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**Fatah al-Islam: Anthropological Perspectives on
Jihadi Culture**

Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbaek

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Summary

This paper argues that the Jihadi culture of Fatah al-Islam is an appropriated and non-traditional culture which must be defended at all costs by its followers precisely because it is an artificial entity.

Introduction

The anthropology of Jihadism is a virtually non-existent field of research due to a number of reasons: the inherent danger of conducting fieldwork, the fear of misused data, the difficulties of neutrality and ethical debates within the anthropological community.¹ The conspicuous absence of social anthropologists engaged in systematic studies on the community of Jihadi groups espousing their interpretation of Jihad has left the field to other disciplines. This is regrettable precisely because Jihadism at its core is a distinct cultural construct, meaning an artificial socio-cultural frame of reference. The acclaimed originality of the bearers and guardians of the only true Islam, personified by the Jihadis, is in need of some serious questioning. That culture matters is evident from the fierce battle being waged on a global scale by disparate Jihadi entities: in essence it is a deadly game of control of cultural symbols.

According to the eminent Russian ethnographer Valery Tishkov, an insufficient number of anthropologists have studied armed conflict, and there remains a serious lack of reliable ethnographic data amid an ocean of political science texts and enlightening journalism. Tishkov's own work on the conflict in Chechnya is an excellent argument for an expanded role for anthropologist to engage in this type of study.²

Readers who expect a grand or holistic theory in which to insert the data gathered from fieldwork will be disappointed. To reduce detailed testimonies, often quite varied or contradictory, into 'risk theory', 'roots of terrorism' or such like would make a mockery of our informants' time and hospitality. Moreover, searching for a great theoretical paradigm to interpret events in a specific Lebanese setting during a time of considerable upheaval would invariably lead to meaningless complexity reduction. Many of the following quotations speak for themselves and are in no need of any academic interference; raw data makes for tough reading. The devil lies in the detail, and the authors believe we actually came quite close to the devil. In deliberately distancing us from the obsession with the systemic level of explanation, we have reached the conclusion that the final word on Fatah al-Islam (FaI) is still far away: it is indeed an enigmatic Jihadi group.

Social anthropology is uniquely positioned to extract a deeper understanding of militant movements and individuals through the tried and tested practice of fieldwork. But such a tool is not available to political scientists or psychologists who have taken the lead in terrorism studies, whether merited or not. The anthropological method of conducting fieldwork allows different types and levels of conclusions and should therefore be considered complementary to a political analysis, for instance. The data extracted from properly conducted fieldwork enables different views and interpretations of Jihadi actors and their perceived role in a wider struggle to defend Islam in times of crisis. An

¹ A debate is currently raging within anthropological circles in the US scientific community. The essence of this particular exchange of views is directly related to American anthropologists working with DoD projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, known as the Human Terrain System. Regardless of one's position on this project, the fact is that very few anthropologists have been involved in studies of Jihadism.

² Valery Tishkov (2004), *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

example of the possibilities is Quintan Wiktorowicz's seminal study of the British al-Muhajiroun, in which he applied an ethnographic approach to gain unique insights into the inner workings of a radical Islamist movement.³

Having thus presented an abbreviated argument for the use of fieldwork in conducting Jihadi studies, the point of this article is to take a closer look at a specific Jihadi group, Fatah al-Islam, which made the international headlines in the summer of 2007 during a prolonged siege at the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared, near Tripoli in northern Lebanon. In maintaining a rigorous and relatively narrow research agenda, defined by anthropological research themes, this Working Paper deals with one particular aspect of FaI. Through the on-site collection of data the idea was to portray FaI as culture in practice, and this perspective requires some elaboration.

Methodology and Scope of Fieldwork

The decision to conduct fieldwork among Palestinian refugees who managed to escape the siege of the Nahr el-Bared camp came about rather suddenly. While the individual members of the research team had been aware of renewed fighting in Lebanon since it had erupted on 20 May 2007, no one paid much attention to what at first glance appeared to be yet another round of Palestinian infighting.⁴ Several weeks passed before the combined intellectual capacity of the team finally realised that this particular battle was different from the other conflicts that have torn Lebanon apart over the past decades.

