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Abstract

While official rhetoric generally views jihadism as separate and detached from international relations, this paper argues that comprehending the rise of jihadism requires understanding the world system. It is the international environment, dominated by neo-realist perspectives, that not only allows the rise of jihadist movements against specific rivals but also leads to them being systematically backed and justified by powerful players within the global system. This point will be argued through a comparison of two cases: Afghanistan in the 1980s and Syria today.

Keywords

Jihad, terrorism, salafism, Afghanistan. Syria

The promises by multiple United States administrations, since 9/11, to eliminate jihadi-type terrorism are becoming like the illusion of finding the Truth, in the Derridian sense. The George W. Bush, Barack Obama and now Donald Trump administrations have claimed that they have the key to solve the problem of jihadism, yet this phenomenon has not been destroyed; indeed, it has grown to more destructive levels. The term “jihadism” is here used to identify the violent extremist groups which have constructed a new and rather unconventional meaning for the Islamic concept of jihad and over-emphasised it in their doctrine to suit political agendas. Therefore, the use of the term is not meant to be confused with its mainstream religious-spiritual meaning. The aim of this paper, however, is to address the actual reasons for the existence and continued growth of jihadist groups. It investigates the background to jihadism as a specific type of political Islam. More importantly, however, such groups will be considered in the larger context of the international system. It will be argued that the international system, dominated by neo-realist perspectives, provides a systematically suitable environment for significant actors to use the jihadist movements against specific rivals in international and regional contexts. To put it another way, the jihadist movements have historically depended on external support for their emergence, survival and growth. The cases of Afghanistan in the 1980s and Syria will be compared to clarify the revival of jihadist groups in different periods of time.

Neo-realism and the problem-solving orientation

Realism, the initial basis for the neo-realist portrait of the world, sees international affairs as a constant chaos in which no state is willing to provide disinterested help when a particular state is in need (Burchill, et al, 2009: 36). It is in this global chaos that self-interested states are supposed to compete with one another and survive. Post-World War II realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Richard Niebuhr provided probably one of the best descriptions of the above-noted claim by commenting “states, like human beings, had an innate desire to dominate others, which led them to fight wars” (Mingst and Snyder, 2004: 5). So far, this perspective does not offer any approach to understanding a phenomenon such as jihadism. Moreover, despite the broad assumption that the neo-realists take for granted, the elimination of jihadism is neither a priority nor a necessity for important global players. Rather, sponsorship of jihadism can as well fit within the realist perspective of using every possible

means for maximising power and weakening a specific rival in order to survive and prosper in the assumed anarchic world.

While acknowledging their debt to realism, the neo-realists take the aggressive characteristics of their perspective for super-powers to a further level. For instance, for Mearsheimer (2004: 56) it is simply the case that “great powers have aggressive intentions”. Therefore, in international relations, “even when a great power achieves a distinct military advantage over its rivals, it continues looking for chances to gain more power” (Mearsheimer, 2004). He sees the end point of this conflict at the global level only when the super-power achieves hegemony. Hegemony is also justified by neo-realists such as Wohlforth (1999) for driving “peace” and stability in a unipolar international system. Despite the over-optimism of the neo-realist perspective and the vast amount of evidence which indicates that peripheral states have always suffered destabilisation from the centre by way of colonialism, post-colonialism, military intervention and economic exploitation in both bipolar and unipolar international systems, hegemony may not be equivalent to stability and there can always be an emerging power to challenge the hegemon.

