
The American Crusader: an Anthropological Analysis of Religion, War, and Identity in The 2026 Iran Conflict

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Abstract

This article provides an anthropological analysis of the religious discourse surrounding the 2026 US-led war in Iran, focusing on the public persona and actions of Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth. Utilizing the concept of religion as a dynamic cultural system, this study moves beyond political commentary to examine how Hegseth's rhetoric and policies represent a distinct form of political-religious synthesis. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Clifford Geertz (religion as a system of meaning, and the ethnographic imperative of "thick description"), Émile Durkheim (religion as a source of social solidarity), Talal Asad (the construction of religion as a category), and Akbar Ahmed (Islamic perspectives on war and the suffering of tribal communities), this analysis interprets the phenomenon of the "American Crusader" as a cultural archetype. It argues that Hegseth's invocation of crusader imagery, Christian nationalist ideology, and policies like the "reform" of the military chaplain corps function not merely as personal beliefs but as a systematic effort to construct a sacred moral universe for the war. This process involves redefining the boundaries of the American moral community (the "us") against a demonized enemy (the "them"), creating new ritual forms (Pentagon prayer services), and legitimizing state violence as a salvific act. The analysis further reveals the structural tensions within a formally secular state that deploys a transcendentalist, monotheistic framework to wage war, while also highlighting the profound human cost of such narratives as experienced by Muslim communities globally. The article closes by considering the implications of this dehumanizing discourse for Muslim urban society development, arguing that the resilience of urban Muslim communities, including their institutions of social cohesion and religious moderation, constitutes a vital counterweight to the polarizing effects of the "American Crusade" narrative.

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Introduction

In March 2026, the United States, in coordination with Israel, was engaged in a full-scale war with the Islamic Republic of Iran. At the helm of the American military was Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, a former Fox News host and National Guard officer. His tenure was not marked by the traditional technocratic language of defense secretaries, but by a conspicuous, fervent, and often controversial integration of his evangelical Christian faith into his public duties. Hegseth spoke openly of the “providence of our almighty God” protecting American troops, quoted Psalm 144 about training hands for war, and described the conflict as a fight against “religious fanatics” seeking a “religious Armageddon” (Wolf, 2026). He hosted monthly Christian worship services at the Pentagon, invited a self-described Christian nationalist pastor to preach to military personnel, and announced plans to “make the Chaplain corps great again” by focusing on “God” over “self-help” (Stanley, 2026). His body bore tattoos of the Jerusalem Cross and “Deus Vult,” symbols historically tied to the medieval Crusades.

This fusion of high office, overt religious identity, and the waging of war presents a rich and urgent subject for anthropological inquiry. While political and journalistic analysis has framed Hegseth as a “very dangerous person” (Smith, 2026) or a figure of “alarm” (Smith, 2026), this article seeks to understand the cultural logic and social dynamics underlying his actions. The central research question is not whether Hegseth is “right” or “wrong,” but rather: What kind of cultural phenomenon does Pete Hegseth represent, and how does his fusion of religious identity with state military power shape the experience and justification of war in the 21st century?

This inquiry carries a significance that extends well beyond the borders of the United States. The rhetoric and policies examined in this article do not remain confined to Washington; they circulate globally through news media and digital platforms, shaping public perception of Islam and, in turn, the lived experience of Muslim communities in cities around the world. Understanding how a sitting Secretary of Defense constructs a sacralized enemy is therefore also a study in Muslim urban society development: it clarifies the external pressures, stigmatization, suspicion, and demonization, against which urban Muslim communities must build resilience, social cohesion, and institutions capable of articulating a moderate, ethically grounded counter-narrative. This article returns to that theme in its concluding discussion.