Gradually, media reporting began to mention the presence of foreign fighters among FaI militants, particularly individuals with recent frontline experience in Iraq, and the presence of individuals from Western Europe. This development alerted the team members as it appeared possible that Lebanon had been placed at the crossroads between the raging Jihad in Iraq and the more subtle version developing in Western Europe. If the media stories, some of which were very doubtful, could be verified the situation could signify a new development in the global Jihad. If seasoned Jihadi veterans from Iraq had begun to gravitate to Lebanon to set up shop, then this clearly indicated that Lebanon was heading for serious trouble that was likely to have serious consequences for the region –and for Western Europe as well–.

Other research commitments allowed only two weeks of pre-deployment preparation, which meant reading as much as possible and contacting colleagues who might be in the know about the situation. This activity resulted in the formulation of a very narrow research agenda to be carried out during one week's intensive fieldwork in Beirut and around Tripoli. The purpose of the trip was to collect as many eyewitness accounts as possible to verify the convergence of different Jihadi actors in northern Lebanon. It was specifically the foreign element that attracted the research team's interest. Many details have emerged about this specific aspect from the data collected, yet the complex analysis has been excluded from the present paper and left for a subsequent publication.

With the systematic collection of data from informants in mind, a simple questionnaire was drawn up before departure. This single sheet formed the basis of a number of semi-structured interviews, and the questions formulated were deliberately kept in general terms so as not to interfere with the informants' formulations of their answers. The questionnaire contained nine headings and 13 additional follow-up questions to be used in the event an informant had extensive and detailed experiences to relay.

General and Specific Fieldwork Considerations

³ Quintan Wiktorowicz (2005), *Radical Islam Rising. Muslim Extremism in the West*, Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland.

⁴ The research team was made up of three social scientists, two social anthropologists and a psychologist, among them Michael Taarnby and Lars Hallundbaek, from the Danish Institute of International Studies, and John Horgan, from Penn State University.

Fieldwork in a war zone is obviously different in many aspects from the common range of chosen fieldwork localities. While physical security is of primary concern it is especially the context in which the fieldworker deliberately inserts himself which dictates the ground rules. The simple act of being there conducting interviews and collecting other forms of data makes it very difficult to maintain a professional distance from the research topic and especially from the informants themselves. However, again referencing Tishkov, journalists and scholars in a war zone *are on the front lines, but not in the war, they are in the zone of conflict, but not in the conflict itself*. While this may seem a trivial observation it makes all the difference on the ground.

The most desired category of informants were, of course, FaI militants themselves. However, they were not available for interview for several reasons, either because they were still engaged in fierce fighting, had been killed or taken prisoner or were in hiding in sleeper cells across Lebanon. Moreover, as will be clearly illustrated in later sections, interviewing FaI militants was never an option as all members of the research team would very likely have been killed.

Informants were grouped into two distinct categories, the first being Nahr al-Bared residents who were eyewitnesses and the second category a mix of security personnel, journalists, academics and others who could assist in providing contextual background information. In all, 21 structured interviews were carried out and recorded in accordance with the questionnaire with an additional 15 un-recorded and more casual interviews taking place in Bedawi. This neighbouring refugee camp – also located outside Tripoli – had sheltered thousands of civilians who fled Nahr al-Bared as fighting intensified. The second category involved about a dozen interviews and informal conversations. All informants were granted anonymity, which indeed was requested by a few, primarily due to the sensitivity of the research topic.

All informants are positioned and embedded in their own culture, and their responses will invariably mirror their role within their very own context, since neutrality and clinical objectivity have no place or role in war zones. This argument must also be extended to anthropologists in the field, though it certainly dents their professional ethos. Informants look to terrorism experts who happen to drop by for explanations of complex issues, which have visibly wrecked their lives. It must be noted that several of the informants had been injured or lost close family members and relatives.

We found that informants were generally articulate and to the point, carefully trying to reconstruct often traumatic experiences for our benefit. The imagery and terminology used by some was far beyond the scope of any report or analysis we have since encountered on the subject of FaI, but so much more insightful. Their testimonies vary considerably, which is only to be expected. Some left the camp a few days after fighting erupted, some were trapped for several weeks and a single informant stayed on voluntarily for six very long weeks.

The different views and experiences are the result of informants being at different places at different times; there is no way they could all survive the ordeal with identical experiences. In spite of the different testimonies directly related to the informants time/space positioning there is considerable overlap and an identifiable frame of reference. The identification of this general frame of reference was the objective of the team –the accumulated experiences from living with FaI–. This collection of data allows for an analysis of FaI as culture in practice.