Critical theorists such as Robert Cox have provided a systematic critique of neo-realism. Cox, for instance, raises two major criticisms. Firstly, he views neo-realism as a super-power ideology. For him, “the defence of American power” is framed in a manner to mean the maintenance of world order (Cox, 1981). Accordingly, the neo-realist perspective may depict something like the occupation of Iraq in 2003 as part of US “defence” in the face of hostile states such as Iraq under the Saddam Hussein regime. The hostility of states such as pre-2003 Iraq, Libya, Iran, Syria and North Korea led to them being labelled with a variety of negative terms such as “the axis of evil” (Atwan, 2015: 102-103). However, the US occupation of Iraq might also be understood as having little to do with US “survival” in an anarchic world; after all, few people would seriously argue that Iraq constituted a real threat to the US in 2003. Rather, as Bassil (2009: 65-81) argues, the US invasion of Iraq can be understood as an expansion of US hegemony over the Middle East at a time when American dominance was declining and its hegemony needed to be restored by force. This, Bassil continues, resulted in destabilising the Middle East, a result in which jihadism played an effective role. Therefore, if neo-realism is the ideology of a super-power such as the US and, moreover, an ideology which justifies invasions and conflicts that result in the emergence of jihadist movements in multiple periods of history, the rise of such movements can also be viewed as a contribution to the US imperialist agenda, whether or not Washington intended this.

Secondly, Cox (1981) addresses the “problem-solving” nature of neo-realism. He suggests that the neo-realist perspective detaches the history of a specific problem from the system that gives rise to/allows “problems”. He argues that this is, mainly, because neo-realism tends to deal with a specific problem within the international system while maintaining the very system which has created the problem (Cox, 1981). The neo-realist rationale, therefore, takes the status quo for granted and ignores the geo- and socio-political complexities that underlie the problems within the status quo. The history of the phenomenon within the international system seems to be irrelevant to the neo-realists and, Cox continues, the static presumption of this perspective suggests that, no matter how much the essence of the problem is deeply rooted in history, for neo-realists the present is like the past and “the future will always be like the past” (Cox, 1981). This approach is particularly problematic in dealing with the phenomenon of jihadist movements.

Taking the response to 9/11 as an example, the whole history of current-day jihadist movements, the geo-political complexities that underlies the emergence of such movements and, more importantly, the international system that allows global and regional powers to use such groups against their rivals, were all ignored. Rather, the complexities were reduced to getting rid of both the Taliban regime and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan by way of military intervention. As a result, and given that the system that produces such movements remained untouched, these movements re-emerged and more regional and global powers came to sponsor such groups in Iraq and, more openly, in post-2011 Syria (Ibrahim, 2009; Atwan, 2015).

Jihadism and third party sponsorship: a background

As the emerging post-9/11 studies note, the jihadists rely on the Salafi interpretation of Islam as the bedrock for their ideology. The Salafi approach, as we understand it today, is a legacy of a 14th century jurist known as Ibn Taymiyyah (Schwartz, 2007). By the 14th century the Islamic realm had expanded across North Africa to the west, into South China and East Asia to the east and into parts of Southern Europe to the north. Therefore, the initial Islamic thinking and principles of seventh-century Hijaz in Arabia had been already mixed with local cultures and were further developed into a variety of theological schools in the two main branches of Islam, namely Sunni and Shi'a, as well as Sufism which is also a form of Islamic thought and practice. As the Middle East historian Albert Hourani (1991: 173-178) noted, the period between the 10th and 15th centuries saw the emergence and flourishing of Islamic philosophy after the translation of ancient Greek philosophy. Post-seventh century plurality and creativity, including Islamic philosophy, operating in the context of multiple Islamic jurisprudences, used rationality in order to interpret sacred texts (Zaryabe Khouee, 1988). Sunnis use *taweel* and Shi'a use *baten* to extract what the sacred text actually means in different times and places, rather than what is literally written in the text; even the use of rationality changes the actual meaning of the text (Zaryabe Khouee, 1988). Ibn Taymiyyah's Salafi approach, however, seems to have been a rebellion against the approaches used after the seventh century up to his own time.