To answer this, this study employs the tools of the anthropology of religion. It moves beyond a simple critique of hypocrisy or extremism to analyze Hegseth’s discourse and policies as a coherent cultural system. It treats his statements, the reported experiences of service members, and his institutional changes as ethnographic data. By situating this case within anthropological theories of religion, ritual, and symbolism, this article aims to demonstrate that the “American Crusade” is not merely a rhetorical flourish, but a concerted effort to construct a new moral framework for American warfare, one that challenges the foundational principle of secular governance and reimagines the relationship between the state, the individual, and the divine. This analysis is deeply informed by a growing anthropological literature on the historical roots of holy war ideology (Holland, 2020), the refutation of biological determinism in human conflict (Ferguson, 2023), the philosophical and political dimensions of war (Okolowski, 2024), the critical role of the anthropologist in speaking truth to power in times of conflict (Ripoll, 2024), and the ethical traditions within Islam that stand in stark contrast to the “holy war” narrative (Ahmed, 2003; Ahmed, 2013).

Literature Review

This analysis is grounded in foundational and contemporary theories within the anthropology of religion, as well as recent anthropological work on war. Clifford Geertz’s (1973) interpretive anthropology is crucial for understanding the power of Hegseth’s rhetoric. For Geertz, religion is a “system of symbols” that establishes powerful moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing them with an aura of factuality. Hegseth’s words function precisely in this manner. By framing the war as a fight against “religious fanatics” and for a nation with “Christian DNA,” he constructs a specific reality. His use of “American

Crusade,” “Deus Vult,” and Psalm 144 are powerful symbols that evoke a cosmic struggle between Christianity and its enemies, creating moods of righteous anger and martial courage while making the war feel not like a political choice but an inevitable, holy duty. Complementing this, Émile Durkheim’s (2001/1912) work on the social functions of religion provides a lens for understanding Hegseth’s institutional actions, such as the monthly Pentagon prayer services. For Durkheim, religion creates collective solidarity through shared rituals that generate “collective effervescence” a powerful emotional energy that strengthens group bonds. By praying together in the name of Jesus Christ, participants in these state-sponsored rituals collectively enact their membership in a moral community that is both American and Christian, projecting their shared identity onto sacred symbols: the nation, the mission, and its leader.

Max Weber’s (1958/1904) emphasis on the role of religious ideas in shaping social action and driving historical change adds a critical dimension. Weber’s analysis of the Protestant ethic demonstrated how a specific religious worldview could reshape economic systems. Similarly, Hegseth’s worldview, rooted in Christian nationalism, can be seen as a powerful cultural force with the potential to reshape the military institution. His efforts to “reform” the chaplain corps, rewrite manuals to “reinsert more God,” and elevate pastors like Doug Wilson, who advocates for a “Christian theocracy” (Wolf, 2026), are concrete attempts to institutionalize this worldview. As Weber suggested, ideas act as “switchmen” determining the tracks along which action is pushed. Hegseth’s ideas are actively switching the institutional track of the US military towards a more explicitly religiously-aligned purpose. Talal Asad’s (2003) critical genealogy of religion is essential for understanding the tensions at the heart of this case. Asad argues that the modern category of “religion” is a product of Western, post-Enlightenment developments, constructed as a private sphere separate from politics and law. Hegseth’s actions fundamentally challenge this constructed separation. By injecting his specific Christian beliefs into the core functions of the Defense Department, he actively collapses the boundary between “religion” and “politics,” creating a structural contradiction: a legally secular state led by an official who operates as if it were a Christian theocracy.

The anthropological literature on war and religion provides a crucial comparative and historical framework. Tom Holland (2020) traces the ancient roots of the modern holy war to the Persian king Darius in 520 BC, who first articulated the concept of fighting for a god of truth against “evil” rebels and promising divine blessings in life and death. This ideology was later adopted by the Roman Empire and, crucially, by the early Islamic Caliphate, which developed the doctrine of jihad. As scholars like Ioannis Stouraitis (2012) and Alan Strathern (2023) have shown, the analytical distinction between “holy war” (justified by religious difference and divine command) and “just war” (justified by political, defensive, and rational criteria) reveals the ideological underpinnings of conflict. Hegseth’s rhetoric aligns strongly with the “holy war” paradigm. He does not justify the Iran war solely on nuclear proliferation or regional stability, the language of “just war.” Instead, he invokes a Manichaean struggle against “religious fanatics” who seek “Armageddon,” frames the conflict as a continuation of the Crusades, and explicitly calls for God’s aid in delivering “overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy” (Stanley, 2026). This discourse moves the conflict from geopolitics into cosmic, salvific struggle.

