

Book Review

Javier Albarrán Iruela. *Ejércitos benditos. Yihad y memoria en al-Andalus (siglos X-XIII)*. Colección Historia (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2020). ISBN 9788433867537.

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Javier Albarrán Iruela's new book, *Ejércitos benditos: Yihad y memoria en al-Andalus (siglos X-XIII)*, is the most complete study of holy war ideology, ritual, and practice in al-Andalus yet written. Based on his doctoral dissertation, "Los discursos de guerra santa y la memoria de las primeras batallas del Islam, al-Andalus, Siglos X-XIII" (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2019), this book reflects the author's broad familiarity with a wide range of Arabic, Latin, and Castilian sources on the concept and practice of holy war.

Albarrán's close reading of these sources demonstrates the ways in which discourses of holy war emerged in the Islamic West in the context of the broader Islamic Middle Period, and also in contact and competition with the Christian kingdoms of Iberia. Rather than focusing exclusively on the legal formulations of jihad as elaborated by jurists, as many

earlier scholars have done, Albarrán considers the ways in which broader ideas of holy war (including those called *ghazwa*, *qitāl*, *ḥarb*, *fath*) were deployed and enacted from the Umayyads of Cordoba to the Almohads. Throughout, Albarrán's book focuses on how rulers used the symbolic capital of holy war to legitimate themselves. By looking more broadly at the discourse, images and symbols of holy war and how it functioned as a tool of power in different contexts, Albarrán moves beyond legalistic frameworks toward an outline of the practice of holy war, and of Islamic rule more generally. Seen from this perspective, holy war is not a concrete act with well-established limits, but instead a flexible field of action that could be adapted by diverse actors to justify their behaviors.

The book follows a largely chronological organization, beginning with a chapter about the ideas of holy war and jihad and

the importance of the memory of the first battles of Islam. As part of this study, he outlines the early Islamic conquests as they are presented in the Quran and the biographies of the Prophet and his Companions, emphasizing the themes and concepts that would emerge again and again in later conceptions of holy war. Albarrán defines holy war as one in which God was seen as present and helpful to warriors, a war that had a missionary character and that was defined by the defense of the “true” religion against enemies of God, or a war that had a salvific element, often supported by the concept of martyrdom. Holy war was one of many discourses that could be used to augment power and, as Albarrán shows, one of the most potent tools a ruler had at his disposal.

Chapter 2 centers on the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba, both the campaigns carried out at the behest of the caliph himself and the ascetic frontier warriors who operated outside the direct control of the caliphate. In Albarrán’s analysis, both the conduct of holy war and its representation served to legitimate the Umayyads as the rightful inheritors of a caliphal role. Although holy war was always theoretically aimed at “infidels,” the question of who belonged in this category was flexibly addressed according to the political climate of the moment. Holy war, especially along the frontier, also served as a powerful justification for the submission of expansive territories to the central authority defending those border zones. “Centralized” jihad, that is organized and managed by the state, was contested by “decentralized” holy war, enacted by individuals along frontiers, which could challenge the power of the

state and augment the prestige of scholar-warriors.

In Chapter 3, Albarrán conducts careful analysis of how the memory of the early battles of Islam as sites of sacred memory was activated in a series of campaigns in the Umayyad period, which then legitimated Umayyad power in al-Andalus and presented its leaders as following the model of the Prophet. The scholarship of the period served to reinforce the image of the Andalusī Umayyads as continuing the expansion of early Islam and also as rightfully inheriting the Umayyad caliphate in the east, with one battle presented as echoing the Umayyad victory over the forces of Ibn al-Zubayr at Marj Rāhiṭ, for example. The scholarly production of Umayyad Cordoba then affected the development of the idea of jihad and how the Umayyads of Damascus were remembered as well.

In the years that followed the fall of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba, holy war continued to carry this important ideological and practical weight. Chapter 4 follows how holy war was understood and deployed in the Taifa and Almoravid periods, and Chapter 5 addresses how the memory of the earliest battles was elaborated and transmitted in a time of multiple competing rulers. As Albarrán indicates throughout, holy war was the tool perhaps best able to support claimants to power, since it allowed them to eliminate enemies and to present themselves as defenders of the community while aligning themselves with sacred history. Thus, in the Taifa period, as al-Andalus fragmented into competing city-states, the idea of the *ghāzī*-king was particularly useful and was deployed regularly by claimants to power.

Albarrán's extensive examination of the ways in which holy war was understood and used in the Umayyad period helps highlight the continuities and disjunctures with the periods that followed. The idea that the Almoravid period was defined by a new focus on holy war against the Christians is here complicated by Albarrán's close reading of Almoravid sources, which shows that they ritualized their holy war less than the Umayyads had done before them and that their vision of holy war brought together the centralized impulse of the jihad state with the decentralized asceticism of frontier warriors. Nevertheless, like their Umayyad predecessors, the Almoravids used holy war to justify their expansion, relying particularly on the famous fatwa of al-Ghazālī, which made their conquest of the Andalusī kingdoms a sacred project.

