



BOOK REVIEWS

A New Weapon in the Arsenal

Jonathan Schanzer

WALID PHARES, *The War of Ideas: Jihadism Against Democracy*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 266 pp., \$24.95. Hardcover.

In *The War of Ideas: Jihadism Against Democracy*, Professor Walid Phares' historical perspective on the growth of the modern *jihadist* ideology and its offensive against the West, America may have found a new weapon in the war for hearts and minds against radical Islam. This book has the potential to make an impact in the battle over how Islamism and *jihadism* are taught in America's institutes of higher learning.

The problem on American campuses is a well-documented one. Before September 11, 2001, America's

professors predicted the emergence of a Middle East filled with non-violent Islamists. Their approach to Middle Eastern autocracies, violence and the systematic violation of human rights was one of apologia. After 9/11, they continued to insist that the threat of *jihadism* is overblown.

Needless to say, these academics appear to be agenda-driven. They prefer the old, corrupt regional *status quo*, and attack policies designed to combat radicalism and promote democracy. Worse still, they have inoculated themselves against outside criticism, and have shut out other academics who don't toe their line.

Enter Walid Phares, a professor of Middle East Studies at Florida Atlantic University for more than a decade. He is also a native of the

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Middle East (Lebanon) whose first language is Arabic. Phares thus is an insider—both in the Middle East and in Middle Eastern studies—and his writings cannot be ignored.

The good professor is not bashful about his beliefs. Much like his earlier works, Phares' new book is decidedly pro-democracy and anti-*jihadist*. As such, it stands in stark contrast to the writings of the multitude of academics and Middle East experts who, either knowingly or by default, have become apologists for radical Islam.

Phares' point is crystal clear. Academia is a vital battlefield in the struggle for hearts and minds now taking place in the larger War on Terror, and he attacks the academic enemies of democracy accordingly. For example, he hammers University of Michigan professor Juan Cole and University of California-Berkeley's As'ad AbuKhalil for spouting propaganda from the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), a Muslim lobby group that defends Islamist figures and ideas. He likewise brands Georgetown University's John Esposito a *jihadophile* for his consistent apologetics for, and defenses of, Islamism. (Esposito, who runs Georgetown's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, received an award in 2003 from the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) honoring his contribution to the understanding of Muslims.) These and other ivory tower *jihadophiles*, according to Phares, treat "*jihad* as a benign spiritual tradition, like yoga." They insist that *jihad* is not a holy war, but a "spiritual experience."

Phares does more than simply attack those professors who are soft on radical Islam, however. His book is, at its core, a tireless and relentless attack on the ideology of *jihad-*

ism itself. In a measured, judicious and decidedly professorial tone, Phares demonstrates that the adherents of *jihadism* are violent, ruthless, anti-democratic, and anti-Western. He makes a strong and persuasive argument that the goal of *jihadists* is to "defeat all other civilizations" and the "dismantling [of] centuries of human advancement." Phares also systematically and patiently demonstrates how *jihadists* eschew a host of widely accepted international principles, including human rights, gender equality, and religious equality. He also highlights the antipathy toward pluralism, political parties, an independent justice system, and self-criticism exhibited by Islamic moderates.

Throughout, Phares' masterful grasp of modern history helps the reader to put the ideological struggle between radical Islam and democracy into context. The first phase of this struggle, he outlines, was a period of relative dormancy that stretched from 1945 to 1990, when *jihadists* chose to wait out the Cold War and amass their strength for the coming battle. The second phase in the war of ideas, according to Phares, was the period spanning 1990 to 2001. During this decade, the Middle East emerged as the region of the world most resistant to the global trend of liberalization and democratization heralded by the fall of Communism. The iron-fisted leaders of the Middle East tenaciously refused to liberalize or evolve, holding fast to the notion that no change should happen until the Arab-Israeli conflict was settled. The plight of the Palestinians is the most common excuse across the Muslim world for why the reform has been painfully slow or nonexistent. All the while, Salafism and Khomeinism, the primary Sunni and Shi'ite strains of *jihadism*, continued to

spread unhindered and unchallenged by democratic ideals.

The current phase of the war of ideas, Phares concludes, is the most overt, in which *jihadists* and democracy advocates openly clash over their interpretations of international relations, the notion of reform, and even the definition of terrorism. He lays bare how Islamic radicals and their supporters have made systematic efforts to numb the United States and its allies to the threat of radical Islam. They have done so by invoking the specter of Islamophobia, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and other thorny issues to fool the public into thinking that America is in fact the aggressor.

The War of Ideas is vulnerable to attack on two fronts. First, Phares quotes his own published works and testimonies some fifteen times throughout the book. This does little for his credibility; simply because he said it does not make the argument correct. Moreover, although an Arabic speaker, he rarely cites Arabic sources. This is a serious error, since “native” news and analysis are seen as gospel within the discipline of Middle Eastern studies, and Phares’ detractors will almost certainly use the lack thereof against him.

On the whole, Walid Phares has written an excellent answer to the glut of apologies that now permeates the field of Middle Eastern studies. *The War of Ideas* has an air of academic authority that exudes more credibility than works written by Beltway analysts which, although they may make many of the same arguments, can be dismissed all too easily as “alarmist.” Not so with Phares’ writings; given the power of its intellectual reasoning, *The War of Ideas* is destined to be a broadside that the ivory tower will not be able to ignore so easily.

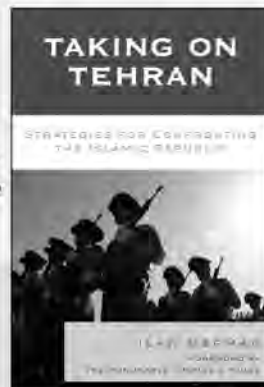


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March 2007 • 160 pages
ISBN 0-7425-5806-1

ISBN-13 978-0-7425-5806-9 • Cloth \$75.00
ISBN 0-7425-5807-X

ISBN-13 978-0-7425-5807-6 • Paper \$24.95

1-800-462-6420

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