Perspectives Around Syria: Moralities in Conflict

By

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Abstract

Recent and ongoing multifaceted conflicts across Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East range from the violent emergence of Islamic State to civil wars, fuelled by irregular proxy forces acting in support of wider power struggles, with consequences for the region, Europe and the UK that include mass migration, social unease, growing support for jihadism, and an increased threat and use of terrorist violence. This study contributes to an improved understanding of the complexity and difficulty of ‘winning the peace’ in current and future military interventions. In doing so it expands current understandings of competing moral components of contemporary conflict using ongoing events surrounding Syria as a multidimensional case study. Individual assessment and subsequent cross-analysis is conducted on the following: the moral component of jihadist discourse on social media, as it is used to gain and maintain support for the jihad; competing dimensions of conventional Western Just War; rivalries within conventional Islamic understandings of Just War; and the moral basis of Russian actions and motivations. Cross-analysis of these competing moral components of conflict highlights the complexity and difficulty of finding an agreed basis for a negotiated conclusion to hostilities, identifying further research strands in the process.

Keywords

Moral component, conflict, jihad, Western just war, Islamic just war, Russia, individual rights, state rights.

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1 Executive Summary

Recent and ongoing multifaceted conflicts across Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East range from the violent emergence of Islamic State (IS) to civil wars, fuelled by irregular proxy forces acting in support of wider power struggles, with consequences for the region, Europe and the UK that include mass migration, social unease, growing support for jihadism, and an increased threat and use of terrorist violence. This report is intended to inform future British policy, doctrine and operational training, contributing to an improved understanding of the complexity and difficulty of ‘winning the peace’, in current and future military interventions. To do so, this report expands current understandings of competing moral components of contemporary conflict using ongoing events surrounding Syria as a multidimensional case study. Section 2 sets out the broader geopolitical context of the study and the scope of the task, while sections 3 and 4 specify the objectives and research questions for each element of the study, and the methodology to be employed at each stage.

Given the ongoing, increasing jihadist terrorist threat in Europe from individuals and groups loyal to (IS), this project has from the outset prioritised an analysis of the moral component of jihadist discourse on social media, and how it is used to gain and maintain support for the jihad. In section 5 Smith conducts an extensive review of literature in this field, highlighting the limitations of ‘radicalisation’ as a coherent concept for both understanding and hence addressing the current jihadist-terrorist threat. This report rejects the premise that those who are drawn to the jihad through online activity are bad people who want to do bad things. Instead, Smith argues that when jihadist social media discourse is examined through the lens of the morality claims therein, the more appropriate premise on which to base subsequent analysis is that most individuals who engage with the jihad online are, to begin with at least, good people who want to do good things. In addition to the literature review, section 5 sets out to understand the complex nature and significance of the moral component of discourse around Syria and the jihad more broadly, through empirical analysis of how this content and social media coalesce for a diverse audience that ultimately makes the binary label ‘jihadist’ redundant.

In sections 6 and 7, Lee and Khalfey respectively explore competing dimensions of conventional Western Just War and Islamic Just War. Unlike Section 5 whose social media research focus is fleeting and transient, these two sections share the common feature of analysing long historical traditions, within which sources and understandings of morality have changed over time. The basis of Western Just War has, over several centuries, emerged from its Christian roots in divine revelation and religious texts to a basis in human reason following the Enlightenment period. However, as Lee highlights, an agreed, homogeneous moral component of conflict based on Just War itself is increasingly difficult to articulate given the moral rivalries developing between competing Western Just War approaches: the collective-rights-based approach most commonly associated with Michael Walzer, and the individual-rights-based approach advocated by Jeff McMahan. In section 7 Khalfey demonstrates how and why Islamic conceptions of Just War retain an overt, politically engaged religious dimension that its Western counterpart does not: assessing the moral aspects of the actions of Middle Eastern states, their impact upon Syria, and the wider repercussions for international relationships with the ‘West’.

Rauta provides a further contrast in section 8 where he explores the moral basis for Russian actions in Syria. In contrast to the priority granted to the individual and individual rights in Western Just War reasoning – especially the noncombatant’s right to life – Russia and President Putin use highly moralistic language to justify military engagement, framed in terms of state rights. Rauta introduces a distinct moral component to Russian actions and motivations: incorporating political dimensions that prioritise the state over the individual, a social component that advocates conservative values, and a religious dimension that is intertwined with state interests. In each of these elements the moral framework at play is antithetical to Western approaches.

The different protagonists in and around Syria operate within their own specific moral frameworks, using distinct moral discourses to underpin their own brands of political violence. What emerges is a clash of moralities that informs and shapes the physical clashes between irregular militias, regular military forces and proxy fighters. Moral imperialism on all sides of the Syrian conflicts is part of the problem not the solution: “If you would only conform to my morality you will understand the errors of your ways and everything will be all right”. A pragmatic form of moral realism is recommended; setting aside idealistic but unachievable
moral and political options and instead pursuing achievable ‘least worst’ options that prioritise the defeat of IS and its jihadist ideology as a starting point. In addition, a holistic, wide-ranging series of potential future research strands for further exploring the moral components of conflict have been identified. Priority should be given to a 12-36 month longitudinal empirical study of the use of morality discourses in jihad-related social media activity to provide evidence for countering jihad in a ‘public interest issue’ paradigm rather than through the more constraining, even failing, ‘radicalisation’ paradigm.
2 Introduction

2.1 Geopolitical Context

Recent and ongoing multifaceted conflicts across Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East have taken many forms, which range from the violent emergence of Islamic State to civil wars, fuelled by irregular proxy forces acting in support of wider power struggles. Consequences for the region, Europe and the UK include mass migration, social unease, and growing support for violent jihad: a term that broadly encompasses the variety of ‘connected’ quasi-conflicts and acts of terrorism and issues often labelled as Islamist, Jihadist, extremist or terrorist, from Syria to the Paris terrorist attacks. There are distinct, disputed and as yet insufficiently researched moral components at the heart of these conflicts involving rapidly growing and evolving Irregular Activity and threat networks. This research project is designed to inform future UK Doctrine and operational training at collective and individual levels, and contribute to understanding the complexity and difficulty of ‘winning the peace’ if preventive diplomacy fails and military interventions are undertaken in the future. To do so, this report seeks to expand the understanding of competing perceptions of morality and moral frameworks surrounding contemporary conflict by using ongoing events surrounding Syria as a multidimensional case study.

2.2 Task

“You kaafir your government is bombing our brother’s and sister’s in Syria whilst your enjoying the freedom. Don’t worry we won’t let you enjoy your life we will make sure you also know the meaning of suffering we know where you live. You live at this address 20 XXXXX Road’ [sic].

Statements such as that above not only symbolising emerging threats and irregular activity, but it is also representative of the changing vocabularies and evolving means of communication used by those who would use unconventional violence for political ends. In the conventional language of Western, Clausewitzian strategic thought, a crucial Centre of Gravity for IS in Syria and Iraq is its use of social media. A sophisticated aspect of the ideological struggle that not only describes what IS is doing, but actively constitutes IS as (at a technical level at least) a sophisticated, intellectually dextrous, compassionate and protective (from some perspectives), cosmopolitan, inclusive and adaptable enemy that is severely underestimated when dismissed as mere ‘terrorists’, ‘psychopaths’ and so on.

The moral component of conflict is playing an increasingly significant and public role on several levels: in the justification of policy at a political level; in the implementation of that policy at an operational level; and conceptually, at an underpinning philosophical level. Recent events in and around Syria show that in addition to cultural, ideological and political factors – and, crucially for this study – moral claims and counter-claims characterise much of the discourse. Consequently, this research project will respond to the Statement of Requirement Research Topics 1 (Social Construction of Conflict and Morality), 2 (Use of Westerns norms, values and morals in counterinsurgency) and 4 (conventional understanding of morality and conflict), as well as going further in addressing the moral dimension of jihadism. A case study approach has been used to explore multiple dimensions (for example: political, ideological, religious and humanitarian) and assumptions about the moral component of conflict as they relate to, and clash, around the conflict in Syria. These clashes extend from individuals and groups on the ground in Syria to Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Paris, Brussels and to wherever social media and other commentary on morality relates to IS, where directly involved and proxy

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2 This understanding of the term ‘the jihad’ is based on Devji, Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality and Modernity, xv.

3 Centre of Gravity. A Clausewitzian concept which refers to a focal point that is crucial in maintaining the whole enemy structure: ‘The first principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone. The attack on these sources must be compressed into the fewest possible actions—again, ideally, into one.’ Clausewitz, Carl von. On War. Indexed edition. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Eds and Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 617.

actors contest the physical, political and moral landscape. In addition, while some of these cultural, religious, ideological and political factors are addressed in the Strategic Trends Programme: Future Operating Environment 2035, the moral dimension is barely mentioned. Given the scarcity of forward-looking research in this area compared to other geo-political and material security factors, this scoping study examines current trends with a view to identifying potential future trajectories in the moral component of conflict that can be developed further in the 3-7 year research timeframe of the Futures strand of the Intelligence and Countering Adversary Networks (iCAN) programme.

The existence of ‘morality’ appears to be universally accepted, even if its definition is not. In every culture, society and religion, across the globe where people share a common life, there is and has been debate over the question: how should we live, both individually and collectively? Wherever contradictory answers have been proposed to that question there exists the temptation to assume that ‘I’ or ‘we’ have it right and ‘you’ or ‘they’ are wrong and simply need to conform to ‘my’ moral framework. In his exposition of ethics, or moral philosophy, Norman distinguishes between ‘normative ethics’ (deciding what actions are good or right) and ‘meta-ethics’ (understanding what we mean when we say that something is good or right). The exploration of the moral component of conflict in this report moves between both of these approaches. Each section explores what different protagonists in the Syrian conflicts mean when they refer to morality or to good and right (normative) conduct in that context. One understanding of ‘morality’ or moral component of conflict (especially a liberal Western perspective) is not imposed across the different research strands. Competing conceptions of morality and the moral component of conflict emerge within the relative political, cultural and intellectual isolation of each section. What eventually transpires, in effect, are several conflicting ‘normative’ moralities.

The challenge in section 9 is in comparing and cross-analysing the competing approaches that emerge in sections 5 to 8. To attempt a coherent cross-analysis, Lee adopts a poststructuralist interpretive approach in the final section which is concerned with how conflicting moralities are constituted as ‘right’ or ‘normative’ in competing political discourses around Syria. The cross-analysis draws conceptually on Michel Foucault’s later work where he investigated the relationship between both wider ‘code-oriented’ moralities (concerned with rules, laws, interdictions to which individuals are expected to conform to be considered ‘moral’) and subjective ‘ethics-oriented’ moralities (motivations, behaviours and goals that shape individual conduct, attitudes and beliefs) in the course of understanding how individuals form themselves and their conduct as ethical. Consequently, section 9 will compare and contrast both the basis of the moral codes from sections 5 to 8 to which competing groups and individuals are expected to conform, as well as other factors, such as religion and ideology, that shapes individual behaviour. The potential scale of such an undertaking indicates that this study represents an initial scoping of the parameters of such an understanding; it will take a subsequent and more in-depth study to develop these introductory ideas more fully.

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5 Proxy actors include groups and individuals who are acting for, and funded by, third party interests. For example, the funding of Islamist militias in Syria by sources in Qatar, Saudi Arabia or Iran who want to expand their regional influence and interests. The key text in this field is Mumford, Andrew. Proxy Warfare. Polity Press, 2013.
7 Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 1984, 5, 25.
3 Objectives and Research Questions

Section 5 – Jihad and Morality

**Objective:** To understand the complex nature of the moral component of discourse around Syria and *the jihad* more broadly, through empirical analysis of how this content and social media coalesce for a diverse audience that further makes the binary label ‘jihadist’ redundant.

**Research question:** How, using an empirical assessment of social and other media, can we better understand the ways in which the moral component of so-called ‘Jihadist’ discourse exists, evolves and is regarded, disseminated and appropriated?

Section 6 – Western Just War

**Objective:** To understand the ways in which normative Western Just War discourses are currently used in relation to IS in Syria, highlighting the limitations of the approaches taken and identifying alternative non-binary morality discourses that can be deployed in complex security situations.

**Research question:** To what extent do conventional understandings of Just War remain relevant in relation to Syria and IS, and why?

Section 7 – Conventional Islamic Morality and War

**Objective:** To map conventional interpretations of Islamic morality with regard to the use of military force in pursuit of political ends, highlighting commonalities and tensions in understanding between Shia and Sunni actors, IS Jihadists, and Western Just War.

**Research question:** How are the actions of Saudi Arabia and Iran considered with regard to Syria: are their actions dictated by the same ‘Western’ moral values that direct international interactions and order? If not, how are their differing moralities constituted and deployed in pursuit of their political ends?

Section 8 – Russia and the Morality of Intervention

**Objective:** To identify the moral basis of Russia’s actions with regard to Syria, in opposition to IS, other anti-government insurgent forces, and the Western-led coalition: paying particular attention to underpinning ideological clashes with Western Just War reasoning.

**Research question:** What is the moral terrain in which Russian behaviour in Syria is rooted, and how does that conflict with Western Just War morality discourses?

Section 9 – Comparative Analysis of Competing Moral Frameworks

**Objective:** Cross-analysis of the competing moral frameworks assessed in WPs1-4, revealing the basis and effectiveness, or otherwise, of attempts to legitimise political violence in relation to Syria and beyond.

**Research question:** What potential future research strands emerge from this analysis of competing, complementary and/or still as yet unknown moralities in Syria and beyond?
4 Methodology

Sections 5 to 8 use four distinct approaches to respectively explore four competing moral dimensions of political violence manifested in Syria and beyond: jihadism, Western Just War, conventionally understood Islamic approaches (acknowledging Shia/Sunni differences), and the Russian reliance on the State as the primary moral actor in the political sphere.

4.1 Jihad and Morality

In section 5 Smith provides a comprehensive literature review of the discourse on the moral component of the jihad. He then combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in analysing empirical data on the moral component of conflict as it appears within jihadist discourse in relation to Syria and beyond (and its reverse threat to the UK and the West) mined from the social media sites Facebook and Twitter. This latter element of the section centres on the importance of memes, videos and images and their accompanying commentary in the moral component of the jihad and its associated violence in Syria and elsewhere.

4.2 Western Just War

In section 6 Lee uses a poststructuralist critical approach to analyse the ways in which normative Just War discourses currently relate to Syria as part of a conventionally accepted moral component of conflict. He argues that the application of a conventional Just War-based approach to a complex, amorphous, evolving conflict like Syria is inevitably limited and sometimes counterproductive, even when, superficially, similar terminology would appear to be used by different contending parties. Specifically, the relative merits of collective rights-based Just War and individual rights-based approaches to Just War are juxtaposed to show that a universal, homogeneous moral component of conflict based on Just War itself is impossible to articulate given the increasingly clear moral rivalries developing between competing Just War approaches.

4.3 Conventional Islamic Morality and War

In section 7 Khalfey addresses a range of questions and concerns that emerge from the ways in which perceptions of the Middle East and its interactions are dominated by Huntington’s hypothesis of a Clash of Civilisations.\(^8\) This evaluation of the Middle Eastern perspective of the Syrian conflict draws upon distinct approaches to the region and its conflicts, engaging with assumptions of differences based upon the existing distinction of ‘West’ and ‘Islam’/Middle East. She assesses the actions of Middle Eastern states, their impact upon Syria, and the wider repercussions for international relationships with the ‘West’ to identify, firstly, whether a moral component exists, and second if this is distinct to that of the ‘Western’ states involved.

4.4 Russia and the Morality of Intervention

In the final section Rauta’s focus is on the Russian intervention in Syria and its moral component. He explores the extent to which Russian behaviour emanates from a different moral ground from Western Just War: referencing particular ethical values, behaviour and legitimising discourses located in a moral structure that is rooted primarily in the State and its interests. Consequently, he argues that the place of the individual, from combatant to the innocent civilian killed as collateral damage, can be seen as a secondary priority that exists in tension with a Western, unilateral, self-generating understanding and practice of morality in relation to conflict.

4.5 Comparative Analysis of Competing Moral Frameworks

The concluding cross-analysis in section 9 examines two overlapping but distinct elements of the moral component of conflict as they emerge in sections 5 to 8.\(^9\) First, the extent to which claims or actions are

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\(^9\) This framework is rooted in Michel Foucault’s later work where he analysed both wider code-oriented moralities and subjective motivations, behaviours and goals in the course of understanding how individuals form themselves and their conduct as ethical. See Foucault, M., The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure, Trans. R. Hurley, (London: Penguin Books, 1984).
rooted in what can be broadly described as written or unwritten but widely accepted moral codes (secular or religious rules, laws, guidelines, ideology etc.). Second, the subjective ethical dimension of each approach that reveals the basis of moral conduct, how individuals are made aware of their moral obligations, how they are supposed to behave, and what they are trying to achieve (social justice, freedom, eternity in a future paradise, and so on). This analysis demonstrates both commonalities and clashes in the competing moral approaches to conflict explored in the first four sections. The report concludes by setting out areas for further research, highlighting how the future operating environment may be shaped and influenced by competing, irreconcilable moralities, as opposed to a universalised moral component of conflict that is translatable across cultural, societal, ideological, religious or political domains. Such research, in turn, will inform future UK Doctrine, operational training at collective and individual levels, and the complexity and difficulty of ‘winning the peace’ if future military interventions are undertaken.
Morality in legitimising jihadist discourses and their use in social media

Tom Smith

“To us Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of al Qaeda, America seemed very close. In a sense, they were more globalized than we were.”

