

## Book Review

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Alejandro García Sanjuán. *Yihad: La regulación de la guerra en la doctrina islámica clásica* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2020), 366 pp. ISBN 978-84-17945-10-7. Price: €26.60 (paper).

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As its title points out, this book by Alejandro García Sanjuán, professor of medieval history at the University of Huelva and one of the most prominent scholars of the history of al-Andalus, deals with *jihād* in classical Islam from a very specific angle: the legal-doctrinal one.<sup>1</sup> This perspective is already evident in the introduction, where García Sanjuán defines *jihād* as “legitimate war from the Islamic perspective” (p. 17).<sup>2</sup> And indeed, the sources on which García Sanjuán bases his book are predominantly legal and doctrinal treatises. In the introduction, the author also makes clear his position on the link between violence and religion—namely, that the latter has been an essential factor in the legitimation of the former, another important element

of the idea of *jihād*. This point introduces one of the vitally important topics treated in the book: the significance of not including the idea of *jihād* within the concept of holy war.

In addition to outlining his selection of sources, García Sanjuán specifies in the introduction how he will address the study of *jihād*. Compared to other approaches, especially those adopted by nonspecialists who “proclaim themselves ‘ulamā’ and determine the meaning of these texts by establishing whether the Quran is belligerent or not, and whether Muḥammad promoted war or peace” (p. 22), García Sanjuán sets out to let the sources speak for themselves. In this way, he complies with a principle that is consciously present throughout his

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1. The book is thus in dialog with works such as Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islām* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955) and A. M. Al-Dawoody, *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

2. The English translations of the quoted passages are mine.

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work: “Islam belongs to its believers, who are responsible for defining the meaning of their own beliefs” (p. 22). As we will see later, despite its utility as a maxim with which to establish the meaning of a concept in the sources, this is a somewhat risky statement.

The first chapter, titled “Las bases textuales” (The textual bases), constitutes an excellent analysis not only of the concept of *jihād* in the Quran, the Sunna, and the biography of the Prophet but also of the main works of Islamic law. After a careful examination of the Quranic vocabulary related to combat, violence, and warfare, García Sanjuán addresses the complex question of whether there is a Quranic doctrine on war, understood as a set of clear, systematic, and well-articulated norms. His answer, derived from the study of the Quranic text itself as well as of the opinions of various specialists such as Patricia Crone<sup>3</sup> and Asma Afsaruddin,<sup>4</sup> is that the more warlike readings of the Holy Book emerged after the establishment of the Quranic text. By analyzing the opinions of medieval scholars, García Sanjuán illustrates in a simple but forceful way how classical thinkers took into account the ambiguous meaning of many Quranic verses, thus giving voice, as the author has proposed to do, to the sources themselves.

Also of great interest is the section devoted to the deeds of Muḥammad and the formation of the prophetic tradition, where García Sanjuán analyzes the importance of *ḥadīth*, but also that of the *sīra* and the *maghāzī*, for the establishment

of the doctrine of *jihād*. Like his discussion of the Quranic text, this part includes a brilliant introduction to these genres and the debates around them. The same can be said of the section devoted to the elaboration of *fiqh*, which also serves as an introduction to the sources used by the author.

The second chapter aims to answer the question posed by its title: “¿Qué es el yihad?” (What is *jihād*?). García Sanjuán’s answer is clear and accurate: despite the diversity of concepts and practices, there is a hegemonic vision within the Muslim tradition of how to engage in *jihād*, and this centers on its connection with war. As García Sanjuán says, “there are justified reasons to speak of an intense sacralization of the martial dimension of *jihad*, which allow us to place it [*jihād*] within the framework of the concept of holy war” (p. 106). One of the main reasons is the direct relationship between the practice of *jihād* and the salvation of the soul. This does not prevent the author from also discussing, in detail, the nonviolent forms of *jihād*, which are mainly related to Sufism. However, as García Sanjuán states, it is not possible to establish a dichotomy between the warlike *jihād* of the ‘ulamā’ and the spiritual *jihād* of the Sufis, since war remained, in works such as that of Ibn al-Mubārak, conceptualized as a form of asceticism (pp. 109–10).