The development of Islamic civilisation and jurisprudence, for Ibn Taymiyyah, corrupted the purity of Islam. He viewed these as bad innovations forbidden by god - *beda'* - (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2000: 49-79). Instead, he suggested that the best way to understand Islam is to follow the path of its two earliest generations, the *salaf* (Wagemakers, 2012: 3). Here, Ibn Taymiyyah's puritanism is backed by dogmatism. However, this became more problematic when he suggested the literalist approach to reading and understanding the sacred texts as well as the way the *salaf* were living in the seventh century (Zaryab Khouee, 1988). The first system of recording Islamic thought only emerged some three hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, and the *salaf*, and these records are subject to controversy among different Islamic fractions and scholars of the field to this day (Aslan, 2006: 163-164). Therefore, Abu Zahab and Roy (2006: 1) provide a helpful definition of the 'Salafist' approach; "they demand a return to a strict Islam, stripped of local customs and cultures". Ibn Taymiyyah also employed an unconventional approach to disagree with other Islamic theological schools. Most of his works feature the concept of *takfir* (Aslan, 2009: 105), which involves unilaterally proclaiming someone an unbeliever regardless of Islamic restrictions on such alienation. The practice of *takfir* became particularly dangerous as Ibn Taymiyyah backed it by an unconventional interpretation of *jihad*. For him, *jihad* was not a marginal concept, but equivalent to one of the five pillars of Islam, if not more important than them. Furthermore, *jihad* against the 'unbelievers', for Ibn Taymiyyah, was not a collective act permitted as a defensive measure when an Islamic realm was under attack (Faraj, 2010), but

an “individual obligation” that can be loosely undertaken in any time and place (Aslan, 2009: 109-110). Put simply, the Salafi-jihadist approach functions as an Othering mechanism to dehumanise others - as false or unbelievers - and therefore justifies taking action against them.

Salafism as a movement, and not a mere theology, was able to emerge and survive as a theology due to a particular political environment in the 14th century. The geopolitical struggle in the late 13th and 14th century Middle East was between the Mamluks and the Mongols. The Mamluks ruled the Levant and Egypt while the Mongols were rulers of present-day Iran and Iraq (Amitai, 1995: 1). The ulama were crucial actors on both sides of this struggle, taking charge of affairs such as mobilising fighters, legitimising and delegitimising certain actions, including warfare (Little, 1973). Ibn Taymiyyah was one of the most influential jurists in the camp of the Mamluks, and declared the Shi'a convert Mongol ruler, Mahmood Ghazan, an unbeliever. This was important as Ghazan won the only victory in the six battles against the Mamluks (Aslan, 2009: 108). It was amidst this geopolitical struggle for economic-territorial gains that Ibn Taymiyyah's approach made sense for the Mamluks - Ibn Taymiyyah actually spent most of his last eight years in prison, mostly for offending the Sunnis within the Mamluk territories, after the Mamluks and Mongols concluded a peace agreement in 1323 (Pourhamzavi, 2017: 23-27). Ibn Taymiyyah was then no longer needed by the Mamluks and his puritanism against even the social plurality within the Mamluks' territory was met with imprisonment where he died in 1328. Salafism, as Aslan (2009: 110) notes, was steadily forgotten by the end of the 14th century and was not revived until four centuries later.

The revival of Salafism, as a movement, took place in mid-18th century Arabia. Although Arabia was part of the Ottoman Empire, by the mid-18th century Ottoman rule and control was limited to the Hijaz in the western part of the peninsula while the vast desert of Najd in the centre of Arabia was ruled by no-one. Najd had been both unimportant and inaccessible to the Ottomans, encompassing a collection of small towns, each ruled by a local leader or a specific head of a tribe (Algar, 2002: 5). It was in this socio-geographical atmosphere that a preacher influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah's Salafi approach, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, sparked the Wahhabi movement. (It must be noted that the title 'Wahhabism' is what outsiders have given to this movement in attribution to its founder, but the theology that underlines Ibn Abd al-Wahhab approach is the Salafi interpretation of Islam (Din Parast, 2005: 7).

Similar to the Salafism of the 14th century, the ultraconservative message of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab cannot be understood outside of the power relations and geo-political struggles of the time. According to his biographer, Ibn Ghannam (1994: 84), the first person to be interested in Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his few supporters was the ruler of U'yaynah Uthman Bin Me'mar. Although the officially-appointed title of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in U'yaynah was a “judge”, he was in charge of doing much more: moral policing and “ordering the wali (ruler)” to impose the hudud, religious laws that he had decided on (Ibn Ghannam, 1994: 85). Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's short presence in U'yaynah was ended by the people of that town protesting against him, while the ruler of the largest city in eastern Arabia, al-Ahsa, threatened the ruler of U'yayna that he would cut financial aid should he resist getting rid of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This led the latter to depart to another Najdi town, al-Dar'iyah, which was ruled by Muhammad Ibn Saud, the founder of the House of Saud which has ruled Saudi Arabia since 1932.