In the 15 years following the events in the United States on the 11th September 2001, the security and intelligence as well as academic and policy communities have each wrestled (largely separately) with the global and seemingly perpetual phenomena of ‘the jihad’: a term that broadly encompasses the variety of ‘connected’ quasi-conflicts and acts of terrorism and issues often labelled as Islamist, Jihadist, extremist or terrorist, from Syria to the Paris terrorist attacks. The stark admission in the 9/11 Report above is a rare but important one that the various interested communities have yet to fully reconcile. This strand of the project is built on the possibility that morality, or at least moral claims, contributed to them being ‘more globalized than we were’. The 9/11 commission and the others who will be highlighted, realised the jihad was reaching across space and time in a novel fashion, in many ways beyond that of the cold war, have largely failed to reconcile how or why ‘they were more globalized’. The how and why are often the most difficult questions to contend with. This section addresses this difficulty and explores the attempts to find answers to guide further work to improve our understanding of the morality of the jihad and its application. The 9/11 hijackers or the young Britons physically going to join IS are just as enabled by globalisation to make the physical journey as the many more who participate at home in different ways (emotionally, intellectually, spiritually) while being similarly incensed. Those willing to act violently are limited in number, but their sense of love, hatred and anger is shared by many others who would never project it outwards in violence, a common feature of the moral discourse of the jihad. Thus far, we (the various interested communities) have failed to resolve where the non-violent ‘contributors’ to the discourse of the jihad sit in our frames of references. It is pushing a (probably already useless) definition of a jihadist too far to include people sharing memes on Israeli settlers. Yet the online discourse and explored content of such people coalesce with that of the more ardent and militant ‘contributors’, in what is (perhaps surprisingly) a relatively pluralist and cosmopolitan environment:

“The catharsis offered by the media or virtual jihad has proven sufficiently efficacious to supplant traditional notions of jihad for a new generation of jihadists, unwilling or unable to engage in actual violence themselves.”

This complex landscape of the morality of the jihad stands in stark contrast with the binary nature of categorisation that comes with the term ‘radicalisation’ and the limited narrative it offers to policy makers. For example, this quote from Hoskins et al identifies the ‘virtual jihadist’ as part of the broader jihad, which prompts the question of the extent to which non-violent by sympathetic individuals are or should be the concern of British or Western security of military forces. If the thoughts and emotions of the sympathetic but non-violent jihadist is securitised, there is a risk of alienating whole sectors of the population who pose no physical threat. As a result of this complexity, the subtleties of morality and the jihad are often ignored or at left to Islamic scholars to contest in isolation. In the remainder of this section an extensive literature review will be used to explore the moral component of discourse as it is used on social media, both to establish and maintain support for political (terrorist) violence within and beyond Syria. Extended discussion around jihad, social media and the limitations of the concept of ‘radicalisation’ in both research and policy domains, is complemented by a sample analysis of social media activity surrounding events in Madaya, Syria in early 2016. This sample analysis tests the innovative research approach to the moral component of jihad advanced in the sections to follow.

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11 This understanding of the term ‘the jihad’ is based on Devji, Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality and Modernity, xv.
12 Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology, 64.
5.1 The research problem

This project is focused on Syria, but in many ways with just one eye, with the many other ‘morally connected’ conflicts, events and issues very much in our peripheral vision. Given the premise here that morality, or at least moral claims, may be the missing and unacknowledged fuel for the jihad, it should be recognised that morality can transcend geography, temporality or scholarly discipline. The often ‘cathartic’ displays of moral solidarity on show on social media, or found by novel field research so far, is hardly the codified doctrine of organised religion, politics or society. Indeed the jihad and its grasp of morality, ethics and even humanitarianism is frequently a rejection of those organised structures within societies from West to East. Morality discourses in the jihad have thus become unruly expressions and acts of freedom from mainstream, ordered power structures. Syria cannot be easily separated from Kashmir, Chechnya, Palestine and other conflicts subject to overlapping and often contradictory moral discourse in the jihad. No authority is capable of exerting control and individuals dictate the moral agenda, subjecting the issues to their own bias. Syria is a moral as well as political and security issue, as demonstrated in the language and imagery in the tweet by MuslimGirl.net below (Figure 1), which is one example of many. Material and behaviour such as this is rightly not labelled jihadist discourse, yet a relationship exists between the ‘innocent’ non-jihadist moral discourse and more militant jihadist discourse. This makes research difficult, but not impossible, and certainly not futile. The longer the various interest communities ignore this relationship, the poorer our ability becomes to research this behaviour accurately in order to understand it.

Figure 1 - Syria is a moral as well as political and security issue (tweet by MuslimGirl.net)\(^7\)

This section is an attempt at analysing the moral component of the jihad, as a single step in what looks to be the best direction according to the most progressive thinkers in the field(s). It requires a consistent and flexible commitment that will need to evolve as methods succeed and fail and, crucially, as the behaviour being studied evolves. Research – both qualitative and quantitative – will need to span disciplines and the distance between anthropology and ethnography on the one hand, and security studies on the other. As we will see, the difficulty in not just researching the morality of the jihad but even in advocating that there is a moral element or some form of justification and ethical behaviour within the jihad, has been a challenge too great for many in the academic and security communities. As a result this is an area that has been neglected

by critical thought and research, with only an important few braving the scholastic wilderness to make the mainly theoretical, and to a limited extent empirical case, that a moral component of the jihad exists. For those in the security communities, this would mean acknowledging the limitations of simple binary distinctions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and engaging with the ambiguous and complex moral ‘grey areas’ that occupy so much of the ideas space between them. While there are challenges in adopting this more nuanced approach, it will also help to make more sense of changes in individual behaviour. Rather than looking for the radicalised individual who makes a drastic leap from ‘good schoolboy/girl’ to IS jihadist, it provides a framework within which it is easier to see how small, incremental changes in behaviour are made and how moral discourses play a crucial role in those changes.

This study therefore confidently embraces the complexity of a freewheeling, all-encompassing messy melange of morality discourses and approaches research with clear epistemological principles underpinning future research into morality and the jihad. To improve understanding and knowledge of the role of morality in the jihad is an inherently social process shaped by context, which as a result has often made it taboo. When morality (often expressed in terms of opposing oppression, doing good, promoting Islam and its values, empathising with other believers) of the jihad is discussed in academic literature we will see it is often from an external and socially constructed position. It is unclear and often unsubstantiated as to how the many authors know what the jihadists believe. Being part of the research process in the immersion amongst the subjects, be that on social media, in fieldwork interviews or ideally both, shapes any understanding of the morality question, which needs to be appreciated and accounted for. In this way it is possible to engage the views of the people involved, accurately emancipating the issues and behaviours under discussion. The limited value in the ‘expert’ diagnosis of what motivates ‘them’, as a result of reading religious themed manifestos or websites or even based on what reformed jihadists tell ‘us’ is becoming more and more evident. This project makes a case for further and concentrated studies of morality of the jihad in order to break this cycle of taboo to better understand the enemy:

“We are likewise inclined to see terrorists as fiends, wild-eyed expressions of evil, diabolical but two-dimensional, somehow alien – in a word, inhuman. Government officials routinely denounce terrorists as mindless fanatics, savage barbarians, or more recently, ‘evildoers’ – words that dismiss any intellectual content and impede efforts to understand the enemy.”¹⁴

The failing orthodox approach Jenkins describes here is one that attempts to sit outside of the subject’s context to give a supposedly fair and untainted judgement on what is seen but, crucially, this approach is the judgement of an outsider with little concern for the context the subject is surrounded by. This obviously risks not just methodological inaccuracy, but also a crucial lack of appreciation of the cultural context in which the jihad and discussions of its morality are situated. Research does not have to be conducted by a Muslim or Arab or Syrian to better understand this context, but in many areas it might certainly help. Importantly, the researcher must appreciate its role as an observer and translator who becomes part of the subjective process of research and therefore a producer of knowledge. There are a number of emerging techniques in which this crucial context can be controlled, where successfully developed approaches can be advanced and adopted to address the question of morality and the jihad. These may be relatively unknown within a UK context but are familiar to regional specialists, and include a greater appreciation of the value of ethnographic fieldwork efforts by researchers and how they can assist military and security efforts. The experiences of this author in the insurgencies in Thailand and the Philippines have highlighted the value of even compromised fieldwork that helps to build crucial local context. It then enables the reflexive critique of what others ‘outside’ conflicts say and do. The US Army’s 2016 Global Cultural Knowledge Network initiative is a step towards greater understanding in this field.¹⁵ One way ahead for the UK would be for the MOD to commission case study reports of fieldwork successes (and failures) in certain geographies and conflicts, as well as more bespoke literature reviews and systematic reviews.

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¹⁴ Jenkins, Unconquerable Nation Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves, 53.
5.2 Significance of the study or ‘A new research paradigm’

‘For Al-Qaeda’s violence, while certainly the most visible aspect of the jihad, is linked to a whole world of beliefs and practices that remains invisible in much scholarly writing on the subject. This invisible world of ethical, sexual, aesthetic and other forms of behaviour is far more extensive than the jihad’s realm of violence.’

It is a decade since Faisal Devji’s book Landscapes of the Jihad, Militancy, Morality, Modernity was published and in that time, even though the violence of the jihad dominates policy and headlines, our understanding and attempts at researching the relationship of morality and the jihad has barely improved. It is important, therefore, to make the case for pursuing this line of enquiry given the extent to which ‘radicalisation’ has come to dominate jihadist policy in the UK and the West. The moral dimension of the jihad is consistently overlooked; likely this is partly because the morality is found in the everyday, more mundane or ‘prosaic’ elements and these do not grab our attention. Especially when the focus is, understandably, with the immediacy of violence and the concern of security services, particularly within the media. As a result the narrative of radicalisation has become a stubborn, if limited, barrier to deeper inquiry into ‘the more extensive invisible world’ of morality and the jihad.

If Devji’s challenge is to be met, there are a number of possible routes for the academics, security services and governments to pursue. One significant opportunity is to explore how ‘ethical, sexual, aesthetic and other forms of behaviour’ is reflected in social media. However, social science research is still very much in its infancy when it comes to social media, especially its role in political violence and security involving rapidly evolving groups and non-static issues. Unsurprisingly, marketing and business researchers first identified the opportunity for quick and specific data on a range of interconnected issues. Those who are viewing, commenting, liking and sharing content on social media are largely ignored in the scholarly writing on the morality of the jihad. It could be argued that a binary ‘radicalisation’ framework struggles to comprehend the vagaries in the connections ‘non-radicalised’ people could have (especially through ethics-based empathy) with content supposedly only for the ‘radicalised’. Research into so-called ‘jihadi-websites’ and ‘gatekept sites’ has steadily grown given its audience is more easily typecast. However, research into the ‘open-web’ and the freely available content that discusses many of the same issues is in its infancy as researchers struggle to reconcile its place, if it has one, amongst the construct of radicalisation.

‘The problem is when we treat radicalization as a reductive explanation for violent action or a reliable indicator of violent intent. There’s a strong argument to be made that our national conversation about radicalization has expanded far beyond its mandate and its usefulness. We can and should retrench, but we shouldn’t just abandon the line of inquiry. Radicalization is one component in understanding terrorism.’

The study of radicalisation is rarely nuanced enough to appreciate the discourses on conflicts, polices, regimes and interventions that draw people together through emotional ties and content; it is ‘not only naive but may actually be counterproductive.’ This behaviour comes in a multitude of often contradictory guises: anti-Assad, anti-American, pro-Palestinian, etc., but at its core is a cosmopolitan, representation and expression of empathy and love for others often far away and very different. This groundswell of ‘invisible beliefs and practices’ needs to be much better understood. Radicalisation fails us as a conceptual framework because it cannot recognise the relationship between a banal meme about Palestine shared by a middle class British citizen, and a militant jihadist in Syria whose actions are a violent representation of this broader, more deeply entrenched empathetic groundswell using the same meme. The dynamics of this groundswell needs to be better accommodated and engaged with in cultural, social and political spheres. Further, ignorance allows those with violent motivations to appropriate this groundswell on claimed ethical grounds, only to twist it into the outward rage of terrorism and insurgency. Looking beyond the simple binaries of good vs

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16 Devji, Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality and Modernity, xv.
17 Chakrabortty, ‘Are Al-Qaeda and the Taliban Driven by the Desire to Help Others?’
19 Githens-Mazer, ‘Radicalisation via YouTube?’
20 Berger, ‘Myths of Radicalization’.
bad or radicalised vs non radicalised, public debate has started to recognise the ‘grey zone’ given the rise of IS and the complexity of the Syrian conflict. As Atran describes:

‘There is a recruitment framework. The Grey Zone, a 10-page editorial in Isis’s online magazine Dabiq in early 2015, describes the twilight area occupied by most Muslims between good and evil, the caliphate and the infidel, which the ‘blessed operations of September 11’ brought into relief. Quoting Bin Laden it said: ‘The world today is divided. Bush spoke the truth when he said, ‘Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists’, with the actual ‘terrorist’ being the western crusaders.’ Now, it said, ‘the time had come for another event to … bring division to the world and destroy the grey zone’.23

This project will enable an insight into this groundswell and provide a basis for further research that can point towards policies that address its appropriation. The grey zone is not an ideal research framework that emerges from social media discourses of the jihad in order to bring perfect understanding. Rather, social media can be one part of the fieldwork component (building on the fieldwork research of the likes of Maeri, Lankford, Kobrin and others) that can emancipate data from its sources (the ‘everyday realities’) with context being one, as yet, underutilised component to improve understanding:

‘Field research is about so much more than data collection. In fact, it could be argued that it is the process itself that plays the more crucial role of educating the researcher and deepening his/her knowledge of the context, and the everyday realities in which the perpetrators, supporters, and victims of terrorism operate.’27

5.3 From literature to practice

This section will compile a unique review of the existing academic literature addressing the morality of the jihad, and complement this with sample empirical findings from social media. It will then evaluate potential future capabilities of such approaches in understanding the use of morality discourses on social media. Part of the task in this limited scoping project is therefore to determine the value and efficacy of an adapted social media research methods such as by Smith (recently published in the journal of Terrorism and Political Violence which analysed Twitter data relating to the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Philippines) and other researchers, notably Klaussen also in 2015, who have used the social media platform Twitter, but to different ends and with different methodologies.

Despite the theoretical strengths of research on social media for the study of morality and the jihad, there are considerable practical, ethical and security difficulties, and methodological weaknesses as well. Crucially, these issues can be mitigated while, overall, the pursuit needs to be considered as one evolving strand of the observing communities’ holistic approach to researching the jihad. Social media research may not be the cure-all that some otherwise clandestine community researchers wish it to be. It is, however, one under-appreciated, but difficult avenue of research amongst several. It is important that the constraints of this one strand are made clear. Some of the major considerations are highlighted below, but in general the risk of disconnect between the content and the context of the subject is particularly stark. Those outside academia will need to be comfortable with the theoretical and methodological complexity of what Heidegger described as the ‘Hermeneutic Circle’; that is, the process of understanding derived from the cultural, historical, political and other contexts. As Dolnik has argued, when the Hermeneutic Circle is broken we ‘leave a wide open playing field for subsequent interpretation of the data’ that usually reinforces held understandings rather than improving them. In short, a single tweet or post continually needs to be viewed in the context it

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22 Ahmed, ‘ISIS Wants to Destroy the ‘Grey Zone’. Here’s How We Defend It’.  
23 Atran, ‘Mindless Terrorists?’  
24 Merari, Driven to Death; Merari, ‘Academic Research and Government Policy on Terrorism’.  
26 Kobrin, The Banality of Suicide Terrorism.  
29 Klaussen, ‘Tweeting the Jihad’.  
30 Packer, ‘Tracing the Hermeneutic Circle’.  
31 Dolnik, Conducting Terrorism Field Research a Guide, 244.
emerges from, to complete the circle. The following four caveats highlight the challenges faced by researchers in this field:

### 5.3.1 Terminology

Firstly, ‘social media’ is a widely used term in recognition of the major global platforms like Twitter (also often referred to as a micro-blogging site), Facebook and Instagram, but there is a great deal of difference in the content, behaviour and audience between, say, LinkedIn or Google+ and Youtube or Reddit. Many individuals have dual profiles: a professional account and personal account used to channel different behaviours and content. Initially then, the researcher must choose which platform(s) to use and, importantly, justify that choice when there is a wide selection available. Similarly, recognising and defending the position of the researcher, from the outside (without a fairly sophisticated and reliable micro analysis) we are unable to differentiate between ‘real’ accounts and the ‘fake’ accounts, or the ‘persona’ account and the ‘private’ accounts. Which ones are a fair representation? And of what? Which ones do we want to study? And why? Broadly, for the purposes of this section it should be understood that the social media platforms which allow instant publication of individual content (with limited but evolving levels of self and community censorship) are our locus of study, but this is a changing landscape.

### 5.3.2 Social media research: participating and observing

Participation is important yet it can also be corrupting. While participation (including observation) is certainly not a research method concern particular to social media, though it may be less of a concern than, say, field interviews, it is not immune. While this digital or virtual fieldwork, like its ‘real’ counterpart, imbues the researcher with some of the contextual cues and social norms necessary to complete Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle of understanding there is a trade-off to be understood and accounted for. Observation is not neutral, it is another observer, an(other) audience member to entertain, to speak for and to, and to discourse with: a ‘follower’, a ‘friend’ etc. It is impossible to know the validity and rationale of the audience. Further, it is because both nobody or possibly everybody can see the content, that the behaviour is so compelling for the subject and the researcher. This in itself is a fascinating dynamic that social researchers are struggling to comprehend. Most content is blind to the audience reaction or the motivations of the audience; witness where propriety algorithms rather than intentional action takes an individual to some unexpected destination, either by click or social circle. Social media is both a hyper-lonely echo chamber and a global megaphone, a contradiction and a contrivance of modern conventions in communication.

### 5.3.3 Research access

Social media platforms are proprietary and access is beholden to the companies who build them. The possibility for elaborate ‘macro-analysis’ of data (as was the case in Smith’s previous work) has already been changed because Twitter has altered the terms of its Application Programming Interface (API). This means that methods are largely not consistent for repetition in every sense: the validity of a search is time stamped, server constrained, processor sensitive and crucially at the whim of the platform’s engine. Twitter’s search API now only recalls data from preceding days (the exact amount depends upon the nature and volume of the content) over the previous month. The greater functionality provided by some platform managers such as Twitter in its API are therefore methodologically costly given there can be no assurance on its reliance.

### 5.3.4 Datasets

Baselines are difficult or even impossible to establish. Social media content (again like other research sources) on certain topics is hard (if not unfeasible) to control and to form a stable body of data to research. There is, in essence, no beginning and no end around which a researcher can easily draw a circle and call ‘the dataset’. It can only be ‘a dataset’ and many are needed to build a clearer photomosaic-like picture of certain behaviours. Search parameters, timing and consistency of the search process are all obvious variables. ‘Events’ can be easier to control as demonstrated in Smith’s earlier work on a kidnapping event, but even then can present challenges. Wider ‘issue’-related research is certainly more complicated, though still useful for certain tasks if treated carefully and in context.