Contrary to Tishkov's argument, we do not believe that informants solely by being outside a politicised and emotionally charged local milieu will necessarily speak more freely or reflectively.⁵ On the contrary, our experience is precisely the opposite, our informants were extremely keen for us to write the truth about what had happened, and moreover they did not attempt to interfere in or

⁵ Tishkov (2004), p. 4.

dictate our analytical process. Professional and personal integrity dictated that all informants would be met with the greatest degree of openness and honesty possible, and of course they wanted to know what we as foreigners and experts had to say about FaI. Hence, the fieldworker is invariably drawn into the conflict whether he likes it or not.

Jihadism as Culture in Practice

This paper argues that the Jihadi culture of FaI is an appropriated and non-traditional culture which must be defended at all costs by its followers precisely because it is an artificial entity. FaI resembles any other Salafi Jihadi group in the sense that the only viable frame of reference is similar Jihadi groups, and this self-contained universe produces self-reference and little else. The appropriated cultural identity of a Jihadi explains the at times absurd insistence and emphasis on details pertaining to cultural symbols of a largely superficial nature. The battle for control of these symbols became FaI's centre of gravity as a militant group, allowing it to distinguish itself from mainstream society, to which it certainly did not belong, and from other militant Islamist groups as well.

Jihadism does not have a religious, cultural or historical origin to draw on. It is an invention despite any insistence to the opposite.⁶ In drawing on an eclectic body of references to support the validity of its world-view and associated political projects it positions itself squarely within modernity. Being left to its own devices it can achieve a relative degree of stability, as occurred in the 1990s in the Afghan camps where the Mujahedin lived the lives of the holy warrior with no outside interference with their cultural construction. Both self-assuredness and doctrine are always put to a severe test once they break out of a closed circuit. Jihadi culture has turned out to be very difficult to sell to local populations, whether in Algeria, Iraq or, as in this case, Lebanon.

The non-traditional origin of Jihadism makes it a highly unstable culture and vulnerable to attacks from the outside as well as internal confusion about what exactly it means. However, the most significant way of reinforcing the culture of Jihad, within as well as outside the group, is to keep up the appearance of being 'Holier than Thou', often in the most literal way. The acquired identity of a FaI militant positions the individual into an unorthodox frame of reference, drawing on very selective elements of Islam, especially the cult of Martyrdom.

In order to describe FaI's culture as it manifested itself during the first half of 2007, several different themes have been identified in this analysis. All are related to expressing a distinct cultural identity and they concern: ideology, religious perspectives, family values, social control mechanisms and symbolic and ritualistic behaviour.

The themes identified here inevitably overlap, which is precisely the point of this analytical exercise. Jihadi culture reduced to its moving parts often makes little sense. The plethora of studies on, for instance, Jihadi interpretations of Islam by otherwise competent scholars versed in religious studies make for one-dimensional reading and analysis. The anthropological method of enquiry attempts to bridge this gap between what the militants say and what they actually do. Theology, to mention one discipline, will not advance our understanding of Jihadism in particular, but studies of contested theological interpretations will produce enhanced perspectives on what is at stake.

Manifestations of Ideological and Religious Perceptions

Coming to grips with a Salafi Jihadi group like FaI in order to describe it as culture in practice requires an understanding of its ideological foundation: what exactly does FaI stand for? This question is comparatively more difficult to answer in detail because similar Jihadi groups have

⁶ For references to Islamism and Jihadism as a non-traditional invention see, for instance: Olivier Roy (2002), *Globalised Islam. The Search for a New Ummah*, Hurst, London; Aziz al-Azmeh (1993), *Islams and Modernities*, Verso, London; and Gilles Kepel (2004), *The War for Muslim Minds*, Belknap Press, Cambridge.

issued a plethora of statements outlining their ideological foundations in considerable detail, most of all al-Qaeda. In 2006 and 2007 FaI provided very few written statements and gave even fewer interviews to the outside world.⁷ Even so, a few important clues can be derived from this minimal interaction with the world at large, and they certainly confirm the group as a highly secretive and introverted organisation.

However, instead of dissecting the statements and speeches through a literary analysis, our anthropological inquiry dictates a different methodological approach. The point is to describe and understand how the thoughts, ideas and perspectives of this Jihadi group manifest themselves through the collective actions of its various members. It is about what they say, but also – and this is of even greater importance – what they actually do as a consequence of their beliefs.

