The New Strategist Journal

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The *New Strategist* is interested in strategic thinking and thinking about strategy, but it is not limited only to debates about theory and decision-making. Instead, it spans a wide field of view. In addition, it aims to combine cutting-edge theoretical advances in defence and security theory with recent findings in empirical and practitioner-focused research. The *New Strategist* encourages innovative analyses across disciplinary boundaries that challenge conventional approaches and promotes critical and creative thinking in matters that impact upon defence and security.

The *New Strategist* welcomes submissions from academics and policymakers across the arts, humanities, and social sciences and including such disciplines as international relations, political science, military history, strategic studies, political sociology, political economy, anthropology, organisational and management studies, and all fields related to defence.

The *New Strategist* aspires to be a forum for 'disruptive' thinking, critique, challenge, and innovation.

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/development-concepts-and-doctrine-centre

Review: Ramsay, Gilbert (2013), Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web (Bloomsbury: New York)

RODERICK MCKENZIE

In *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web*, Dr Gilbert Ramsay offers a fascinating insight into a highly topical area with his analysis of how online jihadis define themselves, express themselves and defend themselves on the internet. In the early part of the book, Dr Ramsay makes the important observation that 'jihadi' behaviour on the web, as extreme as it may often appear, is a far cry from the perpetration of physical acts of violence. Rather, he suggests that the online culture of jihadis has more in common with more 'conventional' online groupings, such as the obsessive fans of features of popular culture and those with a general desire to reach out through social media.

It's no secret that many among us are far more vocal online than we would ever be in person (occasionally to our detriment), and Ramsay suggests that online jihadis are little different in that regard. He warns of the dangers of confusing those of a radical Islamic disposition with actual terrorists, simply because their views are considerably more extreme than most people are comfortable with. In his words, "[t]he problem is not with the old cliché about the impossibility of defining terrorism, however. Rather, it is with the tendency for the meaning of the word, which surely ought to refer to specific sorts of violent action, to be applied to movements and ideologies which, however dangerous they seem, are not equivalent to actual violence happening in the world." In this respect he convincingly plays down the fears that many within the media and counter–terrorist circles have about so–called 'terrorist websites' by highlighting the lack of evidence that the role played by the internet has led to an increase in acts of physical violence.

In the early part of the book, Ramsay demonstrates his considerable knowledge and understanding of both Islamic culture and the Arabic language as he considers the definitions and implications of the terms *jihad*, *jihadism* and *jihadi* as well as their distinction from the physical acts of the *mujahedin*. He also shows that he is not afraid to (respectfully) critique the established names in the supposed field of 'terrorism on the internet' by criticising the tendency to try and isolate this field as a single area of research, instead indicating that usage of the internet by the spectrum of actors from radical Islamists to genuine terrorists needs to be considered with the broader context of their behaviour both on and offline. Specifically, Ramsay convincingly questions the usefulness of the internet as a tool for such areas as attack planning, terrorist knowledge sharing, fund-raising and recruitment, indicating that the number and scale of physical attacks by so-called self-starters inspired by what

they may have read on the internet are little different to the level of violence one might expect by individuals motivated by what they have seen on conventional new reports. While not dismissing its potential, he highlights that claims that the internet has in any way contributed to an increase in terrorist attacks are as yet unproven.

In a detailed analysis of the theoretical aspects around group behaviour on the internet, particular amongst television fandom, the book suggests that many members of jihadi online communities take part as much because of a sense of escapism and a sense of community as because of the actual content of their communications. Ramsay scrutinises the content of self-proclaimed *jihadi* websites, looking at the use of imagery, video clips and music (*nashids*) and shows a clear understanding of the non-linear fashion in which information is created, shared and stored on the web. The book offers a fascinating incite into the heart of *jihadi* forums, such as the sense of community or lack thereof as the closed, controlled nature of *jihadi* culture conflicts with the free-thinking, discursive nature of the modern internet.

A particularly interesting (and oddly entertaining) chapter looks at the interactions between *jihadis* and non-*jihadis* online, considering the struggles *jihadis* face in trying to convert others while avoiding coming across as overly radical, yet simultaneously trying to justify their engagement in digital — rather than physical — *jihad*, both to others and, it would seem, to themselves. This internal conflict, in which online *jihadis* must justify their online engagement as sufficient to satisfy their own obligations towards *jihad*, while simultaneously insisting that it is entirely necessary for others to carry out physical acts, is particularly thought-provoking. Ultimately, Ramsay determines that internet *jihadism* is not merely a precursor to physical acts, or even a lesser activity in the eyes of those involved, rather it is a separate action with its own merits.

To reinforce his arguments, Ramsay offers a comparison of online jihadi culture with Islamophobia and Crusaderism on the web. While recognising the seriousness of the problem of Islamophobia, he remarks on its similarity with online *jihadism* in that it does not necessarily correspond to physical acts of violence, and that the internet itself has not necessarily led to an increase in acts of violence.

The book is very well written and makes for an engaging read. There are sections of the book that are heavy on theoretical analysis (particularly the second chapter) and which may consequently put off readers from a non-academic background, but overall the book is written in an accessible form with some clearly described and dispassionately considered conclusions. The highly topical nature of the content — particularly as governments seek to extend their own powers to control and carry out surveillance on the actions of their citizens online — together with the original insights presented ensure that this book makes an extremely valuable contribution both to the world of academia and, hopefully, to policy-makers, who would do well to consider this measured assessment of the true level of risk posed by radicals (of all kinds) online.