### 5.4 Making or finding meaning

With these four caveats in mind it is critical that the research community, in desperate need of better understanding of the morality of the jihad, allocate sufficient time and resources to the endeavour. While social media behaviour may be fleeting it is (like the violent phenomena that prompts this research) a
zeitgeist issue. There has been a decade of fleeting behaviours, ten plus years of social media activity and fifteen plus years of *the jihad*. Ephemeral memes may be forgotten about moments after posting or viewing but to comprehend this behaviour as meaningless or less than ‘traditional’ in Real Life\(^2\) (IRL) or Away From Keyboard (AFK) actions is to overlook the fact that nearly all traditional communications have also been digital in the last decade. Passing this momentary online behaviour over as ‘digital graffiti’ would ignore the fact that like AFK graffiti, it can be incredibly meaningful and draw you into a sphere that involves physical risk\(^3\). A blurring of what was and still is a binary ‘real’ or ‘virtual’ behaviour has troubled others: ‘these types of assumptions are inherent in the functioning of this binary and influence every line of scholarly inquiry into online communication. The binary underlies much more of the discourse than most scholars are aware of, but it is particularly easy to see the binary at work when dealing with online groups, networks and communities.’\(^4\)

By coincidence, during this project on 19 February 2016, Umberto Eco died, leaving a legacy of semiotics and postmodern philosophy that is proving useful in increasing our understanding of the morality of *the jihad* in social media as *hyperreality*. Hyperreality is the inability to distinguish reality from fantasy, especially in technologically advanced postmodern cultures. Hyperreality is a means to characterise the way consciousness defines what is actually now deemed as ‘real’ in a world where a multitude of media can radically shape and filter the original event or experience being depicted\(^5\). These are the sorts of difficult questions in understanding social media discourses of *the jihad* that are often ignored and lead back to the binary thinking that has so far proved to be an inadequate interpretive framework.

### 5.5 Jihad and humanitarianism

How has the existing literature contended with the issue of morality and *the jihad*? Largely it has been avoided through use of the term ‘radicalisation’ and even though some authors have made concerted efforts to critique the reductive nature of radicalisation and point to a moral, ethical or humanitarian element to *the jihad*. Approaches so far have been limited in scope and often independent from one another. Consider the approach taken by Devji and the suggestion that jihadists could be adopting humanitarian ideals:

> ‘Given that militants today routinely invoke the plight of suffering Muslims in exactly the same way that humanitarians do of victims in general... Indeed, humanitarian actions even serve as the model for militant interventions in the contemporary rhetoric of jihad, so that Ayman al-Zawahiri recommended attacks upon infidels in the same breath as he counselled assistance to those hurt and displaced by the devastating earthquake that hit Pakistan in 2005. Zawahiri not only identified the earthquakes victims as martyrs, as if, like al-Qaeda’s militants, they had died for their faith. He also accused the United States of making war against Islamic charitable work, thus very deliberately conflating militant and humanitarian action.’\(^6\)

Devji’s largely philosophical argument is that *the jihad* has a morality similar in tone to those we are told are from the *McWorld* divide of the *Clash of Civilisations*\(^7\). While any critique of this binary oversimplification is welcomed, Devji’s has perhaps cut the deepest. Drawing together work which is contending with the issue of morality and *the jihad*, there is a case to be made for future joined up approaches to achieve a better understanding. Atran, an anthropologist, has devoted significant time to fieldwork researching ‘members’ (an admittedly problematic term) of *the jihad*. His work, particularly *Talking to the Enemy*, has caused some consternation amongst those who view morality and jihad as oil and water. It impressed Steven Pinker enough to summarise and praise Atran’s work in his popular treatise on violence and humanity, *The Better Angels of our Nature*:

> ‘Far from being ignorant, impoverished, nihilistic, or mentally ill, suicide terrorists tend to be educated, middle class, morally engaged, and free of obvious psychopathology. Atran concluded that many of the motives may be found in nepotistic altruism... Atran shows that Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups hold out a carrot rather than a stick to the terrorist’s family in the form of generous monthly stipends, lump-sum payments, and massive prestige in the community.... Atran has also found that suicide

\(^{2}\) Tusznyski, *IRL (In Real Life)*.

\(^{3}\) Bush, *The Politics of Post-Conflict Space*.

\(^{4}\) Tusznyski, *IRL (In Real Life)*, 45.

\(^{5}\) See the work of theorists on hyperreality including; Eco, *\Faith in Fakes*; Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*; Boorstin, *The Image, a Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*.

\(^{6}\) Devji, *The Terrorist as Humanitarian*, 175.

\(^{7}\) Barber, *Jihad Vs McWorld*; Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*. 
terrorism can be recruited without these direct incentives. Probably the most effective call to martyrdom is the opportunity to join a happy band of brothers. Terrorist cells often begin as gangs of underemployed single young men who come together in cafes, dorms, soccer clubs, barbershops, or Internet chat rooms and suddenly find meaning in their lives by a commitment to the new platoon.\(^\text{38}\)

Pinker observes that what stands out in Atran’s work is how he moves from the individual to the collective as the content and context dictated it. By asking individuals about their motivations, he found collective, socialised answers: ‘Commitment to the group is intensified by religion, not just the literal promise of paradise but the feeling of spiritual awe that comes from submerging oneself in a crusade, a calling, a vision quest, or a jihad.’\(^\text{39}\) Combining these ideas it becomes apparent that the telos, the ultimate aim of jihadists, is a complex, multifarious end, comprising social acceptance, community status (even if it is posthumous), earthly and heavenly rewards, and personal meaning for one’s life (and death). It is in this milieu that Devji philosophically recognised such commitment as an ethical connection within the jihad. While Devji’s work does not feature in the bibliographies of Talking to Terrorists or The Better Angels of Our Nature, it is becoming clearer that there is a degree of consolidation of ideas among what has, so far, been independent endeavours. Atran discusses this moral commitment in one of the few instances found anywhere in the literature of various fields:

‘Moral commitment to sacrifice for their group without regard for their own material reward. As long as jihadis show such moral commitment, as martyrdom missions attest to, then even overwhelming material efforts to destroy the jihadi movement may not be enough. But what gets group commitment going in the first place?’\(^\text{40}\)

Atran’s line of inquiry leads not just to interesting questions, but engaging attempts to answer some of this projects concerns: is there more to the security threat presented by the jihad than binary bad people radicalised by evil ideologies? In response, this study posits the possibility that jihad is not initially pursued by bad people doing bad things, even if that eventually occurs, but by people who consider themselves good and who want to do ‘good’ things. (Future research possibilities in this area are set out in Section 9.4.) For the most part Devji’s ideas have been ignored by those examining what is being called The Politics of Compassion\(^\text{41}\), and as yet the academic community has not associated the jihad with more established and recognised global social movements, whose morality is worn more explicitly on the outside. This lack of examination may be explained by the traditional need for a ‘social purpose’\(^\text{42}\) in most transnational social movements, networks and norms, which the Jihad generally shuns, in favour of vague acts of representation.

### 5.6 Sample case study

After running in excess of 100 searches over 22 days on Twitter, focusing on the starvation of the Syrian city of Madaya and downloading 7,654 tweets, initial analysis suggests there are a number of tentative conclusions to be reached. The first is that to build a comprehensive picture of the moral discourse on Syria and the ways it is operationalised would be an enormous undertaking requiring several personnel searching every day under a large array of parameters and following ‘interesting’ behavioural patterns. For example, following threads in social media (posts that get retweeted, or don’t), identifying by whom as well as where and how deep they go. In addition, following memes to see how and why they are adopted and adapted by different sides over time (trivialised, emphasised, re-made and re-shared).

From a sample of 100 English language tweets the following location and loose estimation of blame and support associated was conducted (see Tables 1 to 3).\(^\text{43}\)


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 284.

\(^{40}\) Atran, Talking to the Enemy, 298.

\(^{41}\) See Ure, M., & Frost, M. (Eds.). (2013). The Politics of Compassion which is singled out because it includes a chapter on Compassion and Terror and continual references to cosmopolitanism.

\(^{42}\) Nelson et al., ‘Restructuring World Politics’, 302.

\(^{43}\) Note that bias could be reduced by searching and analysing across multiple languages. Bias in social media should itself be investigated to understand how and why it is created and propagated in specific ways at specific times. This understanding could be achieved by longitudinal data analysis, building on approaches developed in Reyes, Joseph Anthony L., and Tom Smith. ‘Analysing Labels, Associations, and Sentiments in Twitter on the Abu Sayyaf Kidnapping of Viktor Okonek’. Terrorism and Political Violence 0, no. 0 (14 December 2015): 1–19.
### Table 1 - Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unspecified</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 - Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Sides’ with</th>
<th>Number of tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None/Neutral</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebels</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assad Regime</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unclear but not neutral</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>None</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 - Blame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blame attributed to which side</th>
<th>Number of tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assad Regime</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unclear but not neutral</strong></td>
<td><strong>19</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>None</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: 62 Tweets ‘blamed’ Madaya on more than one ‘side’.

This cursory analysis could be scaled and built upon with more data and analysis tools and time. Searches of Madaya bring up many ‘false positives’: numerous examples of tweets relating to South Sudan questioned the media coverage Madaya garnered given the relative suffering of the populations. In Tagalog (the joint national language of the Philippines) Madaya means deceptive or deceitful and a number of results brought up content relating to this. As the sample analysis demonstrates the majority of the social media discourse on Madaya and other Syrian subject terms tended to focus on the humanitarian issues at hand (see Figure 2).
Figure 2 - Focus on the humanitarian issues at hand

The other notable finding was the global reach of the Syrian discourse, with Indonesian observers notably commenting on Syria with overtly moral content from a politically independent setting (see Figure 3):

Figure 3 - Global reach of the Syrian discourse

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Another example of the moral and political complexity is found when contributions seemingly put the blame for Madaya variously on the Russians, Turkish, Syrian regimes as well as the Hezbollah, all informed by the context and personal values and ideology of the Tweeter (Figure 4):

![Image](https://i.imgur.com/3.png)

Figure 4 - Example of the moral and political complexity

Such findings mean that new search parameters need to be set and searches conducted to investigate the depth and complexity of the moral discourse amongst regional powers and along sectarian lines (see Figure 5):

![Image](https://i.imgur.com/4.png)

Figure 5 - New search parameters need to be set and searches conducted to investigate the depth and complexity of the moral discourse

These examples are illustrative of the complexity of overlapping and competing morality discourses on a multifaceted issue that is global in audience and participants.

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46 MS [onlyGodloving]. (2016, Feb 20). #SyriaCrisis #Madaya #PutinAtWar #erdogan #SyrianArmy #Hezbollah https://t.co/upU4ZRmanc [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/onlyGodloving/status/701134515612291072

47 See Section 9.4 for future research possibilities.

5.7 The global, the local and the jihad

Understanding how both Atran describes the global range of feeling in *the jihad* through, as yet, unexplored instances of parochial altruism, kinship and teamwork⁴⁹ and how Devji views *the jihad* as a global social movement like environmentalism, requires some appreciation of the global and local dynamics at play on such issues. These ideas continue to evade the latest examinations in *Power and Transnational Activism*⁵⁰ yet there are parallels with Chandler’s findings in *Radical Resistance ‘From Below’*. Chandler provides opportunities for the field to address ‘a startling emergence of a new type of individuated civic activism, one which engages in politics through private moral acts. The old peace movement slogan ‘Think globally, act locally’ has been reversed by global civil society activists to read ‘Think locally, act globally’ or even to ‘Think locally and act globally; act locally and globally together’⁵¹. Going further, Charles Kurzman described the chasm between social movement theory and Islamic studies and set the academic research community the challenge of bridging it⁵². It is the latest call for answers to this question of *the jihad* as a morality motivated movement. This suggests that the ‘rooted cosmopolitans with multiple belongings and flexible identities’⁵³ of Donatella Porta’s *New Activist stratum*⁵⁴ could indeed be part of *the jihad*. In this expression, Porta’s cosmopolitans are individuals whose identity is not fixed around a conventional, historical, nationalist sense of place and belonging but are, instead, global citizens who identify with multiple places and identities across political, cultural and religious boundaries. While this looks theoretically promising, an orderly change to understanding *the jihad* as a moralist social movement is unlikely, as Leheny warns:

‘Social movement theory fits uncomfortably in security studies...But I do argue that reliance on the social movement literature provides clues and intellectual tools missing from these other perspectives, primarily because of its situation of self-interested behaviour in local contexts that can be affected by the framing activities of external actors.’”⁵⁵

With this noted, we need to also appreciate that the very nature of activism is in flux and undergoing an intense period of mutation. As a result, the concept of global social movements is a disputed and difficult reality to grasp, which some of the most recent thinking in the area of technology-based activism is wrestling with:

‘Social movement theory has long focused on the problem of freeriding, yet in today’s Internet era, (with few exceptions) there is little reason for individuals to stand on the sidelines... Given evolving communication processes and the ever-expanding possibilities for social movement participation, one is pressed to ask: Must real activism carry meanings such as high-risk, difficult, and always supportive of long-term social movement goals, as Gladwell and others suggest, to preserve the historic moral weight and rules for acting that come with the term? ... [T]here is a desire for activism to be more semantically inclusive.’⁵⁶

Clicktivism (the use of social media as a means of supporting a cause or advancing social change) and different incarnations of 21st century involvement in *the jihad*, are instances of a connection much more attestable than many of the radicalisation proponents provide. These are the ‘beliefs and practices’, which Devji suggested are invisible in much of the scholarly work. The more we learn about how behaviours like clicktivism emerge and evolve, the more accurate we can be about how morality ‘works’ in *the jihad*, offering an alternative to radicalisation as a poor explanation. As Devji argues, *the jihad* has ‘become more ethical than political in nature’⁵⁷ and it is social media where these ethics are discussed, either explicitly or implicitly. In 2013 the geographer Chih Yuan Woon underlined the value of expanding the repertoire of methodologies (beyond secondary discourse analyses) in investigating violence and terrorism.⁵⁸ A potential future research

⁴⁹ See section 9 Section headed *All in the Family* from Atran, Talking to the Enemy, 295–317.
⁵⁰ Olesen, *Power and Transnational Activism*.
⁵¹ Chandler, *Constructing Global Civil Society*, 166.
⁵² Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs*.
⁵³ Bennett et al., *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, 237.
⁵⁴ Porta et al., *Globalization From Below*.
⁵⁶ Butler, ‘Clicktivism, Slacktivism, or ‘Real’ Activism Cultural Codes of American Activism in the Internet Era’, 85.
5.8 Are we stuck with ‘radicalisation’?

Hoskins et al have demonstrated in their large ground-breaking research project\(^5^9\) that ‘radicalisation has been unleashed, it has, so to speak, gone wild’\(^6^0\) and how improving our understanding has become a major problem as a result. That challenge similarly applies here to the question of improving our understanding of morality and the jihad. Reliance upon the term ‘radicalisation’ has led to a lack of discussion or research on the significance of the moral dimension of the jihad to those who subscribe to it, especially in relation to foreign policy responses\(^6^1\). As such, without continual scrutiny of the shifting dynamics of the jihad we have come to rely on the oversimplification radicalisation offers: ‘pathologizing of terrorist violence is myopic and, for most purposes, redundant.’\(^6^2\) In a number of ways, the concept of radicalisation and its application in public and policy discussions has been extended far beyond what its original meaning can sustain, leading to a plethora of descriptions of pathways into radicalisation or even, perhaps over-simplistically, causes. Many of these descriptions rely on the premise that radicalisation centres around named and, sometimes loosely, organised groups like al-Qaeda and IS. As a result, government policy and programs such as Channel and Prevent focus on de-radicalisation\(^6^3\) by making Muslims ‘better Muslims’.

Similarly, though not in a clearly compatible way, others use radicalisation as tool for the ‘projection’\(^6^4\) of the thesis that socio-economic exclusion is to blame. As early as 2005 Devji warned that those connecting to the jihad ‘share neither psychological profile nor require any cultic or ideological uniformity to bind them together.’\(^6^5\) The interplay of moral codes and subjective motivations, actions and intentions found among jihadists from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds are not those of passive individuals as radicalisation purports, but quite the opposite. They seek active and interactive engagement with rapidly evolving discursive content through social media. By seeking out novel research approaches which challenge deeply held assumptions, both academic and policy communities will be increasingly able to intellectually ‘move away’\(^6^6\) from a sole reliance on radicalisation as Sedgwick has signposted, thus supporting those arguing that radicalisation needs to be decoupled from policy.\(^6^7\) The think tank Demos, in its own way, looked for Devji’s beliefs and practices in a rare attempt at policy recommendations, with the emphasis placed on non-violence. Demos found that ‘the process of radicalisation is often over-generalised and lacking in empirical foundation’.\(^6^8\)

How can the gap be bridged between the failings of the ‘radicalisation’ discourse and the potential of Devji’s new model? Research on clicktivism and other dynamics of digital activism and participation is likely to do better to understand and more accurately detail what, and how, morality discourses are constructed and deployed in support of the jihad. When research along similar theoretical lines is designed and conducted the findings directly challenge many current frames of reference:

‘Contrary to the established view that Jihadist websites/forums seek to radicalise, results show that most virtual forums exert no considerable or sustained effort in persuasion or legitimation of the ideology or culture of Jihadism… Theological legitimation has been superseded by the appeal of emotive audio-visual material. Here Jihadist acts ‘speak’ for themselves through the ‘propaganda of the deed’’\(^6^9\)

What has followed in recent years is a community dedicated to watching the watchers – ‘In short, they watch us, we watch them, and then they watch us watching them. Rinse, repeat.’\(^7^0\) The result is the inability to

\(^5^9\) Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, ‘Legitimising the Discourses of Radicalisation: Political Violence in the New Media Ecology’.

\(^6^0\) Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology, 2.

\(^6^1\) Hoskins, Andrew, ‘The ‘War on Terror’ by Any Other Name : Ethical Dimensions of Foreign Policy’.


\(^6^4\) Hörnqvist and Flyghed, ‘Exclusion or Culture? The Rise and the Ambiguity of the Radicalisation Debate’, 331.

\(^6^5\) Devji, Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality and Modernity, 19.

\(^6^6\) Sedgwick, Problems with ‘Radicalisation’.

\(^6^7\) Bartlett, ‘Decoupling Radicalisation and Terrorism’.


\(^6^9\) Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology, 19.