Examining FaI's ideology from this perspective required informants to describe how it surfaced and became identifiable. The interview data identified a single trajectory in terms of revealing FaI's ideological perspectives over time. While there is no reason to believe that FaI changed its ideology over the months when it was present in Nahr al-Bared, instead the inhabitants gradually realised what type of ideology the group expounded. In the end they would be clearly identified by informants as hard-line Salafi Jihadis, especially through the practice of *Takfir* – declaring other Muslims unbelievers –.

When the militants first entered Nahr al-Bared there was little effort in the field of propaganda. Flyers were handed out and a few public meetings were held, but nothing in the form of a systematic indoctrination campaign ever materialised. Thus the informants' exposure to FaI's ideological and religious perspectives came indirectly. Local Imams from Nahr al-Bared held a meeting with FaI after they had arrived and asked them why they had come. Nothing substantial materialised from that discussion as FaI leaders were secretive about their real purpose and an informant remembered that one Imam had told the local residents not to talk to FaI militants.

Despite the Imam's advice, interaction was unavoidable and often resulted in curious or nonsensical statements from FaI militants. For instance, during conversations they would claim to be Mujahedin and some militants were convinced they had arrived to fight Israeli or US troops. One informant thought this was quite hilarious and indicated that Israel was a few hundred kilometres due south and amicably indicated the right direction to the militant and specified that if he wanted to liberate Jerusalem he was in the wrong place.

An appropriation of the Palestinian cause also manifested itself, in which militants acquired the self-defined and imposed role of defenders and saviours of Muslims. At the time, which was before fighting erupted, it was not specified exactly what type of Muslims were meant, but that would soon become very obvious to anyone caught up in the siege. However, from conversations with FaI militants it became quite clear that saving local Palestinian Sunni Muslims from the horrors of Shi'a rule was a priority.⁸

There was indeed some sympathy towards FaI at the beginning, but that would gradually erode and eventually disappear entirely. The informants heard of the idea of an emirate to be established in northern Lebanon. This concept led to the establishment of a *Shura* council that issued religiously-founded verdicts. The Shura council was headed by Shaker al-Absi, with senior FaI members occupying the remaining seats of the council. Apparently the militants truly believed in the imminent creation of an emirate. Women would kiss Absi's hand in respect, as he was to be the *Emir*, or ruler of a *Shari'a* governed enclave in northern Lebanon.

⁷ Shaker al-Absi stated in an interview with the *New York Times* in March 2007 that FaI followed al-Qaeda's ideology (see http://siteintegroup.org/terrorismlibrary/charts_maps/charts_maps_1181682170.pdf).

⁸ The anti-Shia element should not be underestimated in this regard and sectarian tensions have increased since the 2006 war with Israel (interview with Omar Bakri Mohammed, Beirut, 6 July 2007).

When the fighting began in May FaI justified fighting the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) because they were not Muslims, so they could be killed. According to an informant a *fatwa* had been issued by the Shura council denouncing all Lebanese troops as apostates, a necessary requirement for the ensuing battle. This blatant exposure of a *Takfiri* component in the Salafi Jihadi ideology meant that anyone not on FaI's side was fair game. As one informant commented: 'you are either with them, or against them – to them there is only one true Islam'. Local residents who were confused about the nature of the fighting would ask the militants how they could fight other Muslims, an act considered a grave offence. The answer was simply: 'it's Jihad'. The leadership, personified in al-Absi, did not attempt to hide the ideological alignment with al-Qaeda, although he was careful to claim his independence from this most notorious organisation. FaI clearly identified with the global Salafi Jihadi movement although this was not always expressed in unequivocal terms. One informant who confessed his initial confusion simply stated that 'it is a strange group with a strange project'.

The general verdict of the informants on Fatah al-Islam's shallow ideological foundation was summed up by a 28-year old man who managed to escape in late May. 'They came prepared for war, that was all they were good for, and they didn't bother to explain their future plans'. He was upheld by another informant who held a similar view: 'they said they were peaceful, but their actions and the reality looked very different'.

Religious Practice

Relations between Nahr el-Bared inhabitants and FaI members concerning religious issues underwent significant changes over a period of about nine months. Initial curiosity was gradually replaced with scepticism, which would eventually turn into outright rejection and hostility and this downward slope at the religious level is worth some elaboration.

