 Thomas Hegghammer: Yes, that's right. So there is a jihadi iconography, and there is a jihadi kind of sartorial style. You know, there's variation. I mean, the jihadi iconography has evolved somewhat over time. And with the clothing, it varies somewhat across regions. So jihadis in the West wear different... generally speaking, different clothes than the ones in Yemen, for example, or those in South Asia.
- 00:48:12 So, but... About this iconography, I will say that, you know, it's a good example of how we can extract insights that are not made explicit in text. Because when you look at their iconography, there's sort of a... there's sort of a... There's some common denominators. In particular, this sort of sense of... This sort of romanticism and chivalry. These are keywords that, I think, that stand out from many of their, you know, photo montages and films, et cetera.
- 00:48:55 It's clear, to me at least, that, you know, that these guys are, they're trying to cast themselves as knights in shining... Not in shining armor, but as chivalrous knights and chivalrous fighters that are defending suffering Muslim women and children around the world, and that they see themselves as kind of modern-day... As a continuation of, or modern-day representatives of the first Muslims, of the Prophet Mohammad's army.
- 00:49:31 And so it's... The point is, it's a backward-looking worldview. And the iconography reveals this fundamentally sort of nostalgic atmosphere and a backward-looking worldview. And you would not necessarily understand that or capture that aspect of their mentality if you did not study culture.
- 00:50:00 Cole Bunzel: Some of the sounds that are very common in these anasheed include things like... Like hoofs or horses running, the idea-- even though there aren't any horses that these guys are on in Iraq and Syria-- that's the image that they have in their minds, of the early Islamic fighters in the Arabian Desert who have swords, and you hear that (imitates sword scraping) a lot, as well, in addition to, of course, some gunfire, which is modern. So there's a mix of modern and pre-modern, but it's all kind of put together in a sort of pre-modern vessel of culture. That's the way I look at it.

00:50:44

Thomas Hegghammer: Yeah. That's another good illustration. We wouldn't capture that quest for chivalry if we did not hear the hoofs and hear the sound of swords clashing. If we only read their texts, we wouldn't capture this.

Noah Rauch: You know, I'm curious, because we're running out of time-- I want to get... You talked a bit about the sort of emotional persuasion in terms of the "why" of this culture and the role that that plays. But you also talk in the book about sort of signaling theory, and sort of that aspect in terms of helping them be able to sort of judge outsiders coming into that. And so I want to know if you can speak to that aspect of the "why," and then we'll sort of wrap up in terms of why it's important to understand this.

00:51:30

Thomas Hegghammer: Sure. Yeah, so the book doesn't go very deep into the why. I mean, the question of what the culture does for the group, why they do it. It's more a descriptive exercise. But I propose a few hypotheses, and one of them is that the culture is, as I've already alluded to, they're emotional persuasion tools, that they complement kind of the persuasive work done by the doctrine, and that it, you know, helps recruiters persuade recruits to join. Kind of... they seduce recruits with cultural... sort of cultural technology, if you will, of cultural products that sort of... That gives emotional stimuli, or makes the recruit feel good, and so he joins.

00:52:38

And this is... I mean, this is an important insight, if it is true. Because I think most kind of ideal-type kind of models of recruitment are different. They presuppose a cognitive process. You know, people have... You ask experts, you know, "Why do people become jihadis?" And some people will say, "Well, it's exposure to radical Islamic ideology." Well, that is a... That is an argument that involves... Presupposes a cognitive mechanism, that people are exposed to a radical Islamic text, and they are persuaded by mere force of argument that this is something they should follow.

- 00:53:30 Cognitive-- involves, you know, the intellect. Similarly, if we say, "Oh, they do it because of Western foreign policy," well, that also presupposes a kind of a cognitive rational process, because it's suggesting that people join groups to rectify this kind of geopolitical imbalance or humiliation. Or, you know, if you say, "People become jihadis because they're poor or they're economically marginalized," same thing-- it's presupposing a kind of a process whereby people join in order to kind of improve their social status or their kind of...
- 00:54:09 Or change the government so that at one time in the future, their economic situation will improve. But what this cultural, kind of emotional persuasion hypothesis suggests is, it's perhaps not only about cognition. It's also about, you know, emotional stimuli. That people join in part because they... in part because of the emotional stimuli they experience in the process of joining or in the process of being part of the group.
- 00:54:39 Put very simply, they join because they like it. They like the feeling they get in the group. And they may not think very far ahead about where it is all going. They just like the feeling they get when they're on the front line and when they're in this group, the feeling of being part of a vanguard, the feeling of dealing with comrades, you know, singing songs or discussing dreams, whatever. These are... Short-term emotional stimuli might play a more important role than we previously believed.
- 00:55:08 Now, as for kind of the signaling theory hypothesis, it's a little bit more complex. The idea is that... It's essentially that the jihadi culture can be a resource for signs of commitment-- that if somebody is able to learn a lot of jihadi culture, is able to learn a lot of anasheed by heart or of poetry by heart, or learn the finer points of jihadi culture, then he will be seen by his comrades as being more invested in the cause than someone who hasn't.
- 00:55:47 So it's kind of a sign of your willingness to invest time and mental energy into the cause, and so it's a... So having a very elaborate, rich culture makes it easier to screen people for commitment, because you can more easily tell who is willing to take the time to learn the poems and who is not. If you don't have that rich culture, you can't distinguish between