\(^7^0\) Brachman, ‘Watching the Watchers’.
draw any distinction between the digital native\textsuperscript{71} retweeting ‘jihadist propaganda’ and a Kalashnikov wielding insurgent. This ‘Keyboard equals Kalashnikov’\textsuperscript{72} equation is just as reductive as the concept of radicalisation. For a more nuanced future understanding, these two elements (social media activism and physical jihadist violence) should be viewed as distinct domains of analysis, one aspect of which would be to identify the points where the two overlap rather than conflating them into one joint object of study. The flattening out of the jihad into a less ordered, more meritocratic social movement, has generated a ‘varying legitimising mechanism, the ‘media jihad’ has gradually gained respectability as a legitimate endeavour in itself’\textsuperscript{73} that is currently under appreciated in the scholarly and policy literature so far. Despite Hoskins et al and others who looked at jihadist websites for signs of this complex behaviour, and their conclusions about the importance of non-violent involvement, there is little evidence to suggest that vested communities understand this behaviour. They note:

‘The cathartic function of the Jihadists’ media spaces, which allows would-be Jihadists to be part of the broader Global Jihad, but crucially without engaging in direct violence, cannot be overstated.’\textsuperscript{74}

This digital participation is perhaps not just an unrecognized manifestation of the jihad but is another source of evidence of the theoretical weaknesses inherent in the ‘radicalisation’ approach. There has been a longstanding need to move past just using metaphors based on technology, doing so has just meant that radicalisation has led to studies of virtual radicalisation\textsuperscript{75}. Radicalisation theorists treat the digital participation as a tool of radicalisation, the means of somehow ‘infecting’ people who go on to be radicalised in a similar and inevitable manner as someone developing a physical illness. More subtly, we need to understand and value the ways that technology shapes thinking on political and cultural participation. Attempts have been made to look into the dynamics of these but are located within the context of ‘digital radicalisation’ within cultic-networked-ideology, rather than digital participation on an ethical issue. Before digital behaviours are even analysed they are categorised as the assumptions and processes of radicalisation\textsuperscript{76} are operationalised, with all the prescriptions that comes with them.

There is a need to better understand the nuances of the relationship that participants have with the jihad, so as to avoid the simplistic causations currently being applied to all forms of participation in the jihad. Zulaika has argued that this trend has meant policy and thinking on radicalisation breaks down on ‘the perversions of temporality, the logic of taboo, mystical causation and dual sovereignty’\textsuperscript{77}. This ‘participation as radicalisation’ practice is redundant and the latest thinking on technology looks to offer promising theoretical and empirical aids, to better understanding behaviours around the jihad. Commonly, digital participation is portrayed as the way the violent became radicalised in a linear model, when in all likelihood digital activism will be the leading (if not only) form of participation in the jihad for many. The Jihad, explained by Devji, gives the ‘participants’ (or however we term them) agency. In contrast, ‘radicalisation’ discourse often assumes limits on the agency of the participants. This reduces the potential to understand those digital jihadist participants who (along with other forms of digital activism) we might otherwise begin to comprehend as agents of their own politics, morality and culture. The radicalisation explanation, with all its structural limitations, especially fails to recognise and respond to this open-source nature of the jihad. This coincides with the questions Roux raises over the nature of contribution and modes or systems of contribution to the jihad from physical, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic perspectives that go ‘beyond good and evil’\textsuperscript{78}.

\textsuperscript{72} Cilluffo, ‘NETworked Radicalization: A Counter-Strategy’, 15.
\textsuperscript{73} Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology, 57.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{75} Cole, ‘Radicalisation in Virtual Worlds’; White, ‘Virtual Indoctrination and the Dighad’.
\textsuperscript{76} Conversi, ‘Irresponsible Radicalisation: Diasporas, Globalisation and Long-Distance Nationalism in the Digital Age’.
\textsuperscript{77} Zulaika, ‘Drones, Witches and Other Flying Objects’, 51.
\textsuperscript{78} Roux, ‘Agencies’ Democracy. ‘Contribution’ as a Paradigm to (re)thinking the Common in a World of Conflict’, 142.
The recognition of ‘terrorism as theatre’\textsuperscript{80} many decades ago remains insightful but now new behaviours require scholars and policy makers to ‘de-exceptionalize terrorism and to move the researcher past the morbid fascination with the spectacular act’\textsuperscript{82} and recognise the holistic nature of the act, the non-violent contributions which feed the violence. The jihad, not dissimilar to other social movements (and all facets of 21\textsuperscript{st} century life) found online, offers cultural and genre tourism; particularly for nasheed videos which add to its groundswell, connecting to the jihad\textsuperscript{82}. Instances of various corporate style social media promotion techniques such as hashtagging have tried to represent the level of ground-support for the jihad\textsuperscript{83}. This has illuminated connections and ‘support’ to levels previously reserved for older methods of communication (such as Inspire magazine). Charles Leadbeater, in his ‘love letter to the web’s emergent culture of sharing,’ described in We Think how we are identified by what we share\textsuperscript{84}. In such a light the jihad, which shares an awful lot, is an awful lot of different things to an awful lot of different people. This takes us far beyond any unified premise of radicalisation.

5.9 Beyond radicalisation

Coming to terms with the nature of how the Internet shapes our actions and ideas is changing the nature of our humanity\textsuperscript{85}, and in this sense Devji foresaw the challenge the jihad was posing to our definitions and understanding of humanitarianism. The jihad is benefitting from what Clay Shirky calls our cognitive surplus, enabling participation in a much different sense than radicalisation has explained:

‘More value can be gotten out of voluntary participation than anyone previously imagined, thanks to improvements in our ability to connect with one another and improvements in our imagination of what is possible from such participation. We are emerging from an era of theory-induced blindness in which we thought sharing (and most nonmarket interaction) was inherently rather accidentally limited to small, tight-knit groups’\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{79} Recep Cyka Erdoğan \_CykaBlyat\_. (2016, Mar 05). #FightingAssad with the squad #Syria #isis #Erdogan #meme https://t.co/hqkzr1DCPC [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/_CykaBlyat_/status/706053432151379969
\textsuperscript{81} Toros, Terrorism, Talking and Transformation, 35.
\textsuperscript{82} Weisburd, ‘Comparison of Visual Motifs in Jihadi and Cholo Videos on YouTube’.
\textsuperscript{83} Temple-Raston, ‘ISIS Brings Business Acumen To Violent Jihad’.
\textsuperscript{84} Leadbeater, We-Think.
\textsuperscript{85} Fuller, Humanity 2.0.
\textsuperscript{86} Shirky, Cognitive Surplus, 161.
Radicalisation has relied on and engendered this ‘theory-induced blindness’, and gradually we are beginning to find a framework and language. The need to keep apace in our understanding of the jihad will depend strongly on how we catch up our understanding of how technology underpins and enables much of what the jihad is to most participants and the behaviours it promotes. The ephemerality of much of the jihad, still very much in its infancy, has important implications for time and place; it is what gives actions legitimacy, currency and reality to its participants. Where new research is beginning to be undertaken, it is judging radicalisation as counterfactual\(^{87}\) and questions not just the concept but the findings and methodologies of those used until now to assert its explanation. Research into radicalisation has begun to evidence other issues that do not fit radicalisation:

‘Realities of the emergence of new transcultural identities and generational change amongst Muslim youth in the United Kingdom as a feature of their lived experience, rather than as evidence of a process of radicalisation.’\(^{48}\)

Before much more public money and academic energy\(^{89}\) is invested into de-radicalisation by the Qilliam Foundation and others\(^{80}\) there is a need to address the ‘feedback loop’\(^{91}\) amongst researchers, policy makers and commentators that is creating what Heath-Kelly astutely describes as the ‘ad-hoc production of the radicalisation discourse’\(^{92}\). An associated question is whether ‘the fear of radicalisation is a proxy for other fears’\(^{93}\), such as ‘reverse-colonisation’ from migrants as Gilroy has argued\(^{84}\), or Islamophobia\(^{95}\). Policies have embraced a hyphen-happy flurry of strategies titled with various prefaces (counter, anti, de). Even the creation of EU funded projects like the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), seems to avoid looking hard at the distinction between activism and radicalisation\(^{96}\). Given Zulaikas’s systematic deconstruction of counterterrorism ideology\(^{97}\) and the Burke and Bendle spat in Australia over critical terrorism studies,\(^{98}\) there is likely to be lively and robust debate for some time\(^{99}\). In light of the foregoing review of literature the author is confident in concluding that radicalisation is a tautology, a self-reinforcing pretence and unproductive for improving our understanding of the morality of the jihad.

Steadily, attitudes are beginning to shift. Discontent in the media about the inadequacies of the idea of radicalisation have started to surface. By the time of the Boston bombing some in the media had begun to realise, ‘There are no easy answers for why someone engages in violence against civilians, and the temptation to find them should be resisted’\(^{100}\). Not that the radicalisation proponents\(^{101}\) are about to concede the importance of their approach. Rather, the End of Radicalization has been reached because ‘We have lost focus, lost specificity and lost the ability to prioritize our problem set.’\(^{102}\) Progress is made when the validity of the radicalization process is examined in and of itself, while continuing to give the social and political

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\(^{87}\) Heath-Kelly, ‘Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the ‘Radicalisation’ Discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy’.

\(^{88}\) Lynch, ‘British Muslim Youth’, 241.

\(^{89}\) Reinares, ‘Exit From Terrorism’.


\(^{92}\) Heath-Kelly, ‘Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the ‘Radicalisation’ Discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy’, 394.

\(^{93}\) Hoskins, Awan, and O’Loughlin, Radicalisation and Media: Connectivity and Terrorism in the New Media Ecology, 9.

\(^{94}\) Gilroy, ‘Multiculture in Times of War’.

\(^{95}\) Abbas, Tahir. ‘The Symbiotic Relationship between Islamophobia and Radicalisation.’ Critical Studies on Terrorism 5, no. 3 (2012): 345–358.


\(^{97}\) Zulaika, Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.


\(^{99}\) Jones and Smith, ‘We’re All Terrorists Now: Critical—or Hypocritical—Studies ‘on’ Terrorism’?


\(^{102}\) Horgan, ‘Discussion Point: The End of Radicalization?’
influences a greater weight in analysis. One of the only responses to Devji’s ‘discourse analysis of jihad’ comes to a similar conclusion:

‘The Jihad is constituted of multiple flows of social and political desire seeking manifestation. In this regard, the Jihad is ‘pregnant with possibilities’ for creative transformation and evolution in multiple directions … Radicalisation can only be productively addressed only if we accept the need to tackle the schizophrenic multiplicity of issues and complex avenues by which molecular Radicals are born on their own terms; that is, as authentic global desiring-flows, rather than structurally defined identitarian fictions.’

What evidence has been found here indicates relevant ethical connections, suggesting merit to Devji’s explanation and warranting further exploration in more venues and on a greater scale. Because more than the violence surrounds the topic, the views, the emotions and ultimately the connections are much broader than remote surveys could garner. Close up conversation in this messy arena is needed. This may be what Bolt suggested in his study of the Irish Republican Brotherhood; ‘perhaps the Propaganda of the Deed has just been sitting in our blind-spot all along.’ While equating much of the research findings simply to some displays of propaganda of the deed might be novel, it should not be thought of as a very valuable endpoint. We should be as sceptical of Bolt’s reckoning, as we have been here of the radicalization explanation, because as Bolt admits, ‘Propaganda of the Deed is slippery, rarely yielding consensus. It draws on a conceptual tradition but eludes empirical test.’

In essence, the connections of the Jihad as explained by Devji provide numerous non-violent exits, which have not eluded empirical test. As Beger suggested ‘there are many exits and alternate destinations beyond the violence, including among them the mainstreaming of one’s radical political or religious cause.’ The complex ecosystem that Berger suggested needs further study, the so-called ‘non-violent exits’ that focus on opinions and actions. Valuable data are to be found in these social enclaves, which tell us more about the reality of peoples associations with conflict and often their resolution to disavow the terrorism of the jihad. It is necessary to contextualise such research, avoiding efforts to fit 21st century behaviours into an orthodox model of the jihad:

‘Jihad has become a millenarian movement with mass appeal, similar, in many ways, to earlier global movements such as the anarchists of the 19th century or even the peace movement of the 1960s and ’70s. But today’s radical youth are expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo by making war, not love.’

This type of false dichotomy of love and war is a drastic oversimplification, unable to reconcile the utterances of empathy and emotional support voiced for fellow Muslims far away. There is plenty of love in the jihad, as there was plenty of war in peace movement of the 60s and 70s. This Schizophrenia of global jihad, of it being not one thing, neither love nor war but both and sometimes neither, combines with a rebellious sense of having been ‘born on their own terms’. So while future fieldwork is encouraged it needs a theoretical framework to avoid the reductive tendencies of radicalisation. The more research that is conducted under these more informed guidelines, the greater the understanding of the emotional connections in the jihad and their modern forms of expression. As more of this ground-breaking research is carried out, the weaker the radicalisation explanation looks in theory and practice.

Making the case for further fieldwork on these issues is squarely aimed at challenging what has until now been an ‘insular research system whereby inter-textual referencing of existing works impoverishes the generation of ‘new’ geographical knowledge’s. Radicalisation has had an ecosystem of ‘research to itself’

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104 Ibid., 469.
108 Berger, ‘Myths of Radicalization’.
109 Berger, Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam.
110 Stern, ‘Jihad is a Global Fad’.
and largely failed to understand the moral component of the jihad and its significance in gathering and maintaining support.

5.10 Summary

According to Kruzman, ‘jihobbyists’ – a term coined by counterterrorism expert Jarret Brachman – might one day develop into revolutionaries. Other terrorists resent Muslims who claim to support Islamist revolution but never actually participate in it.113

There has been an unresolved conjecture around the inherent tension in the jihad on the meaning of participation and what is disputed about the terms of membership and involvement. Devji’s explanation best incorporated and understood the role and prominence of the jihobbyist without falling into the linear trap of radicalisation that they will one day become full-blown jihadists, and the second trap of assumed resentment from active violent terrorists. Even cursory glances at the jihobbyist habitat online shows how this ‘lesser’ commitment is in and of itself well received and appreciated. Given the research of others noted here and the samples taken for this report, emotional connections have a dual utility: they remain contained but also may be mobilised into a complex arena of modern participation. The communities making these representations may be to Devji’s eyes a global social movement but they also act like groups coalescing around a public interest issue. Regardless of the exact nature of that silent emotional connection or participation, the common element was a connection to a central issue, a morality-based idea: Madaya was the fault of Assad, the rebels, Turkey, and so on. Public interest issues work on a similar basis, disputable and ghettoised without strict membership or formal codes of adherence. This strips away the global social movement to the core of the connection – the shared moral understanding.

Public interest issues are commonly found in legal and governmental work, often with an ethical basis for policy114. Social movements and protest groups also often operate by ‘shifting’115 a private protest into a public protest as a ‘proxy’116. This is happening more and more across geographies to a global scale117 when actors take action for the sake of others (a public), be it for Genetically Modified (GM) crops, deforestation, fracking, or the Climate Change movement. Public interest issues, as nebulous and contested as they often are, do not require a static group or community (though these are often found) to validate individual involvement. Actors subscribe to and act with freedom towards the elements they feel strongly about; involvement in a global social movement could come later with sustained involvement amongst a community. At inception the jihad asks a question: Do you recognise or identify with this public interest issue? The potential value of developing this model of the jihad is as much in its method of communication, because public interest issues are personally understood yet often publically shared. What Sherry Turkle describes as the reliance on the digital dependency ‘to share’ for a generation ‘growing up tethered’118 is enabling sharing of that important ephemerality of a cause important at a particular time. The jihad, therefore goes beyond a global social movement to become more of an open sourced, cloud-based public interest issue. To understand these philosophical and practical shifts that shape the lived experience of those who would sympathise with or give support to the jihad, expanded frameworks of analysis, with corresponding innovative research methodologies and methods, will be needed both now and in the future.

In the next section discussion shifts from the moral component of the ill-defined, contingent online world of social media and jihad to a discussion of the relevance of Western Just War approaches to the multifarious, ongoing Syria conflicts. In contrast to the rapidly changing landscape of the Twitter-sphere and its associated moral claims and counter-claims, Just War has emerged over two millennia. Its precepts are so deeply embedded in Western political discourse that its value and relevance commonly goes unchallenged. As its

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113 Kruzman, The Missing Martyrs, 34.
118 Turkle, Alone Together.
foundational assumptions are critiqued against the backdrop of events in and around Syria, limitations are highlighted and possible ways forward identified.
Exploring the limitations of Competing Western Just War discourses

Peter Lee

For millennia, Just War has emerged in the West as a stable, broadly (though not universally) accepted tradition of moral thought that has evolved over time in relation to changing social, cultural, religious and political contexts. Its purpose has been to provide a moral framework which would shape decisions to go to war, and define acceptable conduct during hostilities. Criteria such as just cause, right intention, last resort, reasonable possibility of success, proportionality and others have taken differing priorities at different times and contexts. In the 5th century, Augustine (commonly accredited as the origin of Classical Just War reasoning) rooted his Just War in a combination of Christian theology and Platonic philosophy, locating the ultimate goal of the just leader and the just soldier in the heavenly City of God in the next life. By the 13th century Aquinas brought together the key ideas from previous thinkers and began to codify Just War in a form still recognisable in large part today. While still rooted in Christianity, he incorporated Aristotelian ethics into his Just War, placing increasing emphasis on the importance of living a good life on Earth. Numerous Catholic scholastics developed Just War further in the 16th and 17th centuries, before Grotius (17th century) and Vattel (18th century) began and continued the process of ‘de-Christianising’ Just War. Thereby shifting its basis from divine command and religious text to human reason and law. Western Just War continued to develop competing and sometimes contradictory sub-strands to the point where it can now only be considered to be a unitary tradition of thought in the loosest of definitions.

An agreed, homogeneous moral component of conflict based on Just War itself is increasingly difficult to articulate given the moral rivalries developing between competing Western Just War approaches. In this section, two competing Just War approaches will be analysed: the collective-rights-based approach most commonly associated with Walzer, and the individual-rights-based approach advocated by McMahan. In the process, consideration of elements of deontological (rule following, with an emphasis on international law) and utilitarian reasoning within the two approaches will demonstrate the strengths and limitations in each. Before addressing these competing Just War theories, however, we will first explore the complexity of the Syrian context in which they are to be applied, to better understand the limitations of this historical Western approach to morality and war.

