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## Jihad Rehab

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## Jihad Rehab

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Jihad Rehab* (2021), directed by Meg Smaker.

### Keywords

Terrorism, Islam, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, War on Terror, Rehabilitation

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### Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



**Jihad Rehab (2021), dir. Meg Smaker**

When the United States government started to send the prisoners held at Guantanamo back to their native countries, they resisted releasing some back to Yemen as they feared that they would join the active terrorist movement there. A solution appeared when Saudi Arabia agreed to take them, on the condition that they would be reeducated at a rehabilitation center funded by the Saudi government, and that the men would remain in Saudi Arabia after their release. This film tells four of their stories.

While these men admit to having joined Al Qaeda, they did not see themselves as terrorists. They trained for war against the United States in Afghanistan, viewing this as self-defense of their people. Most of them did not even understand what had happened on 9/11, and had not seen any images of the attack on the Twin Towers until they were shown them by their reeducators. The

fact that thousands of innocent civilians had died was a surprise and a shock, they claim, as they had only seen Americans as their enemies on the battlefield. (In a similar way, we might note that American soldiers rarely reflect on the civilian casualties caused by their own bombings.) While these men might have been ready to be prisoners of war after their capture, they did not anticipate being incarcerated and tortured for fifteen years. They became suicidal, and hated America even more as they saw their human rights ignored. But in the rehabilitation program in Saudi Arabia, some of them began to see that they had in fact joined a terrorist organization, and that this was a terrible mistake.

Most of these men were teenagers when they were captured and are now in their thirties, having spent half their lives in prison. They know that they were naïve and ill informed, and that terrorist organizations easily recruit young people in this way. They also now have to learn how to survive after their release, and hope to get married and support families. But a new challenge appears when Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Naif, who had started the rehabilitation program, was replaced by Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in 2017, and their release is delayed for months. By the time they enter Saudi society, Bin Salman has created laws that prevent non-Saudis from working, essentially making them permanently unemployed and without a source of income. Some get married and have children, but they cannot begin the new lives they had hoped for.

The Saudi program claimed an 85% success rate, meaning that about one of every six participants is not rehabilitated. Given that Saudi Arabia continued with American support to bomb Yemen and kill civilians there, it is not hard to see why they might not trust their handlers. Bin Salman has classified any critics of his government as terrorists, and has authorized mass beheadings of those who have challenged him; he has also been linked to the murder of journalist

Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. The Yemenis are not allowed to integrate into Saudi society, and it is a hostile environment for them. It is hard to see how they can ever have normal lives.

Director Smaker spent several years in Yemen training firefighters there, so she has a link to these people and clearly has sympathy for them. At the same time, she does not overlook what they have done; one man stops talking to her after she repeatedly asks about his crimes, and he refuses to answer. They may have done wrong, but some of them do want to change. Once one is viewed as a terrorist, however, even without a criminal conviction they are guilty in the eyes of international public opinion. This film humanizes these men and their story, and suggests that they are at least owed an opportunity to live a normal life—but that has not happened yet, and it is unclear when it might.