

Revenge: Dramaturgy and the Tragedy of Jihad

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Abstract : On 5 July 2016, just days before the bloody terrorist attack on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, the Al-Hayat media centre, one of the official propaganda branches of the Islamic State, broadcast a French nasheed which paid tribute to the Paris and Brussels attacks of November 2015 and March 2016. Entitled 'My Revenge', the terrorist anthem was of rare vehemence. It mentioned, sequentially, 'huddled bodies', in a reference to the civilian casualties of Western air strikes in the Iraqi-Syrian zone, 'explosive belts', 'sharp knives', 'large-calibre weapons' as well as 'localised targets'. France was accused of bearing the responsibility for the wave of attacks on its territory since the Charlie Hebdo massacre of January 2015 due to its 'ruthless war' against the Muslim world. Evoking an 'old aggression' and the 'crimes and spoliations' of which France has made itself guilty, the jihadist hymn depicted the rebirth of the caliphate as 'laudable revenge'. The notion of revenge has always been central to contemporary jihadism, understood both as a revolutionary ideology and a global militant movement. In recent years, the attacks carried out in Europe and elsewhere in the world have, for most, been claimed in its name. Whoever says jihad, says drama, yet few studies, if any, have looked at its dramatic and emotional elements, most notably its tragic vengefulness. This seems all the more astonishing that jihad is filled with drama; it could even be seen as a drama in its own right. The jihadists perform a script and take on roles inspired by their respective group's culture (norms, values, beliefs, and symbols). The militants stage and perform such a script for a designated audience, either partisan, sympathising or hostile towards them and their cause. This research paper will examine the dramaturgy of jihadism and in particular, the genre that best characterises its violence: revenge tragedy. Theoretically, the research will rely on the tools of social movement theory and the sociology of emotions. Methodologically, it will draw from dramaturgical analysis and a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools to attain valuable observations of a number of developments, trends, and patterns. The choice has been made to focus mainly – however not exclusively – on the attacks which have taken place since 2001 in the European Union and more specific member states that have been significantly hit by jihadist terrorism. The research looks at a number of representative longitudinal samples identifying continuities and discontinuities, similarities, but also substantial differences. The preliminary findings tend to establish the relevance and validity of this approach in helping make better sense of sensitisation, mobilisation, and survival dynamics within jihadist groups, and motivations among individuals who have embraced violence. Besides, they illustrate their pertinence for counterterrorism policymakers and practitioners. Through drama, jihadist groups ensure the unceasing regeneration of their militant cause as well as their legitimisation among their partisans. Without drama, and without the spectacular ideological staging of reality, they would not be able to maintain their attraction potential and power of persuasion.

Keywords : Jihadism, dramaturgy, revenge, tragedy

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