For millennia, a typically unspoken assumption in Just War reasoning is that war will be fought between two protagonists, one of whom will usually have a greater claim on justice than the other. In the process of discussing how to assess which of two contending parties should have the greater moral claim, Vattel made a rare reference to ‘two enemies’ meeting in war if both sides appeared to have a similar jus ad bellum (that is, moral right to go to war). Jus ad bellum is typically assessed in relation to a number of criteria: just cause, right intention, last resort, legitimate authorisation, reasonable possibility of success, and proportionality. Vattel argued that the side which fought most legitimately had the higher claim on justice. It is difficult to identify significant wars in history that could not be reduced to two opposing sides, even if those sides comprised numerous allied forces – both regular and irregular: Greeks vs Trojans at Troy; Roman conquest of Britain; France vs the UK, Russia, Prussia and Austria at Waterloo; Allied powers vs Axis powers in World War II; UK vs Argentina in the Falklands conflict.

In contrast, fighting in Syria has myriad protagonists with various types of war being fought simultaneously. In early 2016 the UK and US, with others, are using conventional air power, including Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS), against IS but not against the Assad regime; Russia is using conventional bombing against any group, IS and otherwise, that opposes the Assad regime, and with little apparent concern for non-

119 Reichberg, 2016, 13.
120 For a full exposition see Lee, Peter, A Genealogy of the Ethical Subject in the Just War Tradition, PhD Thesis, King’s College London, 2010.
combatant deaths; Assad’s Syrian government is using unconventional bombing and bombardment (barrel bombs and chemical weapons) against opposition groups and civilians; ‘rebel’ groups have laid siege to major towns like Aleppo, starving everyone therein; Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others are directly or indirectly supporting proxy fighters and groups to further regional interests; IS is meanwhile occupying territory with genuine ambitions to statehood; hundreds of other opposition groups are engaged in a fluctuating civil war, with shifting and temporary alliances between Jihadists, Islamists and non-Islamists (loosely defined); refugees and displaced people are being used as a coercive political tool as well as creating a humanitarian catastrophe; meanwhile, online Jihad (as addressed in section 5) is increasing terrorist threat around the world.

The application of two contrasting approaches by Walzer and McMahan highlight limitations within contemporary Just War reasoning. Walzer is taken here to represent (acknowledging simplifications) a range of Just War theorists who would associate with a communitarian approach that is based primarily on the rights of the state or political community. From many examples these would include Richard Norman (‘The concept of rights is essentially a social one’), Paul Ramsey (for whom Just War was a ‘working politico-military doctrine’ not an individualised theory) and Nick Rengger (‘Just War as fundamentally state-based’).

6.1 State rights-based Just War

Walzer broadly summarises the aspect of his moral code that enables the conduct of war to be described, disputed, justified or otherwise, as the ‘war convention’, which for him is made up of ‘the set of articulated norms, customs, professional codes, legal precepts, religious and philosophical principles, and reciprocal arrangements that shape our judgements of military conduct.’ He does not expand on how these elements of the war convention have emerged over time, nor principles from which they are derived: an approach criticised by McMahan (to whom we will turn later) as inadequate and in places incoherent.

Walzer argues that the moral basis for war is rooted in a ‘doctrine of human rights,’ going on to say, ‘States’ rights are simply their collective form.’ It is the rights of states that are paramount in Walzer’s Just War theory, principal actors in a ‘global community [that] is pluralist in character, a community of nations, not of humanity.’ Relevant in the case of Syria, however, is a key condition that he places on the moral standing of states. A state must promote and protect a common life that is shared by its citizens: ‘If no common life exists, or if the state doesn’t defend the common life that does exist, its own defense may have no moral justification.’ It is clear that Syria has no meaningful common life. Worse, the state military and security instruments are turned against Syrians in a way that, for Walzer, can deny Syria the moral basis of self-defence.

Perhaps more importantly for any attempt to apply Walzer’s Just War reasoning to Syria in 2016, is that his prioritisation of the political community is his reluctance to countenance military intervention across state borders. In his original 1977 book, military intervention was ‘peripheral’ to his arguments and it was not until 2006 that he conceded an extremely limited right of intervention in the fourth edition of *Just and Unjust Wars* (admitting only three grounds: secession, civil war or genocide). He has never changed his fundamental view that ‘interventions’ should be very infrequent affairs. In the case of Syria the reasons are clear: there is no single ‘bad’ enemy to overcome in order to preserve individuals and their rights within a stable, fair state. The aim of a ‘better state of peace’ that Just War pursues cannot even be sensibly articulated. A liberal, Western democratic ‘better state of peace’ with associated ‘freedom’ and democracy elements would look fundamentally different to the ‘better state of peace’ pursued by IS and jihadists of multiple hues. For

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124 BBC, 13 February 2016.
125 Norman, 1995, 39.
127 Rengger, 2010, 300.
128 Walzer, 2000, 44.
130 Walzer, 2000, xxii.
131 Walzer, 2000, 54.
133 Walzer, 2000, 54.
example, Islamists (the same ones who take child brides and have enforced sexual slavery in recent years) refer without irony to ‘freeing’ women from oppressive sexualisation of the West. Also, in 2005 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (leader of the group that developed into IS) declared democracy and voting to be ‘the worst form of apostasy, with the sovereignty of popular will placed above that of God’. Complicating matters further, Assad’s Russian-backed vision for a future Syria would be contradicted by those of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq and Qatar. If conventional, state-based Just War cannot articulate a coherent moral goal in terms of what a ‘better state of peace’ would look like there is little possibility of achieving it: especially if it is opposed on multiple fronts, politically, militarily, morally and religiously.

A cursory attempt to apply Just War’s jus ad bellum criteria (just cause, right intention, last resort, legitimate authorisation, reasonable possibility of success, and proportionality) further questions its relevance. There appear to be multiple ‘just causes’ for military action in Syria: use of chemical weapons, mass population displacement, widespread killing of civilians, sexual violence, torture, but Syrian actions against another state is not one of them. However, at different times, different protagonists in Syria have been guilty of some or all of these activities. Even if the correct individuals or groups could be identified the chances of successfully defeating them militarily in counter-insurgency warfare, without killing more civilians, is remote. More problematically in Just War terms, even where the Syrian regime of Assad has committed atrocities that would reach the threshold of a just cause for just intervention, it has the backing of Russia on the ground, in the air, and at the UN Security Council. Legitimate authorisation for military action is not a simple matter for Western powers to decide on their own. Furthermore, while a fully committed major US-led force would likely defeat a Russian force in Syria the cost would be both incalculable and politically unacceptable. Even against IS and other anti-Syrian government forces a reasonable possibility of success is impossible to quantify. Short-term military success could perhaps be achieved in conventional fighting terms but the long-term insurgency that would inevitably follow would be hugely costly and almost impossible to defeat purely with force (and without politically unacceptable collateral damage). At every turn a simple deontological analysis of state-centric Just War (that is, an emphasis on rule-following and conformity to established criteria) appears inadequate. As Paul Fussell observed, ‘If truth is the main casualty in war, ambiguity is another.’

Political imperatives tend towards over-simplification and the binaries of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘them’ and ‘us’ in pursuing support for unpopular, ill-defined or morally vague courses of action. A crucial challenge in applying Just War reasoning to Syria is trying not to lose sight of that ambiguity.

### 6.2 Individual Rights-based Just War

In the 1990s and 2000s an alternative to state rights-based Just War emerged in the form of individual rights-based Just War theorising. Jeff McMahan has been in the vanguard of this approach, with his critique of Walzer in particular and state rights-based just war in general. (An important caveat to insert here is that James Turner Johnson, a scholar rooted in the historical Just War tradition, considers McMahan’s approach to differ from that tradition and does not sit within its lineage.)

A potential shift to Just War theory based on individual rights would be as radical as the development in the Early Modern and Enlightenment periods of Just War as a Christian/religious based morality is to a morality based in human reason and state sovereignty.

Walzer acknowledged a relationship, which he opted not to theorise, between individual and state rights in his Just War theory. In response, McMahan attributes to his opponent a full reliance on the ‘domestic analogy’, where the attributes of the individual are projected onto the state. McMahan considers this association to be a significant weakness in Walzer’s approach, ‘If we conduct our thinking about war by focusing on relations among states and treating states as if they were individuals with rights that are analogues of the rights of persons, the actual rights of actual persons become essentially invisible’. Walzer rejected this reading of his approach as an oversimplification, but McMahan went further, stating, ‘some of

135 Burke, 2015, 68.
136 Fussell, 1975, 79.
138 Johnson, 2013, 34.
139 McMahan, 2007, 96.
the principles [Walzer] defends do not and cannot derive from the basic moral rights of individuals and indeed, in some cases, explicitly permit the violation of those rights\textsuperscript{140}. This approach has particular implications for the conduct of war: both for the moral claims of combatants and non-combatants, and in identifying legitimate targets.

There is a further difficulty when applying McMahan’s individual rights-focused approach to Syria. He argues that where just cause is absent there can be no discrimination, because, ‘what discrimination requires is that soldiers target only those who are morally responsible for an unjust threat or for some other grievance that provides a just cause for war’.\textsuperscript{141} In practical terms, the UK’s intervention in Syria becomes problematic if British armed forces (in other words, air strikes by the Royal Air Force) can only be taken against those who cause an unjust threat. But an unjust threat against whom? Not a direct threat to the UK, which cannot reasonably be argued to currently be at a level justifying war. An unjust threat between contending groups in Syria? It is difficult to judge the degree and culpability of unjust threat when every party claims, and perhaps is, at threat from every other contending party involved. In addition, Russia is operating in Syria at the express invitation of the Syrian government, acknowledging the limitations of its own claims to legitimacy, in a manner that somewhat parallels the UK’s and US’s invitation from the Iraqi government to operate in Iraq. Leaders of the UK, and other states, may feel an obligation to act in Syria to reduce the humanitarian, social and political damage being done in that country, in the Middle East, and extending into Europe. However, such a sense of obligation (which may be further complicated by domestic political considerations and agendas) does not have the same legal weight as an express invitation from legitimate state representatives. In addition, an imperative to ‘do something’, or at least to be seen to be doing something, may compel a government to action where inaction or further observation and analysis may be more helpful in the long term.

Because threat, legitimacy and the status of combatants/non-combatants are linked to the actions of combatants in McMahan’s Just War, the threat needs to be identified and action taken. But only by those who are threatened against those who threaten. In other words, Reaper crews on another continent would not have the moral right to attack IS fighters because they are not under direct threat from those same fighters. The moral equality of combatants that Walzer recognises, where combatants on each side are legitimised, by the action of defending their state or political community and where each combatant on both sides can legitimately kill any recognised combatant on the opposing side, is rejected by McMahan’s individualised approach, a combatant can only kill the person who is directly threatening to kill him or her. One consequence is that Reaper\textsuperscript{142} or other remote weapon system operators could not apply military force because they are personally not under threat.\textsuperscript{143} In addition, McMahan grants that both sides in a war can lay claim to a just cause.\textsuperscript{144} The assumption is that there are two sides in war. Consequently, McMahan’s Just War based on universal individual moral rights leads to logical conclusions within its own frame of reference, but appears unworkable in a complex security context like Syria which is characterised by competing political interests and contradictory moral frameworks – especially those for whom the Western notion of universal moral rights is anathema.

### 6.3 A non-binary alternative to Western Just War (focus on subjectionivation)

This section argues that competing moral claims about what a future peace should look like in Syria cannot be reconciled across all of the contending, interested parties because notions of such a future peace are themselves contested, malleable and socially and culturally situated. Consequently, there can similarly be no clear, unitary moral component to the crisis and it will be argued that any suggested Just War-based binary moral solution will inevitably be inadequate; unable to respond to a crisis characterised by shifting political, ethnic and religious rivalries. To simply project a Western Just War moral framework onto ‘them’ is to open

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{141} McMahan, 2005, 6.

\textsuperscript{142} The Reaper MQ-9 is a remotely piloted aircraft system (RPAS) or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operated by the UK. It originates in the US where it operates alongside the MQ-1 Predator.

\textsuperscript{143} This point is explored at length in Peter Lee, ‘Rights, Wrongs and Drones: Remote Warfare, Ethics and the Challenge of Just War Reasoning’, *Air Power Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn/Winter 2013) 30-49.

\textsuperscript{144} McMahan, 2005, 19.
the UK/West to charges of moral imperialism. ‘They’ – Muslim states, groups and individuals observing a conventional Islamic moral code; jihadists conforming to a radical reinterpretation of that code; or a Russia that places the value of maintained statehood above the value individual human lives – consistently reject Western morality as surely as their differing approaches are rejected in the West. The concept of human rights offers little promise as the basis of a solution since, as will be argued in the sections to follow, Russia views the individual through the lens of the state, and both conventional and jihadist Islamic moralities view individual rights through the lens of an all-knowing and all-seeing God. This Islamic approach has more in common with pre-Enlightenment, Christianity-based Western Just War than with its modern successor. The ‘rights’ of women in Wahabist Saudi Arabia (the UK’s and US’s major regional economic and security ally) bear little resemblance to those enshrined in the European Convention on Human Life. The ‘rights’ of women in areas controlled by IS are non-existent in Western terms with sexual slavery and forced marriage endemic. Yet both of these representations of Islam reject Western notions of rights on the basis that they morally corrupt God’s ordained place for women in society.

In practical terms (for morality that ‘works’ must in the end be practical) there is no possibility of the contending parties surrounding Syria to agree a shared moral framework. Consequently, there can be no universal agreement on what a ‘better state of peace’ might look like. The very notion is imbued with contradictory political, ideological, cultural and religious dimensions. What remains as a starting point is some form of moral realism (that which can realistically be achieved as opposed to an idealistic ambition), a degree of shared, minimal moral utility between, say, Western powers, Russia and affected Muslim states in the region. IS and associated Jihadists/ Islamists would not be accepted into this dialogue. There is no scope here to critique the limitations of utilitarianism as a moral framework, and it has significant drawbacks. However, in a situation as dire as Syria in 2016, the ‘less worse’ option must surely be better than the ‘worst option’. The latter includes the ongoing use of chemical weapons, the bombing of civilians, murder, torture, enslavement, oppression, the displacement of entire populations, the destabilisation of small neighbouring states like Lebanon, and an undermining of the European Union as illustrated by the collapse of the Schengen Area through the reintroduction of border controls. In other words, some kind of cost-benefit calculation becomes necessary, probably of a utilitarian kind.

In this situation Draper provides a helpful conceptualisation when he refers to ‘justifiable war’ as opposed to a more ideal Just War. The core element of this justifiable war is a calculation as to whether going to war will be more or less injurious to individual lives and individual rights to life than not going to war. With the Syrian state lying politically, morally and socially fractured there is merit in using an individual-oriented moral calculation. This is probably more relevant in Europe to where millions of resultant refugees and migrants are fleeing since the European Convention of Human Rights enshrines individual rights in law in a way not found in any other major global region. Russian air strikes in February and early March 2016 during an agreed ceasefire against Syrian civilians and non-IS groups opposed to the Assad regime provide another perspective. Where McMahan’s view of the state in Walzer’s Just War theory is overly critical, his words resonate with Russia’s actions, which ‘treat individual persons as if they had no more significance in relations between states than a person's individual cells have in relations between persons’.

6.4 Summary

Conventional Western Just War faces significant limitations and drawbacks when applied to complex situations like Syria in 2016, both in the sense of the historically rooted, state-oriented tradition and in the emerging individual-oriented just war theorising represented by McMahan. A pragmatic response is to use a form of utilitarian moral calculation in pursuit of the ‘least unjust’ response that the key protagonists can agree upon. This approach, in turn, may inform political discourse and wider public debate. For example, where political leaders make bold, binary (‘my way is good and right, the alternative is bad and wrong’) statements in making a moral case for war or military intervention, so much contradictory and complex
evidence is available through multiple media and other sources that credibility is lost when an audience can see the complexities that politicians apparently do not. Further, when action is justified in complex situations using a simple binary ‘good/bad’ framework, populations lose trust when those complex situations descend into greater chaos. In addition, while the rights and safety of individuals are commonly prioritised in political discourse that seeks to justify military action, the impact on intervening countries (such as immigration, cost, death of military personnel, international standing) can be easily overlooked and a population subsequently alienated. As analysis continues in section 7, exploring in greater detail some of the moral dimensions of conventional Islamic approaches by states and individuals in relation to Syria, further nuances in the complexity of the moral component of the Syrian conflict(s) will become increasingly apparent.

David Cameron to Parliament on 2 December 2015 seeking authority for military action against IS in Syria: ‘The action we propose is legal, necessary and the right thing to do to keep our country safe’. Transcript at Hansard, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm151202/debtext/151202-0001.htm, accessed 29 April 2016. In both examples the complexities and opposing arguments were downplayed, creating a binary choice in non-binary situations.
7 Conventional Islamic Morality and War

Social Construction of Conflict and Morality: The Middle Eastern Perspective

Sameera Khalfey

In exploring the moral component of conflict from the Middle Eastern perspective, this section challenges the notion of a uniform ‘Islamic’ conception of morality. It similarly rejects any suggestion of a uniform regional approach: to presuppose that a single morality exists undermines the complexity of the human condition, and the cultural difference and political rivalry involved. Instead, this section illustrates the multiplicity of moralities that exist, the complexity that they create, and allows for a more nuanced understanding and engagement by the British government and Western powers more broadly.

The exploration of ‘Islamic’ concepts of morality to follow will highlight the role of religion. It will address the ideological roots of morality and its use to legitimise actions and the multiple forms that this may take. The divisions within Islam and within the region, culturally and ideologically, form divisions that impact the morality that is adhered to. The most clear example and delineation is that of the sects within Islam. Born from the same religious sources, Shia and Sunni interpretations of the faith emphasise differing practices and as such hold differing values that will direct their actions. The ability to attack female non-combatants differs between the Shafi and Hanafi madhabs of Islam. The former will allow disregard of the non-combatant status of women of non-Muslim faith, whilst the latter would protect them. Exploring the ‘Islamic’ concept of morality provides a metanarrative for the region. It will be the source for many variants of morality, inclusive of radical and terrorist morality already addressed in section 5.

The remainder of this section will therefore address the following: first, the abstract and ‘Islamic’ conceptions of morality, including philosophical and scriptural conceptions therein; second, the importance of morality in shaping human conduct; third, how morality impacts the international system. This third element will allow for the exploration of both theoretical and the practical aspects within the context of Syria and the region. Discussion of the use, or not, of morality discourses by Saudi Arabia and Iran in relation to Syria will provide an understanding that goes beyond the theoretical and allows for an evaluation of the extent (and context) to which morality claims are used as motivation or justification by these states in pursuit of political ends. The amalgamation of the theoretical and the practical will allow for a clear conception of the multiplicity of moralities and their differing roles within the international context in comparison to that put forward in the other sections.

