

Jihād in South Asia: Historical Contingency versus Essentialism

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The recent revival of jihād and jihādī ideologies in South Asia part of the development of Islamist and post-Islamist thought following the civil war in Afghanistan and 9/11 is seen in some popular and semi-popular accounts as a continuation of an old standing trend of Islam's clash with modernity in the region. A linear trajectory is drawn from anti-colonial and the so-called Wahhābī revolt against British rule to contemporary salafī-jihādīs engaged in Afghanistan, FATA in Pakistan and Kashmir. Such equations and links are rather simplistic. In this paper, I argue against the essentialism of dealing with every case of an appeal to 'jihād' as somewhat linked and stress the need to address the historical contingency of contexts. Furthermore, a careful historical examination of so-called jihādī outbreaks in the region over the last two centuries suggest that religious justification does not provide sufficient reason as an explanation for action and that the proliferation of movements, violent and peaceful, jihādī, sectarian or populist, that attempt to articulate a role for Islam in the public sphere as guidance, governance or mobilisation need to be understood within the political and historical dynamics of the present.