The work of anthropologist R. Brian Ferguson (2023) is particularly important for countering deterministic narratives often used to justify war. Ferguson systematically refutes the argument that war is an innate human trait, demonstrating that the “tribal warfare” model is a myth, that archaeological evidence shows war appears only after the development of sedentism and social complexity, and that chimpanzee violence is a poor analogy for human war. His central thesis, that “our species is not biologically destined for war” directly challenges the fatalism surrounding conflicts like the one in Iran. His framework emphasizes the role of specific historical contexts, leadership, and the construction of “us vs. them” through “moral conversion.” Finally, the philosophical reflections of Paweł Okoński (2024) and the engaged anthropology of Santiago Ripoll (2024) offer crucial meta-level perspectives. Okoński describes war as a tragic feature of a world divided into antagonistic communities, while Ripoll shows how “disciplinary

power” operates within academic discourse to create “docile minds” and silence critical perspectives. This analysis of the political construction of taboo is essential for understanding the controversy surrounding Hegseth’s religious rhetoric.

A critical counterpoint to the “holy war” narrative is provided by the work of Akbar Ahmed, a prominent anthropologist and scholar of Islam. Ahmed (2003) elucidates the strict ethical constraints Islam places on warfare, distinguishing between the “Greater Jihad” (internal struggle) and the “Lesser Jihad” (defensive war). He emphasizes that a Muslim may only fight in self-defense or against tyranny, and must do so “in the name of God,” not for personal or political reasons. The story of Ali sparing his opponent after being spat upon illustrates a standard of restraint that undermines Hegseth’s caricature of Islam. Furthermore, Ahmed (2003) details the rules laid down by Abu Bakr, the first caliph, which prohibited harming women, children, priests, or trees, some of the earliest formal constraints on warfare in history. Ahmed’s later work (2013) documents the devastating consequences when these ethical principles are abandoned, providing harrowing accounts of genocide against Muslim tribal communities across the world. His scholarship provides a crucial corrective to essentializing narratives that reduce Islam to a monolithic “religion of violence,” revealing the gap between the rhetoric of “religious fanaticism” employed by Hegseth and the actual teachings of Islamic ethics. Together, these sources provide a framework for understanding Hegseth’s actions as part of a long historical trajectory of holy war ideology, a refutable claim of biological inevitability, a politically fraught contemporary discourse, and a profound ignorance of the ethical traditions of the “enemy” he claims to be fighting.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, treating the corpus of provided source material as primary data for cultural analysis. The study is a qualitative document analysis, which enables in-depth exploration of human cultural phenomena by capturing the nuances of social interactions and individual perspectives that are difficult to quantify. The data set comprises seventeen source texts, including news analysis from major outlets (CNN, The Guardian, Al Jazeera), reports from the Associated Press and Los Angeles Times detailing Hegseth’s actions, scholarly pieces from *The Conversation*, and academic works by Laliena, Stouraitis, Strathern, Holland, Ferguson, Okołowski, Ripoll, and Ahmed providing historical, theoretical, and philosophical depth. These texts are treated as ethnographic representations and public discourse, containing reported statements from Hegseth, descriptions of events (such as Pentagon prayer services), and allegations from sources like the Military Religious Freedom Foundation. While this study cannot independently verify factual claims, it analyzes them as a record of public discourse, political rhetoric, and institutional action in the 2026 context. To provide a clear analytical roadmap, the research procedure employed in this study is structured into four sequential phases, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