people on that basis anymore. So those are the two main kind of models for understanding the function of jihadi culture.

00:56:28 Noah Rauch: And so in conclusion, both those models have implications in terms of counterterrorism, how you fight groups like this. And so I wonder if you can sort of speak to what we can... You know, ultimately what's the importance of understanding this work, understanding this culture, and how it can be used to ultimately fight these groups.

00:56:43 Thomas Hegghammer: Yeah, I think the biggest insight here is that emotions play a more important role than previously believed. And it can have... I mean, and this, I think, has implications for a range of different aspects of counterterrorism practices, from... from how you... from how you design an information campaign, for example, or a kind of a... or counternarrative.

00:57:11 It suggests that maybe it's not enough to just provide, you know, theological arguments for why what they're doing is kind of wrong. It's not enough to simply try and persuade them cognitively about... you know, to desist from this or to not get involved.

00:57:34 You may also need to appeal to their emotions, perhaps by, for example, showing graphic imagery of the consequences of terrorist attacks, just like you have in some countries pictures of, you know... graphic pictures of the consequences of smoking, like an open... a lung that's... a black lung, for example, stuff like that, to shock people and to give sort of what we call priming, get them to associate that thing with something disgusting.

00:58:08 And you can perhaps consider similar things for information campaigns. Also, it would suggest that the... Relatedly, the problem may not be exclusively in the doctrine, or in the ideology in the kind of sense of doctrine, but as much in the... in the kind of esthetics around it. So it's not enough to just... For example, if you want to get rid of jihadi material online, it may not be enough to just get rid of the most radical treatises. You may also need to take away the anasheed of the Islamic State.

00:58:51 And another... You know, another application of this is, you know, to be able to enable, well, intelligence analysts, or police officers in the field, to recognize jihadi culture when they see it, and, conversely, to not... to not confuse non-militant Islamic practice with jihadists, to not sort of harm innocents.

00:59:30 When they find a computer and there's an anasheed on it, you know, if they don't know what's... Because anasheed are used by many Muslims, you don't want to falsely accuse someone or suspect someone of being a militant. So the knowledge of jihadi culture is the difference between a successful intel operation and a discrimination case. There are lots of kind of practical implications there.

00:59:58 Cole Bunzel: I would just add that not all implications are, perhaps, all positive. Some might be depressing, particularly if jihadism isn't just a certain set of ideas and a certain number of groups that you can eliminate and that you can... that you can contradict, and it's something much larger, and it's a culture, and it unites its entire transnational movement around shared practices, it's very difficult them to remove from the internet, then you have something that is an enemy that is much more difficult to defeat.

01:00:31 So hopefully there's room for positive thinking in the exercise, but to me, it's part of this entire observation that you noted at the beginning, that this is a movement that has just mushroomed for the past 15 years. And there still isn't any great explanation for why that is.

Noah Rauch: Well, thank you, you two. I want to open it up for questions now from the audience. We only ask that you just wait for a microphone. We have some staff here who can bring it to you. We have a question up in the front right here.

01:01:14 Man: Thank you. What's the average age of a recruit, and is the material tailored to different age groups, demographics? Like, within a given country in which they're recruiting, for instance?

Thomas Hegghammer: Right. Well, in general, we're dealing with men in their early 20s. There's some variation. Some contingents have a slightly different age profile. But if you were to create a big data set of all the world's jihadis, I think the median age would be in the low 20s somewhere. You know, it's the same... it's the same demographic that you find in militaries, or also in kind of perpetrators of crime-- young men.

01:02:02 And it's a good question about tailoring. I don't know the answer. It's possible that... I mean, one thing we've seen is that the recruits to... foreign fighter recruits to the Islamic State, the Western foreign fighters recruits to the Islamic State in recent years, have been very young, or younger than average-- you know, often in the teens, late, late teens. And it is possible that some of the things that the Islamic State has done on the cultural side, you know, reflects this, reflects an attempt to reach those people.