Upon arrival in the camp, FaI militants were keen to cultivate an image of being pious and righteous Muslims and some of them actually tried to establish good relations with the host community. Quranic classes were set up for Nahr al-Bared children, which was a popular measure at the beginning as they had previously been unavailable. According to informants, militants constantly talked about Islam and would often invoke the language and imagery of martyrdom. Dying for their religion seemed an obsession. At the beginning they claimed to be defending local Sunnis from the Lebanese Shi'a who were seen as a direct political threat and moreover an apostate sect. This perspective apparently gained some local traction because it could serve as a counterbalance to the success enjoyed by Hezbollah after the 2006 war with Israel.

At the mosque their alien rituals at prayer time attracted the attention of the local residents. Some FaI militants would insist that their form of worship was the only true way, while other militants kept strictly to themselves. The rituals practised were certainly not the traditional Palestinian way, this the informants could easily agree on. FaI militants displayed a strict prayer observance and never missed their daily prayers. However, differences in culturally defined rituals in themselves were insufficient to upset the local residents. Instead, what bothered them was the militants' insistence that their way of believing and worshipping was the only acceptable form of Islam.

Their fanatic Islamic belief manifested itself in several ways even before the fighting started. A 28-year old informant said that 'if you swore at God, they would kill you'. What at first was mistaken for religious conservatism, which in the Nahr al-Bared context was not a bad thing in itself, would gradually be seen as an abuse of Islam, which to the local residents was something entirely different and far more serious. Apparently indifferent to the cultural sensibilities of Nahr al-Bared residents, a burial ceremony was interrupted in the spring by angry FaI militants. One informant who was present at the burial described the obtrusive behaviour of the militants who said that the funeral rites were not just wrong but un-Islamic. This particular event would cause considerable bad blood between the two groups who were gradually –but surely– drifting apart.

Some locals signed up for FaI, mostly very young and poor, but left when they realised it involved terrorism and not the Islamic way. What from the outside might have appeared as a pious religious movement looked decidedly different from the inside. It is not known how many new militants were actually recruited, but the general impression of the informants was very few indeed.

The Takfiri practice of labelling other Muslims as apostates would turn out to be a double-edged sword. FaI militants who had been very quick in denouncing any other form of Islam than their own would eventually be judged by their own behaviour. Informants were very clear in their verdict, returning the *kuffar* epithet to FaI: ‘they used religion as a cover, but this is not the real Islam. They applied their own rules on Islam and had their own interpretation of Haram and Halal’. The religiously inspired readiness to kill would similarly be judged accordingly: ‘they are not Muslims, because they (Muslims) don’t slaughter other Muslims’. Their defence of Islam –that is, their interpretation of Salafi Jihadism– meant that anyone not aligned with their religious persuasion could be labelled an apostate and as such could be killed.

A handful of informants were upset by the group’s name, insisting that these militants had absolutely no relationship with Fatah (here referring to the PLO) or the Palestinian people, and certainly nothing to do with Islam. They were considered fanatics and madmen and the name represented a triple insult: ‘they were not really religious at all’.

Consolidating an Acquired Jihadi Identity

The unequivocal and deliberate separation from mainstream Palestinian society in Lebanon, indeed from Sunni Islam itself, resulted in the perpetual consolidation of an acquired identity as a member of FaI. Precisely because of its non-traditional aspects –not surprisingly claimed by FaI as the only acceptable and permissible tradition– the culture of Jihad was formulated and practiced in different ways. This Jihadi culture manifested itself at many different levels, although only three will be described here. They are related to social control in the community, especially concerning women and children, and the practice of symbolic and ritualistic behaviour. These examples of Jihadi culture in practice are by no means exhaustive, yet they serve the purpose of illustrating just how a radical Islamist ideology was transformed into identifiable behavioural patterns with disastrous yet foreseeable consequences.

Social Control

Informants described how at first FaI militants made no use of threats or coercion, yet they managed to create the impression that they were everywhere. Individual members were very polite and treated people fairly according to a Nahr al-Bared resident. They did try to attract people to their cause, though with seemingly limited success. The militants, however, were extremely security conscious, they always moved around in pairs or small groups and carried concealed weapons. Most of the time they moved around at night, always very cautiously and on their guard. Several informants mentioned that they experienced indirect intimidation. They received strange looks or unfriendly gazes, and this was interpreted as a clear indication that these people were not to be trifled with.