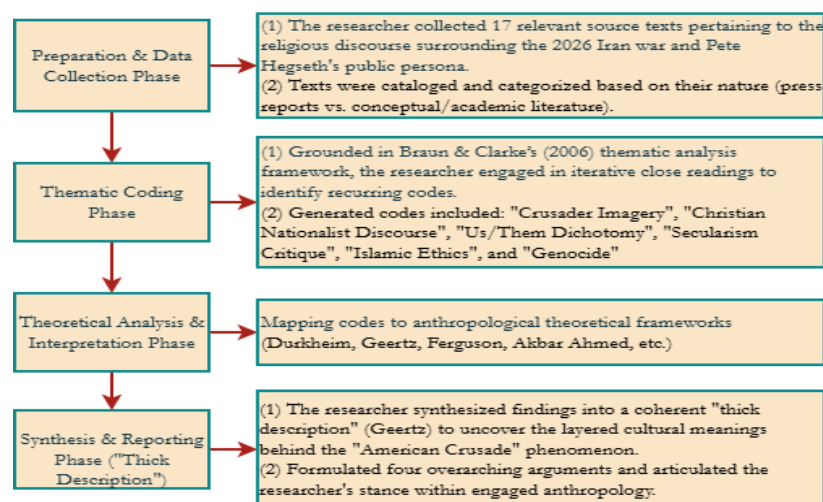


Figure 1. *The four-phase qualitative research procedure employed in this study.*

This procedural design ensures that the coding, theoretical mapping, and synthesis of the “American Crusade” phenomenon proceed systematically, from raw source material to a theoretically grounded, thickly described interpretation.

The analysis proceeded through a systematic, iterative process grounded in thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). “Pentagon Prayer Services” was interpreted through Durkheim’s concept of ritual and collective effervescence; “Crusader Imagery” through Geertz’s framework of symbols and Holland’s historical genealogy; “Us/Them Dichotomy” through Ferguson’s work on enemy construction and Strathern’s Mosaic distinction; and “Islamic Ethics” and “Genocide” through Ahmed’s scholarship to provide a counter-narrative to Hegseth’s framing. The primary limitation is reliance on secondary-source material, precluding participant-observation or independent verification of claims. This study does not quantify religious rhetoric but focuses on its qualitative nature and cultural logic, aiming for Geertz’s “thick description” uncovering layered webs of meaning that shape social action. Similarly, it seeks to provide a thick description of the “American Crusade” phenomenon while using Ahmed’s work to thickly describe the Islamic ethical tradition being caricatured and the human suffering being ignored. The researcher’s position is that of an anthropologist drawing on the engaged tradition described by Ripoll (2024) to make sense of a complex and polarizing contemporary event.

Results and Discussion

Applying the four-phase procedure described above, the thematic analysis yielded four overarching arguments that together construct a holistic interpretation of the “American Crusade” phenomenon. Table 1 summarizes each argument alongside its primary theoretical lens and its key evidentiary basis in the source material; each is elaborated and interpreted in the Discussion section that follows.

Result	Primary Theoretical Lens	Key Evidence
(1) The transhistorical construction of the sacred enemy: Hegseth’s Manichaeism framing of Iran draws on a 2,500-year tradition of holy war ideology, from Darius through Rome to the Crusades.	Geertz (symbols); Holland (historical genealogy); Strathern (transcendentalism)	“Religious Armageddon” rhetoric; Deus Vult and Jerusalem Cross tattoos; American Crusade (2020)
(2) The political construction of “inevitable” war: the “American Crusade” is a deliberate political and cultural construction, not a biologically inevitable clash of civilizations.	Ferguson (anthropology of war); Clausewitz	Refutation of the tribal-warfare myth; “moral conversion”; “leaders favor war because war favors leaders”
(3) The tragedy of war and the silencing of critical academic discourse, and the anthropologist’s ethical imperative to resist that silencing.	Okolowski (tragedy of war); Ripoll (disciplinary power); Geertz (thick description)	Dismissal of press criticism; MRFF complaints; Americans United lawsuit