7.1 Islam and morality

‘Islamic’ morality is built upon a common grammar, a grammar with subtle variances among those who speak differing dialects (i.e. those who follow differing variants of Islam, or are influenced by differing cultures). Any answer to the question, ‘What is ‘Islamic’ morality?’ will therefore mirror the differences that exist within the region. A distinction is made here between Islam and ‘Islam’. The former relates directly to the religion and scripture, whilst the latter refers to ideas that are born from scripture. This section will highlight a few of these nuances, building the metanarrative of ‘Islamic’ morality.

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150 Meaning school of thought.
151 T.E. Lawrence writings on the Arabs highlighted the variances that existed. Lawrence noted: ‘A first difficulty...was to say who the Arabs were... There was a language called Arabic; and in it lay the test. It was the current tongue of Syria and Palestine, of Mesopotamia, and of the great peninsula called Arabia on the map. Before the Moslem conquest, these areas were inhabited by diverse peoples, speaking languages of the Arabic family... However, Arabic, Assyrian, Babylonian, Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syrian were related tongues; and indications of common influences in the past, or even of common origin, were strengthened by our knowledge that the appearances and customs of the present Arabic-speaking peoples of Asia, while as varied as field-full of poppies, had an equal and essential likeness.’ T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph, London, Jonathan Cape, 1955, p.31.
7.1.1 Quranic roots of morality

The use of the term ‘morality’ within the Quran is dependent upon the translation provided. It has been listed in conjunction with trust and honesty.\textsuperscript{152} It is synonymous with ideals associated with being honourable, choosing the right path, and heaven.\textsuperscript{153} Much of what is considered moral is rooted in the tribal values of the host communities. What was considered moral was trustfulness, in contrast to ingratitude and infidelity; personal honour, courage, manliness, truthfulness, faithfulness, loyalty, and hospitality.\textsuperscript{154} Ultimately, to be moral is to be pious. The holistic nature of the faith makes provision for the actions and behaviour of the believer. Thus, encapsulated within the tenets and prescriptions of Islam is morality. The examples below highlight the equation between the love of God and morality (Table 4).

**Table 4 - Examples highlighting the equation between the love of God and morality**

| ‘...do good To parents, kinfolk, Orphans, those in need, Neighbours who are of kin Neighbours who are strangers, The Companion by your side, The way-fairer (ye meet), And what your right hand possess: For Allah loveth not The Arrogant the vainglorious’\textsuperscript{155} | ‘But waste not by excess For Allah loveth not wasters’\textsuperscript{156} |

Morality is developed through the actions of the Prophet (Sunnah), the madhabs and shari’a. Translation and interpretation lead to varying ‘paths’ that may be pursued and form the basis of the multitude of moral languages and dialects that may exist. For example, the treatment of prisoners of war differs according to the madhab that is followed. Each of these interpretations poses a point of contention not only with the West, but, potentially, with other ‘Islamic’ actors.

7.1.2 Beyond scripture

The thinkers of the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} centuries took the principles of Islam and applied them to the political context of the time, developing Islamic thought and the madhabs that were to pluralise Islam. Al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun are two key thinkers that utilise and focus upon morality within their discussions of politics. Al-Ghazali’s focus on moral relationships draws on the concept of ‘balance’. Rooted in Hellenic thought, Al-Ghazali promoted virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. His main premise was that you must treat others as you wish to be treated. Central to this is the interplay between balance and justice.\textsuperscript{157} Al-Ghazali represents a degree of continuity with ‘Western’ thought as opposed to its contradiction.\textsuperscript{158} In contrast, Ibn Khaldun is described as bridging the ethical and observed. His attention to the law and servants illustrates this. Khaldun stated that mistreatment of servants would be the cause of social problems and instability – the remedy of which lies in ‘balance’. The ruler should protect his citizens against mistreatment, but also be bound to the law.\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{152} Muhsin Khan (Translator) S23.8 http://quran.com/search?q=moral [accessed 12/03/2016]

\textsuperscript{153} Translations of the Quran talk about the right path or the straight path which is associated with being pious and therefore moral. To be religious is to be acting morally.

\textsuperscript{154} Antony Black, The History of Islamic Political, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011 P.11

\textsuperscript{155} An Nabawiyah.54 V36 p.221


\textsuperscript{157} Antony Black p.28

\textsuperscript{158} Further exploration of this commonality is suggested in section 9.

\textsuperscript{159} Antony Black p.28
7.2 Morality and human conduct

The pivotal aspect of morality within the multifarious conflicts in and around Syria is its negotiation with the moralities that shape the actions of competing actors at the state and sub-state levels. With claim and counter-claim in the contemporary international system frequently expressed in ‘morality politics’ discourses. Comprehending its role and importance is vital to contextualising it within the greater issue addressed here; understanding the moral component of conflict. The importance of morality lies in its ability to motivate and direct action, indicating what is acceptable and unacceptable. It provides a basis from which an understanding of adversaries is formed, or from which effective peace building may be pursued. The multiple moralities that may exist and interact therefore face a negotiation of what is acceptable and what is not. Clashes occur when at least a degree of common ethical understanding is not reached. An example of which is the lack of understanding of the cultural and moral context of conflict in Afghanistan.

At the surface level at least, Quranic sources of morality can be claimed to be compatible with ‘Western’ morality, insofar as they can be said to promote social cohesion. However, the principles upheld are promoted as distinct, as are the philosophical, ideological and religious claims they rest upon. The Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in 1990 is representative of this: it was a break away from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the basis that it incorporated God. Thus, whilst a degree of superficially shared vocabulary may be identified (human rights), the need to identify and create comparisons and links across concepts such as shura and democracy are more problematic and undermine the ability for direct dialogue. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani proclaimed that it was ‘not necessary for Muslims to take up where the Europeans ended... He criticised those who believed in aping the Europeans model without modification or reservation and accused them of posing a threat to the sovereignty of the Ummah.’ Consideration must therefore be given to the ‘religious’ basis of morality and social structure. Ignoring such differences can magnify points of contention, and consequently be used as the basis of fundamentalist action against the ‘West’.

7.3 Morality and the international system

Beyond compatibility and incompatibility, continuity and discontinuity, morality offers the ability to formulate a dialogue between actors and the establishment of a common set of rules to direct action. More so, the nature of morality itself elevates the motivation and legitimacy of action due to its core role within society. This can entrench conflict further as it introduces values to interactions which go beyond politics at the national or strategic level to include community and individual levels. In an international system that is now laden with moral claims, the inability to form a complimentary dialogue between moralities undermines the ability to understand others or take effective action. The exploration of the Islamic Just War Theory and the limits of morality below will address this further.

7.3.1 Islamic Just War Theory

‘The Qur’an teaches that war must be limited and be conducted in as humane way as possible.’ General principles of 'last resort', 'self-defence' and 'just conduct' are principles not unique to Western Just War Theory, but similarly emerged in Islam. Islam recognises the reality of war, while simultaneously preaching the importance of, and the ultimate aim of peace. In this there are echoes of the 5th century Christian Augustine: ‘war is waged in order to obtain peace.’ Islam in essence preaches what might be termed ‘Idealistic Realism’, for its recognition of conflict ‘undermines the possibility of an Islamic pacifism’ When addressing the question: ‘Why is humanity prone to war?’ the Qur’an claims it to be a result of human inability to maintain ‘moral innocence.’ True peace (salaam) is therefore not merely an absence of war; it

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162 Karen Armstrong, loc.cit


164 Sohail Hashmi, op.cit, p.150-151

165 Ibid, p.148
is the elimination of the grounds for strife or conflict, and the resulting waste and corruption (fasad) they create. Peace, not war or violence, is God’s true purpose for humanity.\textsuperscript{166}

Quranic pronouncements on conflict echo criteria associated with Western Just War theory – just cause, conduct and last resort (Table 5):

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|p{6cm}|p{6cm}|p{6cm}|}
\hline
\textbf{‘Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loveth not transgressors.’\textsuperscript{167}} & \textbf{‘War is permissible in self-defence, and under well-defined limits. When undertaken, it must be pushed with vigour, but not relentlessly, but only to restore peace and freedom for the worship of Allah. In any case strict limits must not be transgressed: women children, old and infirm men should not be molested, nor trees and crops cut down, nor peace withheld when the enemy comes to terms.’\textsuperscript{168}} & \textbf{‘If they incline to peace, then make peace with them.’\textsuperscript{169}} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Note here that peace is not pursued for its own sake, however, but in order to facilitate the worship of Allah. ‘Worship of Allah’ is a basis for the pursuit of peace that would be rejected by secular (non-religious) and Christian Western approaches, as well as by Russian equivalents. Scripture allows for the passages of peace (as above) but also for ‘verses of the sword’ revealed during the Meccan era. The two distinct views on war have been used to the advantage of pacifist and aggressor alike. They form the basis of the interpretations of the jurists and justification of violence by actors like IS and other groups that would be labelled as extremist from other perspectives.

The division of Islam into two competing interpretations of the faith, Sunni and Shi’i, provide scope for interpretational differences.\textsuperscript{170} In the limited scope available, focus will be placed on the Sunni stream of thought, as a comprehensive evaluation of both schools is not possible here.\textsuperscript{171} It should be noted that the interpretations of jurists are heavily subjective. They are influenced by \textit{Ijtihad, fiqh}\textsuperscript{172} and as Sachedina states ‘the socio-political circumstances of the Muslim community.’\textsuperscript{173}

The four schools within Sunni thought encompass subtle differences through their use of \textit{qiyas} (reason). The Hanafi’s and the Malakites’s are rationalists; the former uses \textit{qiyas} and \textit{iijtihad} to hypothesise solutions to difficulties being faced by the Ummah; the latter differs only in detail as they also looked to the Hadith. Contrastingly the Shafei′i’s claimed the Hanafi School had too much personal prejudice through their process of \textit{qiyas} and \textit{iijtihad}; Shafei′i’s therefore uphold tradition more critically. The Hanabalite school of thought however, goes beyond the traditionalism of the Shafei′i’s and takes a literal interpretation of the sources,

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, p.149
\textsuperscript{167} Mushaf al-Madinah an-Nabawiyah S2:190
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid, S2:190 note 204, p.79
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid, S8:61
\textsuperscript{170} Modern Jurists are categorised further by their political standings: Fundamentalist, Conservative and Reformist.
\textsuperscript{171} The Sunni school of thought is essentially the orthodox form of ‘Islam’. Sunni jurists relate as closely as possible to the Islamic sources attempting to maintain the ethics purported. The jurists differ from the Islamic sources through their adaptation and expansion of the principles proposed. Incorporation or their own cultural traditions and the tribal sense of honour have ensured a level of evolution away from the sources. (James Turner, M. Rquibuz Zaman, Sohail H Hashmi, Muhsin M Mahdi, James Turner Johnson, John Kelsay and James Turner, passim)
\textsuperscript{172} Ijtihad, meaning interpretation of the sources and the formulation of legal rulings from this. Fiqh, meaning Islamic jurisprudence. The development of ijtihad came as a result of an evolving and expanding Ummah. Increasing questions over the composition of the society in light of its vast size and the increasing inability to govern effectively brought about an increased need for the jurists to reassess Islamic society. The possibility of the Ummah being unified under a single ruler was increasingly becoming impractical and the Caliphate, by the tenth century, was facing blatant opposition and competition from rival rulers. (Karen Armstrong\textsuperscript{2}, Islam: A short History, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000, passim) Writings of the jurists represent interpretations of the Shari’a in an attempt to remedy these problems.
\textsuperscript{173} Abdulaziz A Sachedina, Chapter Two: The Development of Jihad in Islamic Revolution and History, in James Turner Johnson and John Kelsay (eds), Cross, Crescent and Sword: The Justification and Limitation of War in Western and Islamic Tradition, New York (US), Greenwood Press, 1990, p.35
and allows very little room for analogy.\textsuperscript{174} These differing schools of thought form al-Siyar, which is the Sunni equivalent of international law.\textsuperscript{175}

The Sunni perspectives on Jihad were heavily influenced by the socio-political circumstances of the time, for they reflect a desire for the expansion of the Ummah. Each school of thought therefore differs to the principles purported within the Qur’ān. Sachedina claims,

‘There is the problem of reconciling an apparent discrepancy between the Quranic treatment of the Jihad as a means to make ‘God’s cause succeed’ (S8: 39) and the manipulation of Jihad before the de facto Muslim authorities to increase the ‘sphere of Islam’ (dar al islam) by engaging in territorial expansion...Thus in the highly politicised world of early Islam, it was not difficult to interpret the Qur’ān in such a way that the relatively limited justification for jihad contained in the sacred texts was broadened’ \textsuperscript{176}

Many of the Sunni Jurists transformed the Qur’ānic perception of jihad from that which encapsulated persuasion (husna), patience (sabr), tolerance (la ikrah) and self-determination (lasta ’akayhim bi-mus-aytir) to that of aggression.\textsuperscript{177} Jihad became a means of divinely approving acts of expansion in order to restrict the world outside the Ummah. Methods by which war could be declared were also altered as a means to quicken the process.\textsuperscript{178} This more aggressive approach was encapsulated within the Shafei’i school of thought, as they highlighted the duality of action taken. Jihad was not merely a means of self-defence but was a form of action against the non-believers. There were those who took a more hard-line approach who believed that the verses of the sword abrogated the verses of peace, and therefore believed in the legitimacy of the use of force as a means of subduing polytheists. Their approach to peace was limited, promoting short periods of truce and time restricted peace treaties.\textsuperscript{179}

The Mālikīs and the Hanafis took a more moderate view of jihad. The Hanafis believe the use of force to be a means of self-defence, used once hostilities have been initiated against the Ummah.\textsuperscript{180} Mālikī jurists likewise relegate the role of jihad. The founder himself, Imam Mālik bin Anas, and Imam Abu Sufyān al-Thawrī claim, ‘jihad is not the principle (al-asl) that determines the nature of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. On the contrary, they espoused non-aggressive principles, namely reconciliation, peace, truth, the freedom of religious expression and dissemination.’\textsuperscript{181}

In relation to the conduct of warfare, jurists drew from and expanded upon the guidelines set within the Qur’ān, which highlighted the importance of justice, accountability, and fair conduct. It also highlighted the importance of the treatment of one’s own army, which included animals, and the importance of and the role of amirs.\textsuperscript{182} The development of ethics within warfare, and the detailed definitions of the types of warfare were characteristic of the modern jurists such as Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Rushd and Majid Khadduri, as well as classical theorists such as Alfaribi and Shayabani. They represent the disparate perspectives of warfare and its ethics, for while there were those who saw Jihad as a means of expansion there were those who promoted ethical conduct and restraint.


\textsuperscript{175}Al-Siyar was a term first used by Imam Abu Hanifa and is derived from the amalgamation of principles upheld in the relations of the Ummah beginning under the Prophet (pbuh) whereby the persecution of the Muslims instigated the formulation of responses to hostilities. (ibid, p. 91) Al-Siyar was a ‘self-imposed system of law, the sanctions of which were moral or religious and binding on its adherents even though the rules ran counter to their interests’; (Majid Khadduri (Translator), The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani’s Siyar, Baltimore-Maryland, John Hopkins Press, 1966, p.6) ‘it made no discrimination among foreigners and dealt equitably with the non-Muslim states of the entire world.’ (‘Abdur Rahman I Dii, Shariah: The Islamic Law, London, Taha Publishers, 1984, p.421) Al-siyar emulated the nature of Islam as being ‘inherently personal.’ (ibid, p.7) Al-siyar effectively dictated the form in which relations took place with those without Islam, outlining the treatment of those who lived within the Ummah as well as those outside. As such al-siyar is indicative of the nature of the prescribed relations with non-Muslims and therefore indicates the nature of relations.

\textsuperscript{176}Abdulaziz A Sachedina, op.cit, p.36&37

\textsuperscript{177}M Raquibuz Zaman, op.cit, p. 93

\textsuperscript{178}Within the Sunni school of thought (unlike the Shi’i whereby an Imam was needed to declare war) only the approval and declaration of warfare from a political leader was required, reasserting the aggressive perception of jihad posed by some Sunni schools of thought

\textsuperscript{179}Majid Khadduri (translator), op.cit, p.65

\textsuperscript{180}Ibid, p.66

\textsuperscript{181}Richard Bonney, Jihād: From the Qur’ān to bin Lāden, Hampshire, Palgrave, 2004, p.71

\textsuperscript{182}Meaning rulers. See writings of Shayabani, al-Mawardi and al-Farabi on the various perceptions of the role of the amir.
Islamic conceptions of Just War are therefore religiously based and distinct within every sect that is followed. Each is rooted in an element of scripture, but ultimately serves the purpose of those who promote and propound the ideas. Whether morality is at the heart of a particular action is a question that can only be addressed by going beyond the theory to the political setting concerned, which is Syria in the case of this report.

7.3.2 The limits of morality

Islamic Just War approaches provide theoretical understandings of the role and scope of morality for differing groups. However, this does not equate to an automatic practical implementation and use of morality. For some, morality is merely a rhetorical tool to be used to legitimise particular courses of action. Within Syria, it is difficult to assess the extent to which morality plays a role other than to allow states to rally a call for intervention, while being simultaneously limited in what they are able (or willing) to do. With increasing calls for action (inclusive of ceasefires) in early 2016 on the basis of moral duty to the people of Syria, the regional perspective on the moral component of the conflicts merely adds to the complexity of the situation. An overview of the actions of Saudi Arabia and Iran provides insight into the regional moralities (or lack thereof) that exist and influence the conflict in Syria. The brief investigation below will highlight the priority of politics over morality.