They acted calmly but generally did not like to socialise with the local population. Often they would only approach others to ask for directions, and even then communication broke down occasionally because of their unfamiliar Arabic dialects. The local coffee seller remembered that FaI members would buy a cup of coffee at his stall, but wouldn’t enter a conversation. This behaviour was considered strange and somewhat rude, as he expressed his frustration ‘not even small talk!’. Only a few had spoken to members of the FaI leadership, who kept to themselves. Other members would simply refer to Absi as the Emir in general terms without seeing much need for elaborating on this important and controversial issue. It would seem that the FaI leadership felt little need for reaching out to the local population.

Over time, presumably due to a combination of increased FaI strength and self-confidence and the rising scepticism of Nahr al-Bared inhabitants, more direct forms of social control and assertive behaviour occurred. During the first months and into the spring of 2007 relations began to deteriorate. One informant specified a certain episode in March as the turning point. A quarrel had erupted between this man and members of FaI, apparently over a rather trivial incident. But the situation got out of hand and a relation was shot and injured by FaI militants. From this point on they started to show their strength all over Nahr al-Bared and whenever there was a problem they quickly spread out to take up positions. In another incident a boy of about 12 was stopped because he wore his t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, which was considered un-Islamic. FaI threatened to kill him if he ever did it again, and as a result of this encounter his elder brother told him to stay clear of the militants, they were too dangerous. More examples of how simple quarrels had degenerated into violence were described but also how FaI militants were relentless in their pursuit of real or imagined adultery. Considering the relatively conservative setting in northern Lebanon, FaI's zeal and methods in eliminating immoral behaviour, especially between genders, were disproportionate in the eyes of the locals to the alleged cultural transgressions.

When the fighting started in May, Nahr al-Bared's inhabitants were encouraged to fight alongside FaI. While the latter appeared thrilled by the prospect of battle, very few locals –if any– took up the offer. A measure of the cultural distance between two parallel universes can be derived from a conversation between a 30-year old local and a FaI militant during the fighting. When asked what possible benefit could come from fighting the FaI militant answered 'I have the key to paradise'. On several occasions informants would vehemently argue that FaI had executed several of its own members when treason was suspected. This decidedly firm view on social control could not be verified independently; however, in the minds of the locals, FaI militants were clearly capable of such ruthless behaviour even towards their own.

Jihadi Perspectives on Family, Women and Children

FaI's peculiar views and behaviour towards women are another striking example of the ambiguous Islamic universe common to Salafi Jihadis. The testimonies collected present a clear division of women into two groups: FaI women and everyone else. The few female informants were unanimous in describing non-existent contacts with FaI members, as the local women never spoke to other women and would avoid eye contact. A few marriages were rumoured to have taken place between militants and girls from Nahr al-Bared, but none were confirmed. It seems likely though, that a few marriages did take place especially when generous financial rewards to the families are considered.

In terms of family relations, most FaI members were quite young, and because of their age had not yet married and thus had no family to bring along. An older and smaller group did bring their families when they settled in Nahr al-Bared. As for their own women, they stayed at home and indoors most of the time. When they were sighted on the streets of Nahr al-Bared, they were always fully covered in the chador and a face mask and therefore easily recognisable.

The FaI women trained in guerrilla and terrorist tactics. They were seen training with firearms on the shore close to the Samed area in the camp. When the fighting started in May, some FaI women took an active part. One informant described the strange sight of a female team on a motorcycle which consisted of a driver with an RPG providing close support fire, both clad in their chadors. Another informant saw them carry guns even before the fighting erupted and claimed to have seen female snipers as well.

However, during the siege eyewitness accounts from Nahr al-Bared inhabitants who stayed in the camp for weeks stated that FaI members did not care about their own families, who were in a bad way and not looked after. The explanation offered by the militants was simply that God would

provide. To this group of informants the behaviour of FaI towards their women and children seemed indifferent and callous. It was incomprehensible to them why someone would deliberately neglect the needs of his own family, especially under those circumstances.

The superficial respect for women accorded by the Salafi Jihadi ideology can be summed up in a specific episode before the siege. At the LAF checkpoint women were sometimes searched, but FaI threatened to kill the soldiers as this behaviour was outrageous to their sensibilities. They were, however, restrained by the local Nahr al-Bared Imams who decided that the issue was no reason for bloodletting.

