

‘Jihad’ as a Universalist Project in Comparative Perspective

MARA REDLICH REVKIN

Review of Darryl Li’s *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the
Challenge of Solidarity* (Stanford University Press, 2019)

Studies of “jihadism” have proliferated since 9/11 and the inception of the global war on terror in 2001. Since then, researchers with varying degrees of regional knowledge, language skills and methodological training have responded to a sudden increase in demand for experts on al-Qaeda, and the quality of the resulting research varies accordingly. Some publications in this growing field echoed and probably contributed to rising Islamophobia in the United States and Europe by identifying Islam as a cause of violent extremism. Other works were not explicitly Islamophobic but nonetheless treated “jihadist” armed groups as an exceptional and uniquely radical category—different from other types of ideologically motivated movements that have also used violence to achieve political objectives, such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), a heterodox Christian armed group in Uganda, and the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the United States.

In a provocative and deeply researched new book, Darryl Li argues that the concept of “jihadism” is not useful analytically and, worse, has contributed to the “demonization of Muslims.” *The*

Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity proposes an alternative: reframing the phenomenon known as “jihadism” as a type of “universalism,” which is a political or ideological project that claims to transcend individual differences, whether racial, national or cultural. The first half of the book presents an ethnographic and archival account of the several thousand Muslim volunteer fighters who traveled from countries as different as France, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, among many others, in the name of “jihad” to defend Muslims against mass atrocities during the 1992-1995 Bosnian War.

The second half of the book places the Bosnian jihad in comparative perspective with three other transnational phenomena that Li considers to be universalist projects: socialism in the states of the Non-Aligned Movement, United Nations peacekeeping and the network of global prisons created during the U.S.-led global war on terror. As Li acknowledges, there are important differences between jihad and these other “universalist” projects, particularly the heavy reliance in the latter on human-made nation-states and international law. At times, the

comparisons seem to reveal as many differences as they do similarities—for example, the comparison of jihad to a U.N. mission whose official mandate was to ensure conditions conducive to peace talks in Bosnia. Nonetheless, I agree with Li's core claim that a comparative approach to the study of jihad is more useful than an exceptionalist one.

Li's comparative study of these different universalist projects is an important contribution to empirical research on political violence and complements recent work by political scientists such as [Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood](#), who argue that ideology—across diverse contexts and belief systems—is an important explanatory variable in the mobilization of collective political action. In a related recent work criticizing exceptionalist interpretations of jihadism, [Stathis Kalyvas](#) classifies the so-called Islamic State as a “revolutionary group” that bears strategic and organizational similarities with Marxist insurgencies that emerged during the Cold War. Li's work and that of other comparatists calls into question the need for a specialized field of “[jihad studies](#)” singling out armed groups that purport to be inspired by Islam. The social sciences already offer empirical tools and analytic frameworks for comparison of political violence and collective action in diverse contexts. When jihadist groups are studied comparatively as one example of a broader universe of ideologically motivated movements, they turn out to be less unique than is often assumed.

It is true that, in some cases, “jihadist” armed groups adopt policies and institutions that are heavily shaped by their interpretation of Islam. I have found as much in my own [research](#) on the Islamic State's revenue-extracting policies in Syria—including its collection of “zakat,” a mandatory charitable

contribution specified in the Quran. All ideologically motivated armed groups are shaped by the content of their ideology, and there is value in identifying distinctive features that may stem from different belief systems, whether Islamist, Christian, anarchist, Marxist or other. However, studying jihadist groups in isolation as a unique category tends to obscure their similarities with other forms of collective political action.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, *The Universal Enemy* is the product of difficult and meticulous data collection. I expect that it will be cited as a standard-setting work of qualitative empirical research on political violence. As a multilingual anthropologist and legal scholar-practitioner, Li was able to collect rare primary-source data over the course of more than a decade of ethnographic and archival research in Bosnia and several other countries from which foreign fighters originated. The depth of these sources, including interviews with former fighters, materials from U.N. archives and contemporaneous newspapers, is rare and commendable. The book also stands out among other studies of jihad for its thoughtful engagement with the ethical and professional responsibilities that researchers owe their interlocutors, particularly when the information they share in interviews may expose them to the risk of deportation, prosecution or death. From his original biographical database of more than 200 foreign fighters who fought in the Bosnian War, Li highlights 16 who appear in several chapters, telling their stories with empathy and trust built over the course of many conversations over many years.

The diversity of the foreign fighters in Bosnia—who varied widely in their nationalities, socioeconomic status and religious observance—is an empirical challenge to persistent and largely

unsuccessful efforts by other scholars to develop predictive models of radicalization based on individual risk factors. Their diversity also raises one of the book's central questions: "How could the activity of jihad successfully bring together Muslims from such different backgrounds?" Li's answer to this question is that jihad, as a universalist project, provided its diverse participants with a framework for processing their differences. Kinship bonds including fictive "brotherhood" among unrelated foreign fighters and marriage to local Bosnian women created new forms of community and belonging.

Li's discussion of how his experiences as a lawyer and human rights advocate informed his perspective as a researcher is particularly interesting. Li was part of the team that represented Ahmad Zuhair, a Saudi national detained without charge as an enemy combatant at Guantanamo Bay, and he later served as a volunteer for the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights monitoring the conditions of former fighters detained in an immigration detention center in Sarajevo. Although Li is careful to make clear that none of the information in the book comes from his work on the Zuhair case, it is apparent that his experience as a lawyer working in the "intensely litigious space" of the global war on terror provided him with unique insight into the experiences of former fighters whose trajectories were deeply intertwined with the legal architecture of expanding national security institutions in the United States and Europe. For example, Li himself navigated what has become an increasingly fine line between research (and also journalism) that relies on interviews with members of designated foreign terrorist organizations and the crime of material support for terrorism under U.S. law. The Supreme Court has interpreted "material support" broadly to

include speech acts ordinarily protected by the First Amendment when undertaken "in coordination with ... a foreign terrorist organization." Li mentions that, to avoid running afoul of the law during fieldwork, he was careful to avoid even simple gestures that could be construed as support, such as buying coffee for his interlocutors. This well-founded concern reveals what has been described as a "[chilling effect](#)" of material support laws on humanitarian aid as well as research and journalism.

Finally, *The Universal Enemy* provides a window on the pre-9/11 world, reminding us of a time when travel and migration were far less restricted and securitized than they are today. Abu 'Ali, a Moroccan foreign fighter, crossed the borders of France and Italy into Slovenia, where he was asked by a border guard why he wanted to travel to the war zone of Bosnia and responded casually, "That's where I want to go!" This brief exchange is one of many observations throughout the book that reveal how profoundly the global war on terror has hardened borders.

Although much has changed since the Bosnian War, Li's work is highly relevant to more recent mobilizations of foreign fighters, including during the Syrian Civil War, when at least [260](#) men, women and children from Bosnia and Herzegovina traveled to Syria to join the Islamic State and other armed groups. His work will also be of interest to scholars and practitioners working in the fields of human rights, migration, political violence and peacekeeping.

Cite as: Mara Redlich Revkin, '*Jihad' as a Universalist Project in Comparative Perspective*, (May 28, 2020) <https://www.lawfareblog.com/jihad-universalist-project-comparative-perspective>.