This chapter also discusses the important relationship between *ḥisba* and *jihād* through the practice of *takfīr*. Here, García Sanjuán studies what he calls “sectarian *jihād*,” *jihād* carried out

3. Patricia Crone, “Jihad: Idea and History,” *Open Democracy* (2007).

4. Asma Afsaruddin, *Striving in the Path of God: Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

against other Muslims. He illustrates this section with examples from the Islamic West, such as the case of the Almohads, and compares this reality with that of the crusades launched against Christians who were considered heretics. This interesting cross-cultural perspective could have been developed by the author also in other cases.

Next, García Sanjuán analyzes a recurring but necessary theme in this type of work: that of the place of *jihād* in the hierarchy of Islamic beliefs, and what type of duty it is. He also addresses another key issue, which is that the notion of holy war in Islam should not be limited to the idea of *jihād* but should also encompass other concepts, such as *ribāṭ*, *fath*, and *shahāda*. This point is relevant for future research on the idea of holy war in the Islamic world from a holistic perspective. García Sanjuán concludes that the notion of *fath* (divinely sanctioned conquest) constitutes the highest expression of the sacralization of war in Islam, even more so than *jihād*, since this notion casts God as the subject of the action. However, and despite agreeing with the author on the importance of *fath* to the sacralization of war in Islam, one may object that the agent of *fath* is not always God. As just one example, Ibn Abī Zar<sup>6</sup>, in his *Rawḍ al-qirṭās*, reports that the Almohad caliph ʿAbd al-Muʿmin conquered (*fataḥa*) all of the Maghrib.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, God appears as the subject of warfare also in other concepts, such as *naṣr*

(divine aid).<sup>6</sup> What we find in the sources, to return to García Sanjuán's approach, is a concept of the sacralization of war manifested through various complementary terms. Undoubtedly, the manifestation of God in the contexts of *jihād*, especially through "His help" (*naṣr*), is one of the main features of holy war.<sup>7</sup> This chapter ends with another interesting terminological analysis focused on the interruption of hostilities.

The third chapter, titled "¿Cuáles son los límites de la práctica del yihad?" (What are the limits to the practice of *jihād*?), focuses on the significant Islamic legal corpus related to *ius in bello*, that is, the behavior of combatants in war. As García Sanjuán says, the limits imposed on the practice of *jihād* are a fundamental element of the classical notion of *jihād*. The chapter analyzes, in depth and with an impeccable use of sources, issues such as the distinction between combatants and noncombatants, protected groups, the treatment of prisoners, the use of weapons of indiscriminate destruction, destruction of property, and self-harm and martyrdom. The extensive elaboration of these issues in Islamic legal and doctrinal treatises leads García Sanjuán to consider *fiqh* the first great legal system to contain a specific doctrine of *ius in bello*, thus anticipating modern public international law by several centuries. Here a brief reference to the theory of just war, at the time under development and revision in both

5. Ibn Abī Zar<sup>6</sup>, *Kitāb al-anīs al-muṭrib rawḍ al-qirṭās fī akhbār mulūk al-Maghrib wa-taʾrīkh madīnat Fās* (Rabat: Dār al-Mansūr, 1972), 204.

6. See, for example, M. A. Makki, "Wathāʾiq taʾrījiyya yadīda ʿan ʿaṣr al-murābiṭīn (Documentos inéditos de la época almorávide)," *Revista del Instituto de Estudios Islámicos* 7/8 (1959–60): 109–98 (letter no. 2).

7. See, for example, Dominique Urvoy, "The Question of Divine Help in the *Jihād*," in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qurʾān to the Mongols*, ed. Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy, 27–32 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

the Greco-Roman and Western medieval traditions as well as in Islamic thought,<sup>8</sup> would have been of interest to demonstrate that just-war theory also developed a *ius in bello* doctrine, even though it did not reach the level of normative development present in *fiqh*. Frederick Russell's definition of this theory highlights the overlap: "Content with the achievement of more concrete political objectives, the just war stops short of countenancing the utter destruction of the adversaries and tends to limit the incidence of violence by codes of right conduct, of non-combatant immunity and by other humanitarian restraints."<sup>9</sup>