Like the women, so the children can easily be divided into two distinct groups: those from FaI and the others. Local Palestinian children in Nahr al-Bared often had to pass through the Samed area of the camp, the FaI stronghold, and this traffic was used by the militants as an opportunity to attract new members and to extract intelligence. Several informants stated that FaI worked hard to attract local children, with good results, but eventually their parents stopped this contact because they were uneasy about FaI's intentions. Some schoolchildren who were bribed with money and chocolate to participate in Islamic training, were later pulled out by their parents, especially when it was discovered that they were encouraged to identify traitors. Gradually, the residents would realise that in FaI's eyes boys should be raised as Mujahedin, and that they scorned whatever children normally do. In an incident which occurred before the fighting, some boys were playing soccer on a playground in Nahr al-Bared when they were approached by three armed FaI militants who told them that they had to leave and never come back. And if they did, they would have to take part in military training, or else they would be shot.

The children of FaI militants who settled in Nahr al-Bared were almost invisible at the camp. According to informants these children did not play, only displayed a Jihadi mentality and their lives were clearly being moulded to make them future Mujahedin. The frequent use of death threats towards the local children at Nahr al-Bared –as described in the incidents mentioned above– might be indicative of a much deeper and sinister view that regards children as expendable. An unconfirmed rumour which was circulating at the time of the fieldwork among refugees at Bedawi is particularly illuminating. On or around 2 June a girl of about eight years was seen walking towards a LAF checkpoint. As she approached the checkpoint an explosion followed and the child never returned. According to two informants a bomb strapped to the girl was detonated by remote control by a hidden FaI militant.

Whether or not this story can be confirmed independently is perhaps less relevant in this context. The point of this alleged incident, which was described by two informants who were very insistent that the author took accurate notes, is the fact that by this time FaI had emerged as a group perfectly capable of child sacrifice. Interestingly, the informants barely bothered to pass on any form of moral judgement on the incident: their horror and disbelief spoke for themselves and they apparently felt no need to explain anything.

The Symbolic Universe

The consolidation of a distinct Jihadi identity at the symbolic level occurred in many different ways. In terms of their physical appearance, FaI militants certainly stood out from the crowd. One informant who was particularly disgusted by their strange looks likened them to prison inmates because of their long beards and dirty appearance. Some were dressed like Afghans while others were clad in black T-shirts and rolled-up trouser legs. The outward projection of a Jihadi image entails a number of distinctive trademarks, all of them present in some form in Nahr al-Bared.

A 51-year old male resident of Nahr al-Bared described his first impression of FaI militants: 'these people are not Palestinians, they had a different culture and traditions. Their ways of eating, cooking, clothing was alien'. The local residents were confused by the insistence on long unkempt

hair and beards, the veiling of women and such like. But the fact that many militants took their meals seated on the floor while eating with their hands was simply too much for a few informants who conceded that this was ridiculous ('Palestinians are civilised, we know how to use a knife and fork when we eat!').

Salafi Jihadis interpret the Islamic prescriptions on the use of imagery in very strict terms and the effort to eradicate perceived idolatry was enforced in Nahr al-Bared as well. Posters of Palestinian martyrs were torn off the walls as they were labelled *Jahiliyya*, a sign of unbelief and ignorance of true Islam. The Palestinian flag was also removed and painted black to signify the colour of Jihad, the expression of Palestinian nationalistic sentiments again being interpreted as offensive by FaI. In both cases this deliberate campaign to destroy or desecrate important Palestinian symbols was greeted with disbelief. Only the fear of violent retribution restrained local residents from resisting this exceptionally offensive behaviour.

The identity of FaI Jihadis became clearly visible in terms of their perspectives on Martyrdom which in this context can be narrowed down to the highly symbolic behaviour of dying in combat. Jihadi culture and its associated beliefs were directly translated into actual behaviour on the battlefield. Their style of fighting did not focus on the concept of victory or tactical gains in a conventional sense, but rather on staging their own deaths. Quite a few informants described how FaI militants would calmly stroll around the camp during the siege under intense artillery shelling by the LAF. Their aim was to die as martyrs and they displayed no fear at all; on the contrary, they seemed indifferent to the fighting around them. In the words of one informant, 'they fight in their own way and they sought out danger to achieve martyrdom'. A fellow Nahr al-Bared resident described the difference between the LAF and FaI. The army fired wildly and indiscriminately while the militants casually moved around while killing efficiently.