(4) The forgotten voice of Islamic ethics and the documented human cost of the “crusade” narrative for Muslim communities.	Ahmed (Islamic ethics and genocide documentation)	Greater/Lesser Jihad distinction; Abu Bakr’s rules of war; genocide against Muslim tribal communities
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Table 1. *Summary of the four results of the thematic analysis.*

Together, these four results reveal the “American Crusader” not as a response to an inevitable clash of civilizations, but as a cultural archetype actively constructed through symbol, ritual, and political interest. The remainder of this article discusses each result in turn, integrating the source material, ranging from Hegseth’s public statements and institutional actions to historical analyses and anthropological critiques, to build a layered understanding of how religious rhetoric, political strategy, and historical narrative converge in the justification of the 2026 Iran war.

Discussion

5.1 The Transhistorical Construction of the Sacred Enemy

A central feature of Hegseth’s public discourse is the construction of the conflict with Iran as a Manichaean struggle between absolute good and absolute evil. This is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a deep historical pattern of “holy war” ideology that has recurred across civilizations for over two millennia. As Tom Holland (2020) demonstrates, the concept of a war sanctioned by a supreme, monotheistic deity against a “rebellious” or “evil” foe was first articulated by the Persian king Darius in 520 BC. Darius promised his soldiers “divine blessings both in life and after death” for fighting against the Elamites, whom he branded as rebels against the god Ahura Mazda. This ideological innovation was revolutionary: it transformed warfare from a matter of territorial ambition into a sacred duty, creating a template that would be adopted and adapted by subsequent empires.

This ideological framework was later adopted and transformed by the Roman Empire, which increasingly saw its wars as divinely ordained for the preservation of order and civilization. The Romans, who prided themselves on their piety and claimed divine favor for their military endeavors, established the precedent that a universal empire could legitimately wage war in the name of cosmic order. As Holland (2020) notes, the *pax Romana* was understood as a “martial, aggressive demonstration that Rome, once again, enjoyed the blessing of the gods.” This Roman model was then adapted by the early Islamic Caliphate, which developed the doctrine of jihad as a framework for expansion and defense. The deep history Holland traces demonstrates that the “holy war” concept is not a medieval Christian invention but a recurring ideological formation that emerges with imperial ambition, each iteration drawing on and transforming the precedents that came before.

Hegseth’s rhetoric directly echoes this transhistorical tradition. He explicitly defines the enemy in religious terms, referring to Iranian leaders as “religious fanatics who seek a nuclear capability in order for some religious Armageddon” (Wolf, 2026). This framing accomplishes several strategic functions. First, it dismisses the Iranian regime’s geopolitical and strategic motivations, reducing them to a suicidal, irrational religious impulse that cannot be negotiated with or deterred through conventional means. Second, it inverts the narrative of aggression: the US is not invading a sovereign nation; it is preemptively stopping a cosmic catastrophe that threatens civilization itself. Third, it places the US firmly on the side of God in a cosmic struggle. Hegseth states unequivocally that the “providence of our almighty God is there protecting those troops” (Wolf, 2026). This is not a generic, civil-religious appeal to a “higher power” in the manner of previous presidents. It is a specific, possessive claim to the Almighty’s exclusive favor in a battle against His enemies, mirroring the claims of Darius, the Roman emperors, and the early Caliphs.

This Manichaean framing extends beyond the Iranian leadership to a broader civilizational conflict that encompasses all of Islam. Hegseth’s past writings, as cited in the sources, make this explicit and leave no room for ambiguity. In his 2020 book *American Crusade*, he wrote that

“Islam has been at war with its enemies... since it was founded, and it will never stop” (Wolf, 2026). This is a classic transcendentalist move, as analyzed by Alan Strathern (2023): the enemy is not just a political opponent with whom one might negotiate, but an ontological one, defined by an immutable, hostile essence that makes peaceful coexistence impossible. This worldview, as analyzed by Geertz (1973), provides a powerful “conception of a general order of existence.” It simplifies a complex geopolitical reality into a binary, moral drama where there are no shades of gray. This simplification creates powerful “moods and motivations”—righteous indignation, a sense of urgency, and a willingness to sacrifice for a holy cause. The “us” is defined not by shared citizenship or political ideals, but by a sacred, civilizational destiny that transcends national boundaries.

