

Chapter 2

Omar Shaukat, “Reading and debating the Qur’an with ISIS”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Omar Shaukat’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Omar Shaukat’s essay reports on interviews he conducted with actual and potential ISIS “jihadis” in 2014–2015. He found that violent Qur’anic passages were not the primary motivating factor for these individuals in their decision to become jihadis, and that his interviewees “were even willing to allow for the possibility of contradictory readings of the verses that they themselves cited to justify their behavior, showing a surprisingly open interpretive attitude toward the Qur’an” (p. 22). Shaukat also discovered that his interviewees had a strong desire to be involved in political and social reform – “bad-ass-do-goodery” – and would not be dissuaded from the jihadi path simply by being offered a new interpretation of the Qur’an. Instead, he suggests, they would need to be offered a different way of being radical.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Shaukat’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand his argument.

1. Shaukat’s interviews were guided by two sets of questions (p. 24):
 - “(1) To what extent was each interviewee’s *first and initial* foray into the world of jihadism directed by their discovery of those passages in the Qur’an which they *now* view as calling Muslims to engage in the kind of jihad they advocate?
 - (2) To what extent were they interested in exploring or refuting alternative readings of the Qur’an that would disallow their view of jihad? ... Would they be willing to give up their views or change their lifestyle if they could be convinced of an alternative reading?”

What did his interviews reveal in each of these regards?

2. Shaukat tells about discussing Qur’an 9:5 with his interviewees, some of whom considered it to justify war against their perceived enemies. What objections did he raise to that use of Q 9:5? How did his interviewees respond to his objections?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take time to reflect on the following issues:

3. Some of Shaukat's interviewees acknowledged that Qur'anic verses they cited in support of their stances could be interpreted in other ways. Does this surprise you? If so, why?
4. What else surprised you about Shaukat's interviews?
5. Suppose someone told you, "The Qur'an inspires people to join groups like ISIS." In light of Shaukat's interviews, how would you respond?
6. Shaukat argues that in order to dissuade potential jihadis from the jihadi path, they need to be offered an alternative way of being radical. Design an experimental program for this purpose.
 - a. What age group would you target?
 - b. What would you invite participants to do?
 - c. How would you get people involved and keep them involved?
 - d. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your program?
 - e. Who would sponsor the program?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- You can read how Muslim scholars and leaders have responded to ISIS and their use of the Qur'an here:
 - o *Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, alias "Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi," and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-Declared "Islamic State."* (2014). Available at: www.lettertobaghdadi.com.
- To read more about ISIS and radicalism, see, e.g.:
 - o Scott Atran (2015). "ISIS is a Revolution." *Aeon* [Online]. Available at: aeon.co/essays/why-isis-has-the-potential-to-be-a-world-altering-revolution.
 - o Olivier Roy (2016). "The Islamization of Radicalism." *Mada* [Online], 11 January. Available at: madamasr.com/en/2016/01/11/opinion/u/the-islamization-of-radicalism.