

Second Hayami Award Comments

Recipient: Masahiro Kubo (Ph.D. Student, Brown University)
Paper: The Golden City on the Edge: Economic Geography and Jihad over Centuries
(co-authored with Shunsuke Tsuda)

Mr. Kubo's study explores the historical origin of Islamist insurgency, jihad. With widespread jihadist violence in the world, this is a critical question for global security. Compared to extant work on the historical origins of contemporary conflicts, this paper is unique in that it studies the evolution of cities and jihad in West Africa over centuries in a unified framework, employing innovative empirical design. The key finding is that contemporary jihad occurred in the locations of landlocked pre-colonial cities that had contracted or become extinct, i.e., in "past-core-and-present-periphery" locations. In other words, cities and jihad evolved in the process of reversal of fortune. To control for the endogeneity of the location of pre-colonial cities, which is critical, the authors employ a novel instrumental variable, ancient water access in the Sahara (more than 5000 years ago). The mechanism analysis reveals cyclic jihad over time and points to the persistence of jihadist ideology as a legacy of European colonization. In this way, how historical conflicts ended matters for explaining contemporary conflicts. The authors also analyze the "past-core-and-present-periphery" patterns globally and examine organizational heterogeneity among factions (Al Qaeda and Islamic State).

This well-written paper is a product of high-quality research design to address crucial and challenging questions. The authors adopt a convincing empirical strategy by integrating a rich set of spatial data and obtain findings shedding new light on jihad. The paper contributes to a wide range of the literature on conflicts, historical institutions, path dependence in economic geography, and the Islam economy. The historical instrumental variable employed in the paper is ingenious, encouraging researchers in various fields to potentially exploit the dynamics of natural geography (ancient water and its shrinkage or disappearance) in their projects. Although the paper is a substantial collection of carefully crafted empirical analyses, there remains significant room for improvement, as the authors already plan to extend their work in various directions. We see the following avenues particularly promising: (1) examining a change in trade technology applying relevant measures, (2) systematic analysis at the global scale for generalizability, and (3) comparison of jihad-specific and general factors underlying insurgency. To sum up, this is a path-breaking paper written by two promising young scholars. Mr. Kubo surely deserves the Hayami Award.

Second Hayami Award Selection Committee
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