This essentialist framing of Islam is further reinforced by Hegseth’s identification with the historical Crusades. By sporting the Jerusalem Cross and the “Deus Vult” tattoo on his body, and by writing that “we must push Islamism back, culturally, politically, geographically” (Wolf, 2026), he explicitly positions himself and the American military as a continuation of the medieval Christian knights who sought to reclaim the Holy Land. As Carlos Laliena’s (2014) historical analysis shows, the term “Deus Vult” was “the rallying cry of Christian knights as they marched to Jerusalem.” By adopting this symbol permanently on his body, Hegseth does more than express a historical interest; he performs a form of identification that collapses the temporal distance between the 11th and 21st centuries. He connects the 2026 war in the Middle East to a centuries-old narrative of Christian-Islamic conflict, casting himself as a participant in an ongoing sacred history.

This identification serves as a form of symbolic legitimation that is crucial for understanding the cultural power of Hegseth’s rhetoric. By anchoring the current conflict in a sacred past, he imbues it with a sense of destiny and righteousness that transcends ordinary political debate. The Jerusalem Cross and “Deus Vult” are not merely decorative tattoos; they are ritual inscriptions on the body of the Secretary of Defense that publicly declare his participation in a transhistorical holy war. They transform a potentially controversial policy decision into a sacred duty that cannot be questioned without sacrilege. In doing so, Hegseth is not just a political figure; he is actively performing the role of a holy warrior-king in a tradition that stretches back over 2,500 years, from Darius to the Roman emperors to the Crusaders to the present.

The implications of this transhistorical framing are profound for understanding the nature of the 2026 Iran war. When a conflict is framed as part of an eternal cosmic struggle, the normal constraints of political negotiation and compromise are suspended. Compromise becomes betrayal; de-escalation becomes surrender to evil; and the human cost of war becomes a necessary sacrifice for a sacred cause. This is the ideological function of the “holy war” framing: it removes war from the realm of politics, where interests can be balanced and conflicts resolved, and places it in the realm of eschatology, where only total victory over the forces of darkness is conceivable. Hegseth’s rhetoric thus represents not merely a personal religious belief but a systematic effort to transform the nature of American warfare itself.

5.2 The Political Construction of “Inevitable” War

The “American Crusade” narrative, as articulated by Hegseth, is a powerful example of what anthropologist R. Brian Ferguson (2023) warns against: the false claim that war is an innate, inevitable part of human nature. Hegseth’s worldview is predicated on an essentialist, primordialist view of conflict, where a “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam is seen as an eternal, unavoidable feature of the human condition. This is the intellectual and political framework that presents the 2026 war not as a policy choice made by specific leaders under specific circumstances, but as a necessary, preordained confrontation that no one could have prevented. This framing serves to absolve decision-makers of responsibility while mobilizing support through the appeal to inevitability.

Ferguson’s (2023) work directly and systematically refutes this biological determinism. Drawing on decades of anthropological and archaeological research, he deconstructs the three pillars of the innatist argument that war is hardwired into human nature. First, the notion of

“tribal” warfare as a universal human condition is a myth; paleolithic artifacts show continental-scale stylistic continuities, not bounded, warring tribes separated by hostile frontiers. Second, archaeological evidence shows that war does not appear in the earliest human records but emerges only after the development of specific social preconditions: sedentism, population density, material inequality, and the emergence of hierarchies. War is not a constant in human history but a variable that appears under specific conditions. Third, chimpanzee violence, often cited as evidence of an innate human drive for war, is shown by Ferguson to be largely a product of human disturbance and not a valid model for understanding human behavior. His conclusion is stark and unambiguous: “Our species is not biologically destined for war.”