Another aspect of the deep-seated culture of martyrdom was the use of suicide bombers. Again, actual numbers differ, presumably as a result of the confusion of war, although a very well-placed informant specified that seven or eight FaI militants had blown themselves up. These martyrdom operations occurred during the first days of the fighting and most bombers were Saudi Arabian nationals. Wounded militants would beg to be allowed back into battle, sometimes in spite of serious injuries. One informant described seeing a FaI militant who had lost his hand, but went back into battle anyway. Another related how a militant who had been shot thrice in the leg continued fighting though he was obviously in severe pain.

While willing to suffer themselves, they were certainly also capable of inflicting harm on their enemies, whom they despised for being infidels. The practice of *Takfir*, declaring someone an unbeliever, was to be expressed in highly symbolic and ritualistic behaviour during the fighting. A *Fatwa* issued by FaI's *Shura* Council provided the legitimacy for dehumanising their enemies. In the words of one informant, 'they were willing to do anything to the Lebanese soldiers'. According to informants at least a dozen FaI militants were seen carrying large knives, usually a very direct expression of the Jihadi willingness to slit the throat of their enemies. This practice of ritualistic slaughter was made evident on at least one occasion, testifying to the fact that knives were not merely for decorative purposes. On the night when the fighting broke out an army post was overrun by FaI militants who proceeded to kill all the soldiers. There are several different accounts concerning the number of victims and the manner in which they were despatched, but at least a handful had their throats slit. This ritualistic behaviour is known as *zhabiba* and is a reference to the slaughter of animals. This particular act is highly symbolic as it signifies the complete disregard for the victim as a fellow human being; it is not just killing but a symbolic act signifying utter disrespect.

While the multitude of artefacts and rituals appropriated by the individual FaI militant might appear irrelevant or trivial, in combination they serve a very distinct and specific purpose. They are intended to signal and defend a specific identity, at all costs. This becomes a necessity, because the roots of this particular Jihadi identity are so shallow. While each detail appears trivial when viewed in isolation, in their entirety they take on a new and more sinister meaning. The proof of the significance of details, like table manners, lies in the willingness of the militants to kill or die in order to suppress other forms of cultural identity.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the culture of Jihadism in practice in a specific setting at a particular time.⁹ By doing so, three entities have been triangulated: the anthropological discipline, the method of conducting systematic fieldwork and the behaviour of the particular Jihadi group in question. The methodological and empirical dimensions of this survey have been emphasised, and as such, it represents nothing but a preliminary probing of a new way to approach studies on Jihadism. For an in-depth anthropological and culturally-oriented understanding of the processes by which Jihadi groups manifest themselves, one would obviously need to progress into the theoretical realms of cultural studies. This endeavour, however, would far exceed this paper's format and limitations.

Yet the authors venture to assert that qualitatively based field data like those derived from people having experienced prolonged encounters with FaI militants might indeed advance our understanding of FaI and other Jihadi groups. The current scarcity of fieldwork-derived data does not merit firm conclusions, though it can be assumed that the trajectory of emerging Jihadi cultures will follow identical patterns, at the very least in terms of shared symbols and rituals.

This present case on Jihadi culture highlights a number of possibilities for the study of culture in practice. First, it identifies types of knowledge –otherwise unobtainable– through the generous participation of primary and secondary category informants. The level of detail makes it possible to portray a Jihadi culture from the inside and to reach different types of conclusions than what are currently the standard within Jihadi studies. However, it should be said once again that conducting fieldwork on this topic under the circumstances described is not free of problems. The link between reality and academia was decidedly political and violent in this context. Maintaining scholarly objectivity and ideological neutrality is the first casualty of war.

In highlighting the boundaries of cultural identity, the present case of FaI has proved that even in a conservative milieu such as northern Lebanon, FaI stood out as a deranged sect. The jointly shared symbolic expressions of militants served to reinforce socialisation in a hostile environment, even before full-scale fighting erupted. Through the manipulation and subsequent control of religious symbols, rituals and interpretations it became quite clear to informants that this was indeed a deadly game. Perhaps the most telling verdict on the nature of FaI was offered by a 51-year old resident who escaped Nahr al-Bared after 25 days of fighting, having seen more than he cared for: ‘Fatah al-Islam? They don’t love anyone’.

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