Ibn Saud appeared ambitious to rule beyond Dar'iyah. The agreement between Ibn Saud and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab constitutes the foundation of the Saudi state to this day. In this agreement, based upon "waging jihad" against the people of Najd, Ibn Saud promised Ibn Abd al-Wahhab to perform "jihad" against the unbelievers and the latter promised him victory (ibid, 1994: 87). The later application of this was that the descendants of Ibn Saud (the House of Saud) would be in charge of the political affairs of the state and descendants of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (Al al-Shaeikh) in charge of its religious affairs, although the boundary between the two remains undefined and overlaps much of the time.

The Wahhabi movement attracted the attention of the British Empire. They acted as a third party sponsor for the Wahhabis, mainly against the Ottomans who were their chief obstacle in the region at the time. Algar (2002: 37-40) notes that the first British contact with the Saud family was made in 1865 and this was strengthened by treaty in 1915, during the First World War. British financial and weapons support continued until 1932 when the Saud family established Saudi Arabia as a state.

After the decline of Britain as a superpower and the emergence of the US as the next imperial power, Saudi Arabia became a close ally of the US. An important development that resulted from this alliance, one that affected the rise of future jihadist movements, was the systematic propagation of Wahhabism worldwide which started in the early 1960s (Algar, 2002: 47-48). Backed by gigantic petrodollar budgets, the Saudi-Wahhabi institution began to export its version of Islam, through multiple means and tactics, to peripheral and sometimes troubled states such as Somalia, Bosnia, newly-independent Central Asian states, etc. and to Western countries such as France, Italy and the US (Rakic and Dragsia, 2012; Pargeter, 2008; Algar; 2002). This can be understood in the context of the Cold War when the dominant approach of US foreign policy and thus institutions such as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was to welcome all kinds of Islamism as a means to contain and challenge the Communist bloc (Khalid, 2014: 116). At a regional level, Wahhabism was also meant to deter popular secular-nationalist regimes as embodied by the Egyptian President Jamal Abd al-Nasir in the 1950s and 1960s Nasir was also allied to the Soviet Union and therefore viewed as part of the socialist camp by the US (Schwartz, 2007). The apex of the US-Saudi alliance against the Soviet Union emerged in the 1980s in Afghanistan, where the story of the transnational jihad began.

Afghanistan in the 1980s and current-day Syria (2011-2017)

In 1979 the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan to back a pro-Moscow government and party, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This motivated the US, UK, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to intervene and confront the Soviets, or to "turn Afghanistan into another Vietnam" to use the CIA term (Curtis, 2010: 135). The total official expenditure of the US, Saudi Arabia and some other European and Islamic states in relation to Afghanistan between 1980 and 1992 was around \$10 billion which was mostly spent on weapons to the anti-PDPA and anti-Soviet Mujahedin (Rashid, 2001: 18). The amount of funding channelled from the religious institution of the Saudi state to the Mujahedin is unknown (Aslan, 2009: 115). In addition to conventional weapons, the Mujahedin were also aided by "strategic" missiles such as the Stinger which could shoot down Soviet helicopters. The Soviets' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 led to celebrations in the anti-Communist camp, including among multiple Mujahedin groups each of whom claimed victory for itself. Struggle continued both against the PDPA regime and within the anti-PDPA forces.

Unsurprisingly, this new chaotic situation in Afghanistan in the 1990s led to it becoming a home for civil and proxy wars for multiple foreign powers. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan trained, armed and funded the Salafist Taliban who were able to take over in 1996. On the other hand, Iran and Russia, alongside India and four former Soviet Central Asian republics, supported the Northern Alliance in order to prevent the Taliban from taking power (Rashid, 1999). The Taliban establishment of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan meant two major things in that destabilised state. Firstly, the establishment of a transnational jihadist organisation, namely Al Qaeda, which carried out multiple international terrorist attacks, most famous of which was 9/11. Secondly, the cycle of military interventions continued, with Afghanistan being again invaded in 2001, as a response to 9/11.