Applying this to the Hegseth case, we see that the “American Crusade” is a cultural and political construction, not a biological imperative. Hegseth and the political movement he represents are actively creating the conditions for war by manufacturing a narrative of existential threat. They are not responding to an inevitable clash of civilizations; they are constructing that clash through rhetoric, symbol, and policy. As Ferguson (2023) explains, war is a “continuation of domestic politics by other means” and “leaders favor war because war favors leaders.” This Clausewitzian insight is crucial: war serves political interests, and those who benefit from war will seek to justify it through whatever narrative proves most persuasive. Hegseth’s promotion of a holy war serves his own political interests and those of the faction he represents: it consolidates his base of support, positions him as a decisive leader willing to take bold action, and provides a powerful, simplified narrative to mobilize public support.

The “us vs. them” dichotomy Hegseth constructs is not a reflection of an innate human tribalism that inevitably leads to conflict, as some evolutionary psychologists might claim. Rather, it is a conscious political strategy deployed to achieve specific ends. This is what Ferguson terms “moral conversion” the process by which perceived self-interest is justified in terms of local cultural values, making a war for political power appear as a righteous, moral duty. By framing the war in religious terms, Hegseth transforms a potentially controversial political decision into a sacred, non-negotiable obligation. This moral conversion serves to close down space for debate and dissent: those who question the war are not merely expressing a different political opinion; they are questioning a divine mission.

Ferguson’s analysis also illuminates the preconditions for peace that Hegseth’s rhetoric actively undermines. The preconditions for peace identified by Ferguson include cross-cutting social webs that create interdependencies between groups, shared values that stigmatize violence, and legitimate authorities who can rein in impetuous attacks and oversee conflict resolution. Hegseth’s Manichaean framing does precisely the opposite: it eliminates any possibility of cross-cutting ties with the “enemy,” celebrates violence as righteous, and positions himself as an authority who sanctions unlimited violence. By sacralizing the war and demonizing the enemy, he is actively dismantling the very structures that could lead to non-violent conflict resolution.

The implications of Ferguson’s work for understanding the Hegseth phenomenon are profound. If war were an innate, inevitable feature of human nature, then critique would be futile and resistance meaningless. But if war is a cultural and political construction, then it can be deconstructed, challenged, and prevented. Hegseth’s rhetoric seeks to naturalize war, to make it seem as inevitable as the weather. Ferguson’s anthropology reveals this as a political strategy, not a scientific fact. This analysis reveals that the war in Iran, framed by Hegseth, is not an expression of an ancient, unavoidable human fate, but a deliberate political project that relies on the active construction of a sacred, Manichaean narrative.

Finally, this analysis demonstrates the crucial importance of anthropology in countering deterministic narratives of conflict. By revealing the historical and cultural contingency of war, anthropology provides the intellectual tools to challenge claims of inevitability. Hegseth’s “American Crusade” is not the expression of a timeless clash of civilizations; it is a choice made by specific leaders at a specific historical moment. And what is chosen can be unchosen. The refutation of biological determinism opens up space for alternative futures, for peace, and for the recognition that the 2026 Iran war is a political project, not an inevitable destiny.

5.3 The Tragedy, Politics, and Silencing of Academic Discourse

The phenomenon of the “American Crusader” must also be understood through the lens of the tragedy of war and the political constraints on those who seek to analyze it. Philosopher Pawel Okołowski (2024) describes war as a tragic element of the human condition, emerging from the inherent division of humanity into competing communities and what he calls the “imperfection of human nature.” While his perspective on the recurrence of war is more pessimistic than Ferguson’s, it provides a useful framework for understanding the gravity and enduring nature of the conflict. Okołowski does not celebrate war but acknowledges its persistence as a feature of a world divided into antagonistic states and communities, each pursuing its own interests and values.