The fourth and final chapter of the book is the most innovative of all, at least from the point of view of the posed question: "¿Por qué el yihad ha sido un concepto polémico y tergiversado?" (Why has *jihād* been a controversial and distorted concept?). This chapter—which is connected to other seminal works of historiographical criticism written by the author<sup>10</sup>—analyzes the different ways in which the conceptualization of *jihād* has been adulterated, especially as a result of the fall of the Iron Curtain, the appearance of the theory of clash of civilizations, and the growing accentuation of the role of Islamist radicalism in international politics. García Sanjuán denounces the

mainstream media's identification of Islam with terrorism through a manipulation of the idea of *jihād*, evident in the writings of nonspecialists who "proclaim themselves Islamic scholars," such as Antonio Elorza,<sup>11</sup> and he traces the genealogy of this Islamophobic perspective from the medieval polemic tradition, paying special attention to the Spanish case—an example of great importance due to the Islamic past of the Iberian Peninsula.

Following the approaches laid out in the introduction, García Sanjuán emphasizes that "the role of religious texts in the analysis of violence should not be placed on the level of causes, but rather on that of its justification or legitimation" (p. 294), a point that serves as a preamble to a refutation of what he calls "the fallacy of Islamic exceptionalism" (pp. 294–95), that is, the erroneous idea that Islam is a violent religion per se. However, it would have been interesting if, when dismantling this fallacy, the author had referred to some of the studies that have tried to contextualize the rise of Islam within the framework of Late Antiquity and the ideas of religious violence that were circulating at the time.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, inserting García Sanjuán's considerations into the broader debate on the relationship between violence and religion would have been fruitful.<sup>13</sup> Within

8. See, for example, James Turner Johnson and John Kelsay, eds., *Just War and Jihad: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives on War and Peace in Western and Islamic Traditions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), and John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

9. Frederick Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

10. See, for example, Alejandro García Sanjuán, *La conquista islámica de la Península Ibérica y la tergiversación del pasado: Del catastrofismo al negacionismo* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2013).

11. Antonio Elorza, "Anatomía de la yihad en el Corán y los hadices," in *El nuevo terrorismo islamista: Del 11-S al 11-M*, ed. Fernando Reinares and Antonio Elorza, 269–94 (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2004).

12. See, for example, Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

13. See, for example, Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus*

his discussion of the misrepresentation of *jihād*, García Sanjuán also rightly includes those authors who, from a confessional and apologetic perspective, have tried to separate the “historical” idea of *jihād* from any warlike vision.<sup>14</sup>

This book is, therefore, an exceptional exercise in close reading, scholarship, and historiographical practice. As such, it raises a series of questions for the interested reader that, more by way of dialogue than minor criticism, I would now like to point out. In the first place, although García Sanjuán reiterates throughout the book the conclusion that the historically hegemonic aspect of *jihād* is undoubtedly that of holy war, sometimes it seems that he is reluctant to use this notion of sacralized violence, preferring to employ definitions such as the abovementioned “legitimate war from the Islamic perspective” (p. 17). Without being wrong, this framing is, in the view of the present reviewer, not entirely clear, since *jihād* is not the only “legitimate” war within the Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup> More precisely, within the Islamic tradition it is the sacralization of *jihād* that differentiates it from other types

of legitimate wars (such as those waged against rebels), through, for example, its salvific character, as García Sanjuán rightly establishes.

Second, as noted earlier, the principle established by García Sanjuán in the introduction—that Islam belongs to its believers, who ought to be the ones to define their beliefs—is somewhat risky. I believe that the interpretation, for example, of the Quran in its historical context is not incompatible with the analysis of what the medieval ‘*ulamā*’ said about the Quranic text, even though such interpretation can yield results that differ from those enunciated by Muslim believers. Following García Sanjuán’s premise, many of the studies on early and medieval Islam that he quotes would be invalid. For example, reaching a conclusion such as Afsaruddin’s, when she says that the warlike reading of *jihād* constitutes a “considerable deviation” from its Quranic meaning, could not be deemed methodologically valid.<sup>16</sup> How can she correct and judge the medieval ‘*ulamā*’? The problem with authors such as Elorza is not their “self-proclamation” as ‘*ulamā*’

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(Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003) and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

14. A clear example is the work of Louay Fatoohi, who analyzes the Quran exclusively, highlighting the spiritual vision of *jihād* and ignoring the fact that it was the medieval ‘*ulamā*’ themselves who interpreted the idea within a warlike framework: L. Fatoohi, *Jihad in the Qur’an: The Truth from the Source* (Birmingham: Luna Plena, 2009).