While Afghanistan marked the beginning of transnational jihadism, Syria is its most prominent latest manifestation. As part of the “Arab Spring” Syria witnessed a limited uprising, beginning on 15 March 2011. Some, like Cartaluccci and Bowie (2012) and Anderson (2016), believe that the militarisation of the uprising began the same month. Others, like Lister (2015), believe that the uprising was militarised by the end of 2011. Whatever the case, it did not take regional and global powers such as the US, France, the UK, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan and the UAE very long to get involved in the Syrian war and support a variety of militant groups against the Syrian government which is supported by Iran and Russia as well as non-state actors such as the Lebanese Hezbollah. One well-documented report estimates that during the period between 2012 and 2016 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and Turkey bought around €1.2 billion weapons from eight central and Eastern European states to channel into Syria through the Turkish and Jordanian borders (Marzouk, 2016). The involvement of global powers and their regional allies in peripheral states’ conflicts, such as those in Afghanistan and Syria, helps reveal the systematic characteristics of these conflicts. Moreover, critically examining the role of the Western media, NGOs and donors helps us understand these conflicts and the way they benefit jihadist movements. Analyses of media, NGOs and funding through ‘donors’ as systematic tools to back jihadist-type conflicts existed before the war in Syria and even before the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s. As Cooley (2002: xiv) notes, allied governments such as Britain and France helped the US in its “flirtation with Islamism” during the 1980s and “information media” was part of the Afghan War during the Soviet intervention. Saudi Arabia had not built its media empire in the Middle East by the 1980s, but was spending enough money on Arab journalists to either buy sympathy for its foreign policies or prevent criticism (Aburish, 1996: 209). One of the most notorious NGO-like entities in the early 1980s was the Mujahedin Service Bureau, Maktab Khadamat al-Mujahedin, in the Pakistani region of Peshawar. It existed to “arrange for Arabs who wished to take part in the jihad to join the various Afghan factions” (Tawil, 2010: 17). This later evolved into what is today known as Al Qaeda.

In relation to donors, who tend to be presented as individuals and their donations as individual acts, Cooley (2002: 86) notes that the whole donation process became a systematic means to finance the Afghani jihad. Such finance and “Black Budget” money would have been controversial had it been transferred through official channels. Rashid (2000: 201) clarifies Cooley’s findings by noting that the first Taliban contact with Gulf donors took place in 1994-95 in the southern Afghani province of Kandahar, where the “donors” were invited for a hunting trip. These significant visitors, says Rashid, were Saudi and Gulf princes. The Human Rights Watch (2001: 23-32) issues a detailed report on Pakistani state support for the Taliban. It noted how “private-sector actors in Pakistan provide financial assistance to the Taliban”. The report shows that donations to jihad in Afghanistan were

mutually beneficial as the Pakistani private-sector were able to make money out of their donation to the Taliban militants, mainly through the latter securing the trade in the Afghani side of the Afghani-Pakistani borders. These systematic donations also contributed to the Pakistani madrasas where Taliban members received their training and this linked the 'donors' to Pakistani political parties and other entities which supported the madrasas. There are few serious studies of Western media involvement in Syria. Anderson (2015) sheds light on the propaganda war against the Syrian government and its few allies by Western media and some regional media such as Al Jazeera. Anderson believes that the demonisation of the Syrian government through "repeated atrocity claims" is meant to "mobilise popular support behind the war". However, the role of Western media in shaping conflicts in peripheral states in the Middle East is only one part of the story. The other part that should not be neglected is the massive share of media owned by regional allies of the Western powers and their effect on the Syrian conflict. One of these allies is Saudi Arabia which is "one of the Middle East's most influential media owners" (Cochrane, 2007). Within this media empire, speaking the same Middle Eastern regional languages, outlets from Al Hayat newspaper, known as the most liberal Saudi newspaper and published from London, to Al Wesal TV Network, known as the most radical and puritan Saudi media entity, Salafism and the need for purging the Shi'a and other religio-ethnic minorities are propagated on a daily basis. Employing a variety of media tactics, a TV channel such as Al Jazeera Arabic shows no hesitation in acting as a media platform for the jihadist groups when they target the Syrian and Iraqi forces and when this is in accordance with Qatari foreign policy in the region (Pourhamzavi and Ferguson, 2015).