7.3.3 Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy

Saudi Arabia epitomises the use of morality as a legitimating and motivating force. Its policies are directed through four spheres of influence: 1) the Gulf circle, 2) the Arab circle, 3) Islamic circle, and 4) the international circle, each suffused with the moral rhetoric of protection and responsibility. Priding itself as the leader of Sunni Islam and protector of the Holy Kaaba, Saudi Arabia’s actions within the region befit its attempts to be a regional leader with international reach. Its regional competitor, Iran, continues to pose a serious threat to its status on the basis of its revolutionary grounding in comparison to Saudi Arabia’s conservativism. Iran threatened Saudi’s leading principles of religious and Arab solidarity that were sought to ensure a greater sphere of influence. It was Saudi’s long association with the British and US that highlights the limited role of morality in foreign policy and decisions made. Saudi Arabia’s history is laden with the interplay of regional dominance and alliances with the ‘West’ to help ensure its status. Religious idealism is less of a priority than political pragmatism, even when the latter uses the language of the former. The creation of Wahhabi Saudi Arabia was therefore a strategically planned affair rooted in the realist desire for power (i.e. status, wealth, influence) and not religious unity. This was achieved by labelling the actions of Hashemite Sharif Husain of Mecca as expansionist and receiving aid to expel him. Put explicitly,

"The foreign policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on geographical – historical – religious – economic – security – political everlasting principles and facts."186

Saudi action reflects its turbulent history with Syria. In supporting rebel forces, Saudi Arabia has aligned itself with non-IS Sunni factions and fighters, reinforcing its stance as the self-proclaimed leader of Sunni Islam. By backing the ousting of Assad and his Alowite-led military-backed government, Saudi Arabia has stood in apparent contradiction to the position of its Western ally – the US. Faced with the choice of security (with US support against an internal threat from factions supporting IS) or Islamic solidarity, Saudi Arabia chose security. Facing a war on two fronts – Syria and Yemen – Saudi Arabia’s actions are driven by realpolitik. Idealistic religious morality has taken second place to the relationship with the US and the threat posed to its security and internal stability (by IS). This highlights that despite the rhetoric, moral considerations do not solely shape foreign policy and are perhaps not even a priority. Saudi foreign policy is motivated by self-preservation and regional dominance.

183 Ibid
184 Fred Halliday, Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen 1967-87, Cambridge University Press, 2002
186 The Foreign Policy of Saudi Arabia, mofa.gov.sa http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/KingdomForeignPolicy/Pages/ForeignPolicy24605.aspx [accessed 13th March 2016]
7.3.4 Iran’s foreign policy

Iran’s history places it at direct odds with Saudi Arabia. Similarly steeped in religion, Iran’s Shi’a underpinnings and revolutionary anti-colonialist character uniquely positions it within regional politics. Laden with diverse ideologies during its revolution, Iran’s foremost foreign policy advocated the ‘liberation of mankind’\(^{187}\) through Islamic universalism. Separating the domain of power for Iran and Saudi Arabia, based on sectarian differences, Iran’s relationship with Syria was not simple. Whilst Syria and Iran are both directed by Shi’a ideology, Syrian Ba’thist ideology hindered consistent cooperation.\(^{188}\) Motivating factors for Iran represented its competing ideologies through its revolutionary and formative years. Morality was a fluid religious-based concept dependent upon the ideas that dominated and had been negotiated by the Khumayni. Iran presents a complex state; it illustrates the fluidity of morality\(^{189}\) to meet the needs of the state, and it presents the reality of mixed interests and the interactions that accompany them.

7.4 Summary

Morality, even just within Islamic traditions, is not singular and thus not readily defined; it is a fluid entity with multiple expressions. The role and impact of morality is constantly negotiated in relation to political ends, and its hindrance within conflict comes about due to the inability to agree upon a base code of conduct acceptable to all warring parties. The multiplicity of moralities at work is representative of the diverse actors that hold and negotiate them. Within the regional context of the Syria conflict, politics, history and geography play a far greater role. The multiplicity of competing and contradictory moral codes creates a complex web of interactions that are ultimately motivated by a multitude of influences such as self-defence rather than by a shared moral framework. Learning to negotiate between these different moral frameworks is key to establishing cooperative relations and effective peace building. Acting morally within Syria and with/against regional powers must be pursued with a consideration for the morality that underpins and legitimises the actions of regional states, groups or even terrorists. However, more so, the actions and character of actors are contingent upon their history and not purely upon morality or civilizational divisions. Understanding this and building this into UK responses will create more effective actions. To legitimise UK actions, for example, mirroring language used by those being engaged with should be used. For example, much of Islamic morality uses terms such as “honour”, “trust”, and “honesty”. Using such language to explain the actions taken and the attitudes held towards the actor will help to establish a common language and understanding, in turn reducing points of contestation and misunderstanding. Similarly, to undermine the actions of an actor, especially that of radicals and terrorists, the moral basis of their actions should be questioned, not just the actions themselves. Understanding the religious roots from which Islamic morality may be based would allow the UK to more effectively undermine and question the position taken by the radical or terrorist. Further research on this point is recommended in Section 9.4 (4).

\(^{187}\) R. K. Ramazani, Chapter Two: Khumayni’s Islam in Iran’s Foreign Policy, in in Adeed Dawisha (ed) Islam in Foreign Policy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985 pp.9-32

\(^{188}\) This does not discount all cooperation – Syria aided Iran in the Gulf War.

\(^{189}\) ‘Fluidity of morality’ is representative of a code of conduct that may change over time or with differing interests. Whilst this may be accompanied by religious principles the level to which they are adhered to, or are entrenched, is merely superficial.
8 Russia and the Morality of Intervention

The Moral Basis of Russia’s Intervention in the Syrian Civil War

Vladimir Rauta

This section analyses the moral terrain surrounding the intervention of the Russian Federation in the Syrian civil conflict starting in September 2015. At the request of Syrian President Assad, Russian President Putin authorised air strikes against terrorist groups engaging in political violence on the territory of Syria\(^{190}\), until March 14, 2016 when President Putin ordered the start of Russian forces’ withdrawal from Syria\(^{191}\). The sections to follow will explore the notion of ‘moral basis’, or ‘moral bases’, of the Russian intervention, not by employing a Western conceptualisation of morality but by identifying a Russian alternative. In doing so, it feeds directly into earlier discussion emphasising the inability of the Western Just War discourse to attain universal acceptance as a moral basis for military interventions world-wide. An infrequent occurrence in current research, explaining Russian interventionism by looking at Russian formulations of ‘morality’ and ‘responsibility’ breaks from existing research templates still holding Russian political behaviour to standards of practices that not only lack acknowledgement by the Russian side, but also are completely replaced by concepts with a distinct formation and evolution.

However, from the outset, a series of clarifications are necessary. These are brief methodological notes that preface the investigative component of this section and that explain 1) the direction the inquiry takes, 2) the choice for synthesis over in-depth analysis, and 3) the difficulty of correlating such individually complex concepts: ‘morality’, ‘intervention’ and ‘Russian Moral Spectrum’. Overall, the general concern here does not address substantive issues such as the broader geopolitical context, the Syrian civil war, or the rationale behind the Russian intervention and the pursuit of airstrikes against terrorist groups in Syria, but rather focuses on introducing the aforementioned series of caveats. This is important because current space limitations on this element of the project restrict the scope of analysis. As such, what follows takes the form of guiding notes. These are approached by first addressing the conceptual concerns.

This research element proceeds with its investigation by cutting though the complex, often convoluted and repetitive academic debates, by reducing the discourses to a cumulative and constructive engagement. Thus, while taking stock of the multi-faceted character of the debate, the research seeks to grasp the essence of the key narratives while avoiding the risk of oversimplification. The second observation introduces synthesis as a path of inquiry. Since this research aims to arrive at conclusions that can inform the wider remit of policy-making and its decision-making processes, its nature has to be, first and foremost, of increased specificity; it has to answer the set questions, and only, subsequently, delve into setting up a wider agenda of inquiry. As such, it links the main concepts of ‘morality’, ‘intervention’ and ‘Russian Moral Spectrum’ by treating them as a combination of components, forming a connected whole. Lastly, there is the issue of the direction of inquiry, or specifically, the mapping of the following paragraphs and the approach followed in determining the moral basis of the Russian intervention. Rather than searching directly for the moral component of the Russian actions in Syria, discussion commences with a focus on a Russian concept of morality more broadly. The emphasis is on determining its sources, its limits, and its purposes for Russia both domestically and internationally. Having clarified a distinct Russian perspective on morality without reference to any specific context, this research then turns to embedding the Russian understanding of morality in the Syrian case. Throughout the investigation, both primary sources (interviews and speeches) and secondary sources (existing literature and research) are used.

8.1 Russia and ‘morality’ politics

‘We are all different, and we should respect that’, was one of the main points President Putin stressed in his address to the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly\(^{192}\). As President Putin drove a wider wedge between his state and the West in general, by blaming the latter of trying to standardise foreign policy praxis irrespective of scenario, he essentially put forward the case for accepting diversity of foreign policies, of political

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\(^{190}\) The communique issued on the 30th of September 2015 by the Syrian Presidential authorities noted that ‘Any increase in Russian military support to Syria happened and is happening as a result of a request from the Syrian state’, in Reuters 2015.

\(^{191}\) President Putin is quoted saying ‘I believe that the task put before the defence ministry and Russian armed forces has, on the whole, been fulfilled. With the participation of the Russian military, the Syrian armed forces and patriotic Syrian forces have been able to achieve a fundamental turnaround in the fight against international terrorism and have taken the initiative in almost all respects’, in The Guardian, 2016.

options and of alliance models. At the core, it was an open bid for a Russian model of foreign policy, one seeking alignment on the basis of a refutation of the Western values, of globalisation and of American unilateralism. To understand ‘morality’ from a Russia perspective, it is important to begin precisely by framing it as different from its Western equivalent and as having a unique origin. Of equal significance, is also to note that what is currently comprised in the semantic extension of ‘morality’, as well as the axiological precepts encompassed by the notion of morality, are the result of an evolutionary process that has captured, and in many ways mirrored, the transformations of the Russian state post 1989. Relevant here are the difficulties and uneven trajectory of the process of transformation of the state. If, ‘in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet empire, the new leadership and the elites embarked on a quest for a new sense of national identity’\(^{193}\), it was only recently that the notion of state identity came to be employed in a consistent fashion. With it, ‘the state has gone from forgotten to focal point’\(^{194}\). This parallels the evolution of ‘morality’, from forgotten to focal point, and to highlight this, discussion continues by noting the shift leading to the remarkable centrality it holds in constructing both policy and politics in present day Russia:

‘Expressed in Russia’s domestic and foreign policies, this new ‘morality politics’ is dated by the Pussy Riot trial in 2012 that the Kremlin used to advance its new discursive frame in the public sphere. Although not entirely new in its orientation, this new stage of ‘morality politics’ different from the earlier policy initiatives in its intensity, scope and political significance for the regime.’\(^{195}\)

From the beginning, it is important to note that ‘morality’ in this sense is an essentially political and politicising concept that only recently surfaced in Russian public debates. In the first usage, ‘morality’ becomes a class of values that is socialised through the symbolism of tradition and conservatism from the state down. In the second, it becomes a tool for reining in alternatives. Here, ‘morality’ splits its referents in the simplistic categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and postulates the absolutism of the former, with limited space of ‘side-swapping’. Note, the break from the moral trajectories of the previous three sections which in different ways increasingly reject simplistic good/evil binaries, or see those binaries break down in the complex socio-political and security domain that is Syria. In the Russian conception, as a politicising value, it is authoritative, intransigent and inflexible because it admits virtually no degree of perfectibility outside its boundaries. It is for this reason that with ‘morality politics’, President Putin:

‘[…] took upon himself the mantle of the champion of conservative values worldwide and positioned Russia as the saviour of the moral foundations of the Western civilization.’\(^{196}\)

As it sums up common history, common culture, and common spirituality, ‘morality’ is claimed as a constant meta-value aimed at holding social structures together and reinforcing them through its ability to inform the experiences of the individual. In doing so, it becomes a benchmark, a point of reference for both the citizen and the state itself. Concerning the former, the crusade for ‘morality laws’ which aimed to ban the use of profane language, gay propaganda and blasphemy, was a political project that filtered to all the levels of society though state-owned media. In this regard there are similarities with, for example, the Saudi approach of using morality discourses for political ends, as highlighted in the previous section. Key players, outside the pool of legislative actors including Aleksandr Sidyakin and Yelena Mizulina, the chairperson of the State Duma’s Committee on Family, Women and Children known for authoring the federal anti-gay law Dmitrii Kiselev, the head of Russia’s state-owned media, and political commentators such as Sergei Kurginyan. Their ability to shape public preference by adhering to the state conservative agenda has often led to media promoting ‘conservative themes [such] as homophobia, the Russian Orthodox Church, and chauvinistic gender roles.’\(^{197}\) This allows for a characterisation of Russian ‘morality’ as fundamentally heteronormative and anti-feminist, and helps locate the basis of morality within a particular interaction of social relations, one that, throughout history, has been carved on a religious worldview.

Turning to the link between religion and morality the discussion shifts from the level of the individual to that of the state and its pursuit of morality-guided foreign policy. Mentioned above was the recently claimed purpose of the Russian state to save the Western civilization, in and of itself a religiously charged message of messianic format. At the turn of the new millennium, in the implosion of the domestic situation President Putin found an

\(^{193}\) Kasymov, 2011, p. 534.


\(^{195}\) Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 615

\(^{196}\) Cottiero, Kucharski, Olimpieva and Orttung, 2015, p. 536.

\(^{197}\) Cottiero, Kucharski, Olimpieva and Orttung, 2015, p. 536.
easy target for blame, the West. The liberal policies attempted in the early 1990s brought systemic failure, and generated in turn a societal disillusionment with the West. President Putin capitalised on this disbelief and pursued an Eastward facing path of political, economic and social restructuring\(^{198}\). It was against this background of introspection that the state grew closer to the church. State and religion in Russia find themselves in a symbiotic relationship. If the state is there to protect itself, the Russian people and Russian-ness, the church is there to provide guidance on how to achieve it, having as a starting point the historical baptism of the Holy Rus. As explained by Nicolai N. Petro:

‘Morality’ is born, thus, not from a separation of the state and church as shown by the Western model of secular politics, but from a close cohabitation where the elements of this binary reinforce each other: a model that is more closely reflected in the relationship between Islam and policy making in Saudi Arabia. The Russian Church’s overall influence lays claim to setting the long-time framework for national interests and foreign policy by transforming them into noble, divine-inspired, questions of honour. As Andrei Tsygankov pointed out\(^{201}\) Russia has always found itself in pursuit of its honour:

‘Russia has cooperated with its European neighbours, when they have acknowledged it as part of the West; responded defensively, when they have excluded Russia; and assertively, when they have been overtly hostile to Russia’s sense of honour’.\(^{201}\)

Russian ‘morality’, thus, emerges out of a historical diffusion of interactions in a profoundly religious social setting and because of this it becomes an integrated part of the pursuit of both domestic and foreign policy. That a conceptualisation of ‘morality’ on Russian terms was needed is justified by Putin’s own assessment of the activities in Syria: ‘we are acting in accordance with our convictions and with the norms of international law’\(^{202}\) (emphasis added). If international law norms do not raise any significant questions as they reference, almost mechanically, the United Nations’ Charter, postulates such as ‘our convictions’ would have clouded discussion of intervention in Syria, without a prior examination of their meaning. Hitherto, the investigation into the moral basis of the Russian intervention in Syria kept the two concepts of ‘morality’ and ‘Russian intervention’ separate. Drawing on the understanding of the Russian idea of ‘morality’ as a by-product of the politico-economic and socio-cultural forces shaping the post-Soviet Russian state, this analysis offers a moral basis for the recent intervention in Syria by operating a classification of ‘morality’. To grasp the intricacies of claimed morality-based intervention from a Russian perspective, it is best in the limited space available to avoid a ‘big picture’ comprehensive analysis, as the result would be misinformed and would not capture the nuances of the detail. As such, this discussion proposes splitting the moral basis of the Russian intervention along the lines of 1) the moral authority of the legitimate intervention, and 2) the moral duty towards the Russian state and the Russian people in the face of terrorism. The next section discusses these in turn, as they correspond to the importance the Russian state attaches to each of the identified aspects of morality.

### 8.2 Morality, domestic politics and intervention

To appreciate the moral underpinnings of the Russian intervention in Syria, ‘morality’ first features in relation to the legitimacy of the actions. Specifically, Russian intervention is deemed moral because it respects the framework set by international law which, in turn, is a paradigmatic example of codified morality. This point has been reinforced by President Putin time and again. In the above-mentioned address to the UN General Assembly, President Putin highlighted the issue of legitimacy of state authorities:

‘You shouldn’t play with words and manipulate them. In international law, international affairs, every term has to be clearly defined, transparent and interpreted the same way by one and all. [...] Of course assistance to sovereign nations can, and should be offered rather than imposed, in strict compliance with the UN charter. In

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198 The literature notes the existence of three schools of thought when it comes to Russia’s positioning in regards to the West: Statists, Westernists and Civilizationists. Andrei Tsygankov maintains their scope was ‘to preserve Russia’s international choices in ways consistent with the schools’ historically established images of the country and the outside world’, 2006, p. 4.

199 Petro, 2015.

200 Tsygankov, 2014.

201 Petro, 2015.

other words, our Organisation should support any measures that have been, or will be, taken in this regard in accordance with international law, and reject any action that is in breach of the UN Charter.  

Similarly, morality as legitimate intervention features in the follow up discussion on the speech at the UN and subsequent interviews:

‘Regarding Syrian territory, [...], there is neither a Security Council resolution on the issues, nor a corresponding request from the official authorities in Damascus. [...], as for our involvement, [...] this will be in strict compliance with the norms of international law.’

‘Let me say again that we are acting in full compliance with international law – at the request of the Syrian Arab Republic’s official government. All other countries that have so far taken part in operations in Syria are acting unlawfully, because there is no UN Security Council resolution on these operations, and no official request from the Syrian authorities.’

Compliance with international law is informed by the primacy of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy. For the Russians, sovereignty is ‘spiritual freedom’ that is defended through a strong and socially protective state. Not only is it a top political priority, but it is also the main feature of the state seen as the basic unit of the international system. It is for this reason that President Putin has called for the pursuit of a political settlement to the Syrian civil war that would involve the Syrian government as the elected representatives of the state. Secondly, morality as legitimacy sees as central the United Nations and the Security Council’s ability to mandate and authorise. Directing policy through the Security Council effectively enforces the organisation’s initial system of checks and balances codified in the practice of the veto, and ultimately avoids setting precedents for non-sanctioned action.