15. See, for example, Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

16. On the other hand, Afsaruddin’s work, focused on Quranic exegesis, could be used as another example of studies that have misrepresented the notion of *jihād*, in this case to downplay its warlike character. See Christopher Melchert’s review of Afsaruddin’s book in *Review of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015): 175–78. As Melchert states, “a natural concern of an historian is what Islam has been like, of a theologian what Islam ought to be like. This book tries to enlist an historical survey in aid of a theological argument. Perhaps theologians will find it unusually scholarly. As an historian, I find it disappointingly unrigorous.” On the early Quranic exegetical sources regarding *jihād*, see Andrew Rippin, “Reading the Qur’ān on *Jihād*: Two Early Exegetical Texts,” in Gleave and Kristó-Nagy, *Violence in Islamic Thought*, 33–48.

and their interpretation of the Quran despite not being Muslims, but rather the decontextualized way in which they carry out their interpretation and their lack of training and specialization for this task, as most of them lack any knowledge of the Arabic language or the Islamic exegetical tradition.

Third, and given the legal-doctrinal approach of the book, it presents a perspective that could be further nuanced, at some points, by the use of other sources, such as chronicles or biographical dictionaries. A clear example concerns the limits to the practice of *jihād*, which are greatly blurred if we depart from the purely legal approach. A wide selection of sources and different perspectives is essential in a study on a broad notion such as *jihād*, and thus brief reference to the multidimensional perspective provided by other sources could have been helpful to the reader. In the same vein, sometimes a better contextualization of the authors and sources analyzed could have been useful for a better understanding of the approaches and meanings they propose. An illustrative example is that of Ibn Ḥazm, whose vision of *jihād* should, I think, be attributed not only to his *Zāhirism* but also to the threatening situation that al-Andalus was facing in the eleventh century. García Sanjuán rightly highlights

this issue when talking, for example, of how pilgrimage and *jihād* are equated in the texts of Ibn Rushd al-Jadd.

These points notwithstanding, this is an outstanding book written by one of the leading Spanish scholars of Islamic studies and Islamic history, and its publication is undoubtedly a milestone in the analysis of *jihād*, for three main reasons. The first is the book's indubitable meticulousness and accuracy in approaching its sources, not an easy task considering the amount and complexity of Islamic legal-doctrinal literature. In this sense, it is also worth mentioning the author's comprehensive use of secondary literature. The second reason is that the author adds to his rigor a clarity of expression and explanation as well as a capacity for synthesis, allowing the book to be directed to a wider public, in line with the commitment to society that García Sanjuán has always exhibited in his work as a historian.<sup>17</sup> Third, and relatedly, this work fills in a rather astonishing gap: it is the first academic monograph in Spanish to systematically address the concept of *jihād*. Fortunately, in the last year other books on the topic, likewise written from a historical perspective, have been published, thus beginning to fill this gap.<sup>18</sup> García Sanjuán's book, therefore, has opened a line of research that will hopefully be followed in the coming years.

17. For example, he is one of the creators and editors of the open access online magazine on Andalusian history *Al-Andalus y la Historia*: <https://www.alandalusylahistoria.com/>. He is also a regular contributor to many newspapers; see, for example, [https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/opinion/plaza\\_publica/2021/02/15/convivencia\\_invasion\\_genocidio\\_pasado\\_peninsular\\_116649\\_2003.html](https://www.infolibre.es/noticias/opinion/plaza_publica/2021/02/15/convivencia_invasion_genocidio_pasado_peninsular_116649_2003.html).

18. See, for example, Javier Albarrán, *Ejércitos benditos: Yihad y memoria en al-Andalus (siglos X-XIII)* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2020) and Josep Suñé, *Guerra, ejército y fiscalidad en al-Andalus (ss. VIII-XII): De la hegemonía musulmana a la decadencia* (Madrid: La Ergástula, 2020).