



4-1-2010

## Report from Slamdance 2010

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### Recommended Citation

Blizek, William L. and Desmarais, Michele M. (2010) "Report from Slamdance 2010," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.14.01.02>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol14/iss1/2>

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## Report from Slamdance 2010

### Abstract

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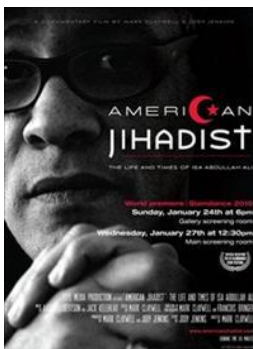


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### Grand Jury Award for Best Documentary Film Winner

One of the most important questions of our day is why people become Jihadists—why they are willing to kill in the name of God. Mark Claywell's *American Jihadist* is an excellent effort to answer that question. The answer Claywell gives through his film, however, is not the answer we would like, not an answer that will give us any comfort.



*American Jihadist* follows the life of Isa Abdullah Ali, formerly known as Clevin Holt, through his upbringing in an alcoholic and abusive family, his being bullied in school, his enlistment in the United States Army at the age of fifteen, his conversion to Islam, his fighting in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and

later, Bosnia. As a child, Isa frequently talked to God, the creator of all things, because talking to God was the only way for Isa to find any peace or comfort in the world. As a child bullied at school—other students made him pay a tax to attend

school—Isa learned to be sympathetic to those who have been ill treated and oppressed. Later Isa says that his mission is to seek justice for just those people. His mission is a calling from God. In the Army, Isa learned the hard way about discrimination and he becomes a Muslim in part because he sees Islam as a religion that does not discriminate. Given his military training and his religious conversion, Isa is now ready to protect his people from those who oppress and ill treat them. We now have an American Jihadist.

One of the unique features of Claywell's film is that it follows one individual in a way that gives us an in depth look at the Jihadist. Usually we get only sound bites from a number of terrorists, but here we get to know Isa as a complex person. What we find is there are many reasons for turning to Jihad. There is no single characteristic that identifies the Jihadist. The suffering and oppression that Isa feels is a characteristic felt by other Jihadists, but the cause of that suffering and oppression may vary greatly from individual to individual. So there is no way to identify some young people as more or less likely to turn to Jihad. What is clear from Isa's case is that religion (not only Islam) provides some structure and meaning to those who are lost souls. Religion provides meaning to one's life and gives young people an opportunity to connect with something larger than themselves. Religion provides hope. It gives people a future. Religion also gives young people a moral purpose—they will be protecting those who cannot protect themselves, they will be

bringing justice to those ill-treated and oppressed, they will be doing the will of God. All of this is true, whatever the religion. The Christian anti-abortionist who kills a physician sees himself as protecting the helpless and as doing the will of God. The very nature of religion is such that it attracts Jihadists—Christian Jihadists as well as Muslim or Hindu or Jewish Jihadists. Regardless of religion, some people are drawn to killing in the name of God.

We usually think of religion as a good thing, but religion also can be something that rots our souls. Even religion is not safe. It does not guarantee that we are on the right path. It is not having a religion that matters, but rather how we practice whatever religion we adopt. What makes this frightening is that what we usually think of as a refuge, can give us a moral justification for producing evil in the world.

From the movie, we do not see Isa Ali as a bad man. He does want to bring justice to those who are ill-treated and oppressed. Who can argue with that? His life has been given structure and meaning through his Islamic faith. Who can argue with that? He wants his children to live in a better world than the world in which Isa grew up. Who can argue with that? But where is the line between these concerns and using God to justify killing innocent people and what pushes us over that line? *American Jihadist* tells us that there are no easy answers.