The moral duty towards Russia and the Russian citizens in the face of terrorism is the second basis for the intervention in Syria. Terrorism has been a constant security challenge for the Russian state and one of such significance that it prompted close collaboration with the US in the aftermath of 9/11. As mentioned in the meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, the scope of the Russian intervention is:

‘ […] to combat terrorism and to help President al-Assad gain victory over terrorism, which in turn would create conditions for the beginning and, hopefully, successful implementation of a political settlement.’

While the Russian stance on Syria ‘is informed by a number of consideration[s] and interests, at both an international and a regional level’, the official rationale for the intervention stems from Russia’s moral obligation towards its citizens and itself as a country in the face of terrorism. This is explained by linking the intervention to Russia’s renewed confidence in using coercion in pursuit of policy. As Easter puts it:

‘Perhaps the most obvious feature of the Russian state under Putin was the renewed readiness to use coercion.’

Overall, linking the intervention to terrorism and its spread both regionally and in Russia, points to Russia’s most sensitive nerve – the rise of extremist nationalism. With Russia’s mosaic-like ethnic and religious demography, Putin’s objective in containing international terrorism reverts not just in its ability to stop and prevent home-grown terrorism, but functions as a tool to deal with old and new emerging strands of nationalism, particularly in the Caucuses. According to Crews, between 2012 and 2014 more than 1,500 people have been harmed or killed in Russia’s North Caucuses in clashes between Islamist fighters and government security forces.

### 8.3 Summary

The actions of President Putin and Russia in relation to Syria – from ad bellum justifications to in bello conduct – have been criticised on both moral and political grounds. Western analysis commonly views Russian actions in that particular theatre as a simplistic realpolitik-driven attempt to maintain a sphere of influence that also contains a strategically useful Mediterranean port. Further, deaths of Syrians have come under criticism from the

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206 Tygankov, in Petro. 2015.
208 IISS Strategic Comments, 2012.
UK and US where the individuals have been either civilian non-combatants or fighters from groups crudely assessed to be ‘good’ on the basis that they belong to neither IS or the Assad regime. This short section introduces a clear moral component to Russian actions and motivations: incorporating political dimensions that prioritise the state over the individual, a social component that advocates conservative values, and a religious dimension that is intertwined with state interests. In each of these elements the moral framework at play is antithetical to Western approaches. In the final section to follow, the detail and implications of Russian morality in the Syrian conflicts are located in relation to the moral frameworks identified in sections 5 to 7, highlighting commonalities and incongruences with each and suggesting paths for future research.
9 Comparative Analysis of Competing Moral Frameworks

Cross analysis and recommendations for further research

Peter Lee

9.1 Just and justified

Over the course of the preceding sections, competing representations of the moral component of conflict have emerged in multiple ways in the discourse of the protagonists concerned. In places, similar sounding vocabulary suggests that some form of agreement might be achievable on matters of war and peace. Terms like ‘just’ and ‘justified’ are used by opponents on all sides, and even where these words are not explicitly used their meanings can be inferred: from the ‘Like’ of a tweet or other online posting to parliamentary debate. The most common feature of the use of the language of morality in relation to events in and around Syria is its appropriation by politicians and leaders on all sides to legitimise their own actions and delegitimise the actions of opponents. The point is illustrated in the British parliamentary debate on Syria on 2 December 2015:

‘Do we send in bombers, not totally aware of what all the consequences will be, or do we pause, not send them in, and instead put all our efforts into bringing about a peaceful humanitarian and just political settlement to the terrible situation faced by the people in Syria?’

‘We have to carry [the parliamentary motion] with our eyes open, knowing that we are flying into a mess that shows no easy prospect of being quickly resolved, but we cannot leave a vile force unchallenged. These air strikes do matter. I believe they are justified.’

For the first speaker, Corbyn, a ‘just political settlement’ is both peaceful and humanitarian. In contrast, for Duncan, air strikes are justified because the use of ‘vile force’ in Syria must be confronted militarily. These powerful moral claims have at least one common feature: they offer no account of how they would work. Corbyn does not explain how a formidable, violent organisation like IS can be removed or rehabilitated without the use of military force, while Duncan offers no framework for moving from the application of military force (air strikes) to a negotiated or enforced peace. In context, the first task of these arguments was to win a parliamentary vote on military action in Syria, with the actual delivery of peace a secondary consideration, if it is considered at all. Elsewhere, global leaders have made claim and counter-claim about the legitimacy – moral and otherwise – of their actions in relation to Syria, frequently expressed in terms of the violation of individual rights. President Obama stated at the UN:

‘We see some major powers assert themselves in ways that contravene international law. We see an erosion of the democratic principles and human rights that are fundamental to this institution’s mission; information is strictly controlled, the space for civil society restricted. We’re told that such retrenchment is required to beat back disorder; that it’s the only way to stamp out terrorism, or prevent foreign meddling. In accordance with this logic, we should support tyrants like Bashar al-Assad, who drops barrel bombs to massacre innocent children, because the alternative is surely worse.’

Similar statements can be found in other speeches by Obama, with the same sentiments being echoed by David Cameron in the UK, Angela Merkel in Germany and elsewhere in the West, broadly defined. Problematically, however, they only make sense within the political and moral context of the speech maker. For the US, UK and others to berate the major actors in Syria for violating human rights is to completely miss the point. For Assad-led Syria, Russia, IS, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the multiple opposition, rebel or terrorist groups (depending on one’s perspective on Syria) the idea that a Western notion of human rights has any

212 Alan Duncan, Ibid.
universally accepted and prioritised meaning is a chimera. If such rights do not exist they cannot be violated. Similarly, if some conception of ‘rights’ exists for contending parties in Syria, but are framed in ways – political, cultural, ideological, religious – that are antithetical to Western norms, values and understandings of freedom and democracy they may as well not exist for the purpose of countering Western moral claims.

President Putin prioritises the political independence of states and the prohibition of external interference as enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter. Individual rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) do not hold the same status as the rights of states in international law: a crucial element of the Russian approach to Syria that appears not to be fully appreciated by Western powers that consistently, and fruitlessly, refer to Russian violations of individual rights. Further, when key actors like Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran adopt morality discourses in pursuit of realist political aims, their common priority is the continued existence of their own states and interests, with Western notions of individual human rights (especially the right to life) either marginalised or non-existent. To complain about Russian bombing of civilians in Syria with their aircraft is to miss the point. If the deliberate or accidental bombing of hospitals enables Russia and President Putin to achieve their aims – the prioritisation of the state over the individual, continued existence of the ‘legitimate’ Syrian government, the destruction of ‘terrorists’ in Syria, and the deterrence of terrorists in the Russian caucuses – then their actions are both politically and morally legitimate from a Russian perspective.

Going further, the religious and cultural aspects of a Russian moral component of conflict were addressed by Rauta, who discussed the symbiosis between the Russian State and the Russian Orthodox Church, highlighting a complexity in the politics-morality relationship that shares some elements with both Western Just War approaches and conventional Islamic approaches, while simultaneously contradicting aspects of both. Russian morality, specifically in relation to war, has its origins in its long Orthodox Christian roots, paralleling Western Just War’s origins in its predominantly Catholic Christian origins. While there is not the scope here for a substantial exposition of the similarities, any historically common features break down increasingly towards the present. While the West, and Western Just War, has increasingly seen the significance of the individual prioritised in social, political, legal and moral discourses, the collapse of the Soviet Union with its socialist foundations has not promoted a similar emphasis on individualism. The Russian collective, represented in its modern guise by President Putin in his direct wielding of power, remains dominant: broadly applied moral codes with associated homophobia and chauvinistic tendencies (from a Western perspective) seek to maintain a type of conservative norm.

Ironically, given President Putin’s stated desire to position Russia as ‘the saviour of the moral foundations of the Western civilization’, the symbiotic relation between church and state, politics and religion contrasts the Western approach and is closer in form to the integrated political and religious dimensions of Islam. Furthermore, the conservatism of modern Russia echoes elements of the conservatism of, say, Saudi Wahabism, with a lack of equality between men and women and between heterosexual and homosexual citizens. Even more significant for a study of the moral component of conflict in and around Syria, is the extent to which morality serves politics in a way that, despite the claims of some opponents to recent military interventions, is not so obviously the case in Western Just War theory and broader political discourse. In addition, while the individual clearly has a place within Islamic discourses on the morality of war, these are subordinate in the historical writings to the importance of the Ummah, the universal community of Muslims.

### 9.2 Further perspectives on ‘jihad’ and ‘Islam’

Returning to Smith’s arguments in section 5, the moral nature of the jihad, is potentially best understood by theorising the jihad as a public interest issue, which are often at the centre of global social movements. The ways in which a public interest issue or cause can be used, abused, usurped and debated offers a potentially useful analytical framework to further understanding. Public interest issues usually rely on some frame, a polarity boundary, whether it is the state, the European Union, or perhaps the whole world: the latter being particularly relevant in issues such as rising sea level, air quality and global warning. At either end of the scale, the construct of a public interest issue presents a debate, a contest of ideas. It is also a concept that exists in familiar if not always comfortable terms, perhaps being less ‘owned’ than global social movements.

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214 Charter of the United Nations, Article 2: ‘All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations.’

215 Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 616
Describing the jihad as any one movement is impossible; it should be more accurately described as a series of slightly different movements closely aligned.

The notion of a public interest issue is inherently unstable, with truth and morality claims disputed at every turn in the political domain. Further, the concept of the jihad as a glocal public interest issue allows each individual to attach and detach themselves from an ever-evolving idea free of the requirement for localised grassroots support. Understanding the jihad as a public interest issue seems more amenable to further research than current focus on it being primarily a security issue. Conceptually, this provides a further challenge if individual western states are seeking to use communitarian Just War arguments to respond to a cosmopolitan global phenomenon. If the morality connections on and offline that have been attached to the jihad are to be understood as a public interest issue, they represent the voices and support of other marginalized, victimised and vulnerable groups. This collective public interest issue, may better address the challenges of Devji’s ideas, as Townshend notes:

‘Devji’s analysis can at times seem - as he says be - ‘somewhat abstract’... But even hardbitten empiricists are likely to find his thoughtful account of the Khilafat Movement in northwestern India after the First World War illuminating. Here was a moment when an essentially secular Islamic institution, the caliphate, provided the basis for a general movement under the authority of Gandhi, a Hindu. Devji’s assertion that Osama bin Laden is ‘the Mahatma’s alter ego’ is perhaps the most challenging of his invitations to rethink the Western refusal to engage with the mind of the ‘enemy’.217’

Given the significantly postmodern nature of the jihad, researching the groundswell prompted by the jihad will need a multifaceted and cross-disciplinary effort. There should be a combination of further macro- and micro-studies, in which the former can focus on broader areas and concerns around ‘support’ and ‘concern’, while taking a more holistic view of the jihad. Alongside this approach, more micro-studies into specific groups using improved and ever-adapting methods to changing contexts; improving understanding of what connects differing expressions of the jihad. Both macro and micro approaches would need to take into account the unrecognised importance of non-violent contributions to the groundswell and how they contribute to those who produce and those who witness acts of violence.

Conventional conceptions of Islamic morality as discussed by Khalfey indicate a strong tendency towards moral codes: ‘a common set of rules to direct action’. The ‘good’ Muslim is required to conform to those codes, not just for the sake of behaving well as a member of a particular society or state but also as one who conforms to the will of God as revealed in the holy texts. In this regard, Islamic notions of Just War in the twenty-first century, both in relation to conflict in Syria and elsewhere, retain an explicit religious dimension that cannot be divorced from its civic aspect in the way that is the case with Western Just War. In contrast, in the UK and the West more generally, any attempt to apply Just War moral principles with either an explicit or implicit Christian/religious element would be considered provocative; including provocative towards non-Muslims in the West for whom the political domain is and must remain secular or humanist. France and the US even have constitutions that enshrine the separation of state and religion in law. While there is not the scope to explore the point further here, Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush both used a heavily Christianised good/evil binary in the build-up to the 2003 Iraq War, with mixed domestic and international consequences, many of which were negative. Awareness of the subtle complexities of the use of appeals to Islamic morality in support of realist political ends is a first useful step towards engaging diplomatically with the correct language and an appropriate focus. As Khalfey argued, the use of concepts such as honour, courage, manliness, truthfulness, faithfulness, loyalty, and hospitality218 may reduce antagonism level in international discourse between actors with simultaneous overlapping and competing interests.

In the course of this scoping project a number of aspects of the moral component of conflict have been identified for further research. Ideally, these would be addressed concurrently in one project with multiple research strands. Alternatively, one umbrella project could bring together several co-ordinated but independent research strands. The main benefit of such an approach would lie not in the improved understanding of individual, isolated moral components of particular conflicts, though these will have a

216 ‘Glocal’ – an enterprise or issue where the global and the local are inherently interconnected.
218 Black, 2011, 11.
degree of merit. Rather, maximum benefit would accrue in a multi-layered cross-analysis of findings from diverse conflicts where competing moral claims underpin the actions of multiple, sometimes simultaneous opponents. These research strata would include the philosophical (and theological), policy, and operational dimensions of the relevant moral components, spanning across multiple types of contemporary conflict and security challenges, many of which will continue and grow in scope in the short-to-medium term.

9.3 Addendum – Brussels terrorist attacks and social media

On 22 March 2016, as this report was being finalised, IS-inspired or coordinated terrorist attacks took place at the Zaventem Belgium national airport and the Brussels Metro. Within minutes, social media comment began and within hours jihad-supporting tweets were posted on social media. From countless possible examples, the following illustrate different dimensions of the moral component of the actions as viewed by sympathisers and supporters (Figure 7):
Figure 7 - Different dimensions of the moral component of the actions as viewed by sympathisers and supporters

The challenge must remain for a future research project to fully understand why there was so much immediate UK and European-based Twitter and other social media support or sympathy for the killings in Brussels, in particular the moral dimension of claim and counter-claim by jihadists and other observers. This would need a permanent and full time approach to search and track daily in order to build a comprehensive data set to then analyse fully.
9.4 Recommendations for further research

Building on the findings of this scoping project, an extensive number of future research strands of the moral components of conflict have been identified: probably too many to be included in a single coherent research project. However, several of these strands can be combined in different ways depending on the orientation of the research requirements: policy-oriented, historical, security-related, jihad-themed, and so on:

1. A 12-36 month longitudinal empirical study of jihad-related social media activity to achieve the following:
   i. Understand similarities and differences in social media behaviour around long-term, ongoing jihadist activity and short-term, high profile, jihad-related events.
   ii. Provide an evidential basis for the relative merits of understanding and countering jihad in a ‘radicalisation’ paradigm or in a ‘public interest issue’ paradigm.
   iii. A greater understanding of the difference between occasions when jihad-related online activity is the act (‘liking’ a tweet or posting) and when jihad-related online activity supports a second- or third-order act (travelling overseas to fight, beheadings, terrorist action).
   iv. Test the hypothesis that for many or most participants the starting point for social media jihadism is a desire for good people to do good things, only a small number of whom go on to undertake physical jihad in some form. This would involve both qualitative and quantitative dimensions, tracking the use of language that denotes humanitarian concern and a desire for peace, and where that language gives way to sympathy towards, and explicit or implicit support for, violent acts.

2. A retrospective analysis of the emergence and evolution of the under-researched moral component(s) of the jihad over the past 10-20 years.

3. A broad study of the moral dimensions of contemporary jihad in diverse geographical locations: highlighting commonalities, differences and conceptual areas for potential exploitation.

4. A study of the differences and similarities in the ways that morality/religious discourses are used in support of the foreign policies of states like Saudi Arabia and Iran and non-state jihadist actors like IS. This understanding would facilitate more effective counter-discourse and counter-actions. These could include not only criticism of, or opposition to, specific acts but undermining the claimed moral basis of those acts.

5. Qualitative, public dialogue-style engagement across a range of Muslim groups and demographics to review the strengths and weaknesses of the government’s Prevent strategy to this point.

6. The difference of emphasis placed on the moral component of conflict in British and American political discourse and policy on recent and ongoing military interventions.

7. Explore the tensions, and implications of those tensions, in UK foreign policy and political discourse between individual rights-based moral arguments and state rights-based moral arguments.

8. Using a case study approach that involves cultural, social and political analysis, compare the moral dimensions of UK/US justifications for military intervention and non-intervention, with Russian and Chinese equivalents.

9. Explore the extent to which moral considerations in Russian domestic terrorist threats and counter-terrorism policies shape foreign policy and military actions. The following sub-strands could be addressed:
   i. Why does Russia continue to go through the motions of denying the killing of civilians in hospitals in Syria even where the evidence for such action is compelling, given its prioritising of the state over the individual?
   ii. The links between domestic and international terrorism and Russian counter-terrorist policies
   iii. Russian approach to state-sponsored terrorism in the light of President Putin’s critical tone over aiding and training of non-state actors in the Syrian conflict.
   iv. The similarities and differences between Western and Eastern concepts of morality in general, (not necessarily framed in a contextual, case study scenario).

Note: the Principal Investigator for this report is already involved in a series of three international workshops with UK, US and Chinese military ethicists in 2015, 2016 and 2017, that is beginning to set the framework for such a study.
10. As a basis for potential dialogue between Western and Islamic moral components of conflict, explore the philosophical basis of Al-Ghazali’s 11th century conception of Islamic morality and the philosophical basis of Aquinas’s 13th century Christian morality. While there are clear religious differences between the two, each relied upon Hellenic ideas located in the work of Aristotle and his promotion of virtuous living.

11. Analyse the importance of the relative moral and legal standing of the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the right to political independence of states in Article 2 of the UN Charter. Russia’s and China’s almost absolute commitment to the latter – at least when advancing interests – and disregard for the former needs to be understood in greater depth. In contrast, the relative and shifting priority granted to state and individual rights by Western allies provides further points of dispute with Russia and China.

12. What is meant by ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’ in the competing moral components of conflict of the UK, US, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and high profile jihadist groups? As a result of significant cultural, social, legal, religious differences, ‘freedom’ and ‘rights’ have very different meanings depending on the context of their use. Better understanding of opposing approaches would be a positive step towards better-informed engagement, rather than attempting to impose Western conceptions of freedom and rights that could be socially and politically destabilising, or culturally and offensive.

13. Assess the trade-off between moral conduct and gaining strategic depth through employing rebel groups as proxy actors in fighting the Syrian government.

14. Identify the moral component in the dynamics of the decision making processes authorizing external support to rebel groups.

15. Examining Russian intervention through the lens of its significance to the military-industrial complex (arms sales and power projection) as opposed to considerations of moral precepts.
## References and Publications


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