01:02:45 We've seen, for example, that their iconography has incorporated more themes from the gaming industry, from, like, from computer games and from Hollywood films, Hollywood action films. There's this famous sort of copy... Sort of jihadi version of "The Punisher" and the jihadi version of the Call of Duty kind of logo. Those sorts of things, you know, might suggest, you know, that they are tailoring their products to a younger audience.

01:03:26 Man: If I could just do a quick follow-up. Apart from online means of recruitment and propaganda, how else is recruitment done? Like, I guess, in the Middle East, for instance, or in states in Europe? I mean, are there, like-- totally tongue-in-cheek-- like, career fairs for jihadis? Like, are they actually on the ground in person, in neighborhoods recruiting?

- 01:03:49 Thomas Hegghammer: Yeah, so, there's been a lot of talk about kind of internet—online radicalization and lone wolves, et cetera. But I don't think... I think we should not overestimate the role of the internet in this regard. I think what... What you have in most cases is interplay between the online and the offline world.
- 01:04:19 So, you know, people meet in real life, interact in real life, but they will use things they get from the internet in their social interaction. So they will download a jihadi film. They will watch the film together in a room. Or they will down... You know, they will hang out during the day, and they'll go home. And at home, each of them will, you know, listen to anasheed and things. And they'll come back the next day and will just go, "Oh, did you hear that one? That was a great one. Did you see that film?" So these processes reinforce one another.
- 01:04:56 Now, specifically, the... Kind of the practicalities of recruitment vary from country to country, context to context. Because it often depends on... On how strictly that government is policing the radical community. Sometimes the policing is lighter, so they can use things like mosques or more obvious kind of arenas. And other places, there's more surveillance, more... Maybe that country kind of makes sure that every single mosque is kind of under control. Then they will migrate to other arenas.
- 01:05:42 So the kind of the details of the recruitment exercise is contingent on government strategy. So we want can't really generalize there. But the basic point is that there is usually interaction between online and offline.
- Man: Thank you.
- Noah Rauch: Right here in the front.
- 01:06:05 Man: Thank you. You both commented that you had no great explanation for this movement, but when you talk to these jihadis who are doing their terror, they're very open about saying that their inspiration came from

the Quran, and when they're committing their terrorist acts, they are crying out, "Allahu Akbar." They're not saying, "God bless America." And so shouldn't we be looking more towards Islam, the Quran, and the Hadiths to explain their motivations?

01:06:47 Thomas Hegghammer: We can't explain variation with a constant. That's the problem. So the Quran has been around for a very long time, and so many of these kind of... These beliefs are old, and yet the... this increase is new. So looking to those things alone will not help us explain that change. I mean, I would agree with you that we should take religion seriously. We should take their declared motivations very seriously.

01:07:25 And I'm not among those who say that religion is... that their religious beliefs are irrelevant, that it's all about geopolitics or economic marginalization, and so on. I'm very... I'm all for... and doing this jihadi culture project has convinced me even more of the importance of their religious beliefs and not these kinds of... The religious emotions that are evoked by the culture.

01:07:55 Cole Bunzel: I'm largely on the same page as Thomas.

Man: But you're saying what we need in order to explain these changes in the movement, but when we look at Islam historically, hasn't violence pretty much characterized Islam, this quest for a worldwide caliphate?

01:08:21 Thomas Hegghammer: Well, Islam, like other main religions, is not a... is not a pacifist religion. The representatives of Islam have used violence for all kinds of political and other reasons over the centuries. But, still, there's variation in the... in the amount of violence used, in the direction it's been, you know, used, and so on.

01:08:51 What characterizes, you know, this jihadism that we're dealing with here is something quite new, the sort of... the, you know, transnational activity-- people, you know, moving across countries and, you know,

planning, you know, an attack in one country and attacking in another part of the world and migrating from one continent to another to be foreign fighters alongside other Muslim militants, and so on.

01:09:23 This sort of transnational emergence is quite new. And also some of the tactics are new. The suicide bombings, for example, is something quite new. There are all these sort of... several new things here that I think we can't really explain by the old textual sources.

01:09:46 Cole Bunzel: In fact, if you look at Islamic history, while a lot of the religious writing does indicate that this ideal of a unitary caliphate that would prosecute jihad until the world was converted to Islam, that's very much a constant theme, but the political and social reality of the Islamic world was nothing like the theory. So you have, ever since the eighth century, really, no united caliphate ruling the Islamic world.