NGOs also play an effective role in the Syrian conflict. One of the NGOs that has attracted a large amount of criticism for being used as a tool for regime change in Syria is the White Helmets, founded by British military contractor James LeMesurier. This NGO is also funded by the United States Agency of International Development Office, with an estimated budget of \$23 million since 2013 (Sterling, 2017). The White Helmets' duties and their propaganda tactics on the ground have been investigated by scholars such as Flounders (2016). However, according to Manna (2014), the systematic utilisation of NGOs and "charity organisations" in the Syrian conflict began in 2011. This included the emergence of new organisations with "unknown founders" and the infiltration of existing organisations by powerful "Salafi personnel" (Manna, 2015: 101-102). Manna believes that Qatar relied on such organisations as a means to support fighters in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. He records that jihadist groups such as ISIS, al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham were supported by these organisations as 'moderate' groups. As a matter of fact, Qatar is not alone in using 'humanitarian' organisations as a channel to support the extremist groups who fight in Syria. The record of other four Persian Gulf states - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait - is more or less similar to Qatar. Organisations such as the Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People is one of many that has been used to channel "hundreds of millions" of dollars to the Syrian jihad (Mccants, 2013).

Finally, the donors also play an effective part in the structural machinery of the jihadist groups in the Syrian conflict. By 2009, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was able to report that donors in Saudi Arabia were "the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide" (WikiLeaks, 2009). The same leaked classified memo referred to Qatari counter-terrorism co-operation with the US as "the worst in the region". Moreover, evidence indicates that the 'donors' have largely been left free to function openly in favour of the jihadist groups in the Syrian conflict. Indeed, in the list of the donors, one can find people such as the Kuwaiti former minister of both justice and Islamic affairs, Nayef

al-Ajmi; his name is associated with open fund-raising for the Nusra Front in Syria (Cockburn, 2014: 106). Another is a Syrian Salafi figure known as Adnan Al Arour who fled the country in 1982 after the military confrontation between the Syrian government and Muslim Brotherhood in Hama. Al Arour is based in Saudi Arabia and was given one of the anti-Shi'a satellite channels there to run his own show against the Syrian government and the Shi'a at large (The Economist, 2012). Al Arour's phone number and his bank account in Saudi Arabia have been on Twitter since 2012 and are still accessible at the time of writing. They are advertised "for whoever wants to financially support the Syrian jihad through Shaykh Adnan Al Arour". It is hard to exclude Al Arour, as an example, from the state, in this case the Saudi state, that gave him all the means to operate against a specific rival, and therefore it is difficult to exclude donors like Al Arour from the overall system of power relations at work in the case of the conflict in Syria.

Conclusion

Methodologically, two broad approaches can be employed to comprehend and therefore deal with the jihadist movements. The first, which has proved to be popular among politicians within various US administrations, is to focus on the individuals who make up the jihadist groups. This approach focuses on their atrocities, emphasises their danger, and views them as a phenomenon which is both separate and detached from the world system. It promises to chase and eliminate them wherever they can be found or try to hide. Such a problem-solving approach clearly has not been successful since it was internationally adopted after 9/11. That is mainly, as this study has argued, because the structure, the overall global relations, that gives birth to jihadist movements has remained untouched. This brings us to the second approach, one that emphasises the importance of comprehending the system that leads to the rise of jihadism. This system of power relations uses complex institutional means such as finance, media, NGOs, weaponry and information technology to produce jihadist movements to gain hegemony over specific rivals. The violent phenomenon of jihadism is, in a sense, part of the unbalanced relationship between the Global North and the Global South: some Middle Eastern peripheral states lose their stability as proxy wars are waged by powerful states for hegemonic gains. The emergence, survival and rise of jihadist movements can structurally be viewed through this lens and the well-being of states which are troubled by jihadist types of chaos depends on reforming the very structure of power relations that continually produces such chaos.

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