The Almohads, on the other hand, ritualized and sacralized holy war even more than the Umayyads had done. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on, respectively, the practice of holy war under the Almohads and the memory of early Islamic battles developed in their period. As Albarrán demonstrates, Almohad processes of *ḥisba* (commanding the good and forbidding the wrong), *takfīr* (proclaiming Muslims to be infidels), and jihad constituted a single important trajectory, allowing them to present themselves as the sole real Muslims and to validate holy war against all of their rivals. It is in the discussion of the development of Almohad holy war culture that Albarrán's work reaches its highest levels of analysis. Using published chronicles, legal texts, and works of *futūḥ*, as well as an unpublished *maghāzī* manuscript by Ibn al-Qaṭṭān from the Qarawiyyīn Library in Fez, Albarrán

considers the justification, rhetoric, and ritual of Almohad holy war. His analysis of the increasingly elaborate rituals of holy war developed by the Almohads demonstrates the importance of such traditions as processions, banners, drums, and the presentation of sacred objects in the performance and legitimation of power. He examines the direct involvement of Almohad caliphs in leadership of holy wars and in the development of holy war ideology, including through the commissioning of works of *maghāzī* and *futūḥ* (including those of Ibn Ḥubaysh and Ibn al-Qaṭṭān). Albarrán also considers the objects, architecture, and inscriptions that reflected this vision of holy war, and the destruction of objects and symbols of the enemy that accompanied war. Finally, he considers how memory functioned in the construction of holy war ideology—both the memory of the conquests of early Islam and the ritualized commemorations of sites of memory (*loca memoriae*) associated with battles in al-Andalus.

One major contribution of this book is in the systematic refutation of the long-standing argument that al-Andalus fell because of a lack of jihad ideology. Albarrán demonstrates that several of the pieces of evidence of this “lack” put forward by earlier scholars are untrue. He establishes, first, that there was in fact a lively group of *‘ulamā’*-warriors in al-Andalus, with considerable social prestige; second, that Andalusī *‘ulamā’* developed new concepts of jihad designed to face the threat of the Christians, as is visible in their legal works and in books of *maghāzī* and *futūḥ*; and third, that the perception of a greater spirit of holy war in the Islamic east than in al-Andalus is illusory. The earlier analyses that present Andalusīs as

lacking in the necessary piety or martial fervor are therefore based on incomplete evidence and do not stand up to closer examination. Albarrán does not seek to explain the failure of the Umayyads or Almohads to hold onto power, but rather to demonstrate the continued value of holy war for rulers, warriors, and scholars throughout this period. Indeed, as the whole book shows, holy war ideology was central to the legitimation and practice of power of every dynasty he considers.

Albarrán concludes that holy war was not simply a rhetorical tool for those in power, but functioned in addition as a source of legitimacy and authority, carrying considerable weight for rulers' subjects. As such, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries in al-Andalus, discourses around holy war developed into complex systems of rituals and symbols, many of which continued in various forms in subsequent centuries. By examining the whole period from the rise of Islam to the end of the Almohad period, Albarrán's book highlights the important continuities across this period and the recursive ways in which subsequent dynasties returned to earlier moments to demonstrate the holiness of their own mission. Indeed, using the lens of memory demonstrates the powerful pull early Islamic history had on the dynasts of the Islamic Middle Period, who by echoing the tropes of earlier battles could present themselves as embodiments of holy figures. Scholars could also use an imagined memory of a unified *umma* dedicated to the fight against infidel armies to chastise their compatriots for their lack of unity and, as Ibn Ḥazm did, call for a new jihad to unite the community once more.

Another major contribution of this book is its familiarity with the literature on Christian holy war, and particularly on the development of the idea of holy war on the Iberian Peninsula more generally. By looking at representations of holy war and its uses for political legitimation in al-Andalus with reference to the simultaneous appeals to holy war in the Christian kingdoms of Iberia, Albarrán demonstrates the transcultural nature of ideas about holy war. The discourse of holy war, as well as its symbols and ritualization, are marked by significant parallels in Islamic and Christian contexts, especially in the twelfth century. Albarrán notes fascinating evidence of medieval scholars' awareness of such parallels, such as when Ibn 'Idhārī describes the order of Calatrava as conceiving the fight against the Muslims as their *ḥajj* and jihad.

The book forms part of a new flurry of interest in jihad in Spanish scholarship, with two other books on the topic coming out in 2020. Alejandro García-Sanjuán's *Yihad: La regulación de la guerra en la doctrina islámica clásica* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2020) focuses on legal questions relating to the practice of jihad in the Islamic world more generally, while Josep Suñé's *Guerra, ejército y fiscalidad en al-Andalus, ss. VIII–XII* (Madrid: La Ergástula, 2020) considers why Andalusī armies became unable to defend themselves against their Christian rivals. Albarrán's work differentiates itself by its simultaneous attention to the practice of jihad by rulers aspiring to power in al-Andalus from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries and how scholars in their employ connected military campaigns to the memory of early Islam.

Overall, this book constitutes a major contribution to the fields of the history of al-Andalus and of holy war more generally. Scholars working on the ideology of holy

war in Christian contexts as well as those interested in the practice of power in the broader Islamic world will learn much from it.