01:10:16 You don't have that ideal being carried out whatsoever. And so what I tend to see ISIS as, the jihadis more in general as, is this kind of reaction by a minority against the broader Islamic majority. It's a lot more like the Wahhabi movement of the 18th century, that when it arose, it essentially deemed the majority of the Islamic world to be apostates because they weren't fulfilling certain core theological values.

01:10:46 And so... But they stressed different themes that they weren't fulfilling. They weren't trying to restore the caliphate. So a lot of the doctrinal content that the jihadis refer to is very much there. They're not making it up. But the fact that they're trying to implement it against Muslims in a particular way is unique.

Noah Rauch: We have time for one more question. Maybe in the... yes.

01:11:20 Woman: I know in American conversation especially, there's a large reaction where violence as a reaction is an actual idea that politicians have thrown out, so going and bombing ISIS, having that kind of thing in

our rhetoric. Do you think that responding with violence, especially with targeted killings, has a positive or negative effect on these kinds of movements?

01:11:46 Thomas Hegghammer: I think it's impossible to formulate a kind of universal, kind of timeless answer to that. It depends, is the short answer. It depends on the nature of the target, you know, how large it is, how dependent it is on its leadership, et cetera. And it depends on the type of military intervention you have in mind.

01:12:12 One of the big problems I have with this general... with this debate about, is it the Western foreign... is it Western foreign policy? It's almost like people don't understand-- is it Western foreign policy or not? But of course, Western foreign policy is a whole... is a whole range of different things, a lot of different types of interventions.

And what is the West anyway? I mean, it's a bunch of different countries. And sometimes they act together, and sometimes it's one country doing something smart and another time it's another country doing something stupid. It's sort of a whole range of different things. And the same, and so it's...

01:12:53 We can't say that Western foreign policy has that effect or this effect. The same thing with, you know, military force. We can't say that it has that effect or this effect. It depends on what type of force and the... and the situation or nature of the target.

01:13:12 Now, of course, you know, the... The... Usually, the logic behind targeted killings and drones is that... is that you need leaders and a cadre of organizers in order to produce violence. So in a given situation, or a given country, there may be a lot of discontent or unhappy people or anger, but you... but that does not necessarily translate into terrorism, because you need people who can kind of translate that anger into practical actions.

- 01:13:54 And so... For example, in very brutal dictatorships, typically, you know, people are extremely unhappy, extremely angry, really, if you could get an honest answer from them. Yet there is little terrorism. Why? Because the government has taken away those people who have the ability to produce violence, organize this anger into violence.
- 01:14:20 It's the same logic with sort of targeted strikes. It's the idea that a disproportionate amount of the jihadi terrorism that we get, you know, is produced by cadres of kind of organized... small organized groups. So it's not the Muslim world acting in rage. It's small groups of people who are plotting things. And the idea... so then the idea is, if you can take away those people, if you can eliminate those organizing structures, you will get a relatively high... a larger effect. You will reduce their capability to inflict violence quite a lot with relatively little force.
- 01:15:03 That is the logic behind it. You take away the organizers and the leaders. And of course, the question is... the problem... It becomes complicated, because often when you do this, you don't just kill the leader. You will kill ten or 50 or 100 other people in the process. There's collateral damage. Or there is distortion of the act.
- 01:15:30 So, you know, if... so there's a... You know, there will be... So the target group or movement will have an interest in exaggerating the collateral damage, or perhaps lying about what happens. Say, "Oh, they bombed a mosque," when it wasn't really a mosque, or a school when it wasn't really a school. So when you intervene, when you do a targeted strike, it may be perceived as something completely different in the local population.
- 01:15:58 And as a result, a lot of people, a lot more people in the local population, are angry and prone to joining the group. So here's the trade-off and the calculation-- you know, will that targeted strike kind of eliminate... have a... Will it reduce the capability of the group more than it increases it by fueling recruitment from below? And so in our militaries, they do it when they think... when they have done the calculus and think that the benefits will outweigh the cost.

01:16:42 Cole Bunzel: Another complication to this argument that I've heard from an expert on... who's been on the ground in Yemen dealing with the drone strikes there, which has been a territory that we've carried out numerous drone strikes, the fact is that by concentrating exclusively on Al Qaeda there, it's actually alienated Al Qaeda. So some people have decided to keep a distance from the group. And so there are all these other factors to take into account.

01:17:11 Noah Rauch: Well, with that complicating factor, we are far out of time. Thank you all very much for joining us. And please join me in thanking Cole and Thomas again.

(applause)