one that intimately details his interactions with other elements of the opposition, especially the far left. How did they theorize his presence as a political force?

Finally, I encountered a few technical and factual errors that slipped past the authors, copy-editors and editor, including ‘estrebad’ being misspelt as ‘esetbad’ (59), Asrar-i Hizar Salih being called an ‘anti-religious tract’ rather than ‘anti-traditionalist’ (68) and the claim that this same work was written by ‘Ali Dashki while its author was actually Ali-Akbar Hakamizadeh (265). There are other examples I do not have enough room to get into (see 94, 121, 173, 184, 193, 197 and 213).

In its capacity as an introductory work that mostly reinforces prior insights and brings together readily available yet disparate sources, Adib-Moghaddam's volume can indeed be deemed valuable. However, I think the work would have been much superior if the above-mentioned points (among others) were addressed with a dash of non-descriptive creativity.

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For public and experts alike, jihad is the religious war that every Muslim is commanded to wage against the ‘infidels’. Extremist political Islam claims that (sparse) verses of the Qur’an obligate believers to exterminate every enemy of Islam and promise martyr combatants (including suicide bombers) ample rewards in the after-world. Most Muslim and Western scholars counter these arguments by simply giving a different interpretation to the same sacred verses. Their main point is that jihad must be intended as a spiritual war (‘greater jihad’) rather than a fought one (‘lesser jihad’). Despite the opposite perspectives of extremists and moderates, all seem to agree that jihad entails ‘war’. But was it always so? And if yes, was it a universal obligation for Muslims in any circumstance?

Asma Afsaruddin, Professor of Islamic Studies at Indiana University, has some provocative answers to these questions. In Striving in the Path of God: Jihād and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought, she challenges the contemporary interpretations of jihad and shahāda (martyrdom). Through the study of archaic Islamic primary sources: the Qur’an, hadith works, ethical and moral texts, and specific jihad literature, she shows that, in fact, definitions of jihad and martyrdom as ‘primarily military [concepts] deviate considerably from the Qur’anic significations of these terms’ (p. 5). Rather, such definitions would be the product of an Islamic legal tradition whose exponents were usually involved in, or supportive of, their governments and, therefore, very sensitive to inter-state relations. Hence, jihad's meaning as a ‘call to war’ consolidated in specific historical situations: in earlier times, when Muslims were militarily attacked because of their faith; later, when
(unpopular) rulers attributed religious significance to the state in order to overcome the populace’s reluctance to join the army.

In her book, Afsaruddin examines the interpretations (exegeses) of relevant terms and verses in the sacred texts conducted by authoritative commentators in two distinct periods: early and late Islamic era (respectively, from the seventh to the tenth century CE, and from the tenth century CE). Along with jihad and *shahāda*, Afsaruddin analyses a range of related terms such as *sabr* (‘patient forbearance’), *qitāl* (‘armed combat’) and *ribāt* (‘defence of the borders’), and the ways they reinforce or contradict martial interpretations of jihad and martyrdom. These concepts are less familiar than jihad, but equally fundamental for the understanding of today’s debate on political Islam, within and outside of the Muslim world.

Through the diachronic comparison of the interpretations of same texts by authors differing by historical, geographical and doctrinal positions, Afsaruddin identifies a trajectory along which the concept of jihad, from its early meaning of ‘following the path of God’ in a general and pacifist sense, progressively acquired a much narrower and partially incorrect sense of ‘military obligation’ of each Muslim against any infidel. Analogously, *shahāda’s* meaning changed from generally dying as a believer (under various circumstances) to dying as a believer in battle only. Throughout her research, Afsaruddin examines jihad and *shahāda* (and related concepts) within Islam’s broader conceptualizations of religion, community and the world. From this ‘holistic’ perspective, she concludes that, indeed, their contemporary meanings are the result of doctrinal as well as historical and political influences on commentators.

This comparative exercise takes seven of the book’s nine chapters; conducted in minute details, it is a dense reading. The first chapter briefly introduces the main commentators and offers an in-depth discussion on the meanings of ‘striving “for”, “in”, and “in the path of” God’ (10). Chapters two to six engage in detail with the texts. Those who do not wish to immerse themselves in the sources will find a comprehensive summary of the textual findings in the book’s conclusion. Afsaruddin convincingly proves her point – her argument made even stronger by her acknowledgment of controversial sources, or less-than-straightforward interpretative traditions. In the final chapters, she leaps to modern and contemporary Islamic authors. Their names (al-Bannā, Qutb, Khomeini, al-Qaradāwī and others) are familiar to the informed reader. Their positions on jihād and martyrdom are examined within the Islamic exegetical tradition expounded in the previous chapters. To those who deal with the subject for the first time, Afsaruddin’s selection of authors, although necessarily narrow, offers an overview of the most vocal ones, and a clear treatment of their arguments. Finally, in the postscript the author highlights several important questions that Muslims face today, the resolution of which both depends from and affects the future interpretations of jihad and related concepts of the Islamic tradition.
Afsaruddin’s primary purpose is to counter the narrow military conceptualizations of jihad diffused in the literature on Islamic terrorism and in most Islamic legal texts. To do this, she also touches on side-arguments that are worthy of attention. In particular, she compares early Islamic equivalents of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* with Islamic and Christian legal and religious doctrines of war. Equally thought-provoking is the parallel made between Islamic fundamentalism and Soviet Communism as revolutionary ideologies. Although similar associations are not new (for example, in the work of the Iranian thinker Ali Shari’ati), they still recur in certain contemporary Islamic discourse, for example in Russia. Despite the book’s analytical richness, however, the growing phenomenon of female terrorists and martyrs is mentioned only briefly among the final questions of the postscript. A more extensive discussion of the interpretations of the role of women in military jihad, in relation both to jihād per se and to Qur’anic pacifism, would have made the book even more relevant in the contemporary debate on political Islam, especially for Western readers.

In conclusion, Afsaruddin’s book is commendable for its rigorous, but at the same time accessible treatment of an impressive body of sources. Not only does it represent a valuable source of alternative, authoritative interpretations of jihad, martyrdom and related topics. It also frames them within broader Islamic doctrinal debates on how single believers and the Islamic community as a whole should relate to non-Muslims. Both as a treasure of punctual quotations or as argumentative background, it provides political scientists and commentators with a solid support to a rigorous (counter) argument to extremist and terrorist stances.

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Hussein Ali Agrama’s riveting ethnography of Egyptian personal-status courts and the Fatwa Council of Al-Azhar makes manifold contributions to our understanding of the changing nature of Islamic authority; the transformation undergone by the shari’a as it is subsumed under the structure of state law; the role of the mufti and the fatwa; and the nature of state power and political protests. However, Agrama’s most significant contribution is to our conceptualizations of secularism. Interweaving findings from his two years of fieldwork on juridical practices in Cairo with analyses of law, legal changes, court judgments, case reasoning and the work of Islamist lawyers, Agrama investigates the nature of secular power in Egypt and beyond. Explaining the relevance of Egypt to broader theorizations of secularism, Agama asserts that the question of whether Egypt is a religious or a secular state can be asked not just of Egypt but of a multitude of other states, including Western