Okołowski’s (2024) key insight, echoing the 19th-century philosopher Joseph de Maistre, is that war can paradoxically serve to put “every man in his proper place,” reinvigorating societies that might otherwise degenerate into complacency and decay. This is precisely the fear of critics like Janessa Goldbeck, CEO of Vet Voice Foundation, who warned that Hegseth is a “very dangerous person” with the “arsenal of the United States government at his disposal” (Smith, 2026). From this perspective, Hegseth is not just leading a war; he is attempting a form of social and political re-engineering through sacred violence. The tragedy, for Okołowski, is that war may be necessary to prevent social degeneration, even as it causes immense suffering. This tragic vision captures the dilemma of those who recognize the horror of war yet also recognize the horror of the alternatives.

This tragic dimension of war brings us to the critical issue of academic and public discourse, as explored by Santiago Ripoll (2024) in the context of the Gaza conflict. Ripoll shows how “disciplinary power” operates within academic and public discourse to create “docile minds” and silence certain perspectives, particularly those critical of state power. Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of power, Ripoll demonstrates that silencing is not always imposed from above through censorship; it often operates through decentralized mechanisms of self-scrutiny, where researchers and institutions internalize dominant discourses and censor themselves out of fear of being labeled antisemitic, anti-American, or extremist. In the case of the 2026 Iran war, the same dynamics are at play. Hegseth’s own rhetoric frames any dissent as un-American or even sacrilegious. As he stated in a press briefing, “The press only wants to make the president look bad” (Wolf, 2026), dismissing critical reporting as illegitimate and positioning journalists as enemies of the nation.

The political construction of taboo around discussing the religious dimensions of American warfare is a central concern of this analysis. Ripoll (2024) argues that anthropologists and other social scientists are best positioned to understand the political construction of this taboo and to resist it. Our discipline’s commitment to long-term, contextual analysis, its critique of essentialism, and its focus on power dynamics provide the tools to cut through the simplified, belligerent rhetoric of figures like Hegseth. Where Hegseth sees a timeless clash of civilizations, anthropology reveals historical contingency. Where Hegseth sees absolute evil, anthropology reveals complexity and humanity. Where Hegseth sees sacred duty, anthropology reveals political interests dressed in religious garb.

This commitment to complexity and context is embodied in the pursuit of what Geertz (1973) called “thick description” the effort to capture the intricate layers of meaning, context, and social action that define human experience. Geertz’s qualitative analysis of the Balinese cockfight provided profound insights into the symbolism, status politics, and cultural identity in Balinese society, a richness that could not have been achieved with quantitative methods alone. Similarly, this study aims to provide a “thick description” of the “American Crusade” phenomenon, deciphering the intricate cultural and religious meanings embedded in Hegseth’s rhetoric and policies. The very act of analyzing the “American Crusade” through such an anthropological lens is a form of resistance to the silencing that Ripoll describes. It challenges the false binary of “with us or against us” and insists on the complexity and contingency that Hegseth’s worldview denies.

The lawsuit filed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State (Stanley, 2026) represents a secular legal challenge to the sacralization of the Pentagon. But the anthropological contribution is to show how this conflict is not just about legal principles, but about competing

visions of reality, the role of the state, and the very nature of political community. The legal challenge addresses the establishment clause; the anthropological analysis addresses the deeper cultural logic that makes such a challenge necessary. Hegseth's actions are not just violations of the First Amendment; they are performances of a political theology that rejects the secular settlement of the Enlightenment. The academic debate around Hegseth is, therefore, not merely an intellectual exercise; it is a vital part of the broader struggle over the meaning and legitimacy of the war itself.

In this struggle, as Ripoll (2024) suggests, speaking out is a moral and professional imperative for anthropologists. Silence in the face of the sacralization of state violence is not neutrality; it is complicity. The "docile minds" that Ripoll describes are those who internalize the taboo and refrain from analysis that might be deemed controversial. But anthropology has a long tradition of speaking truth to power, from Franz Boas's critiques of racism to Margaret Mead's advocacy for peace to the contemporary engaged anthropology that Ripoll represents. The analysis of the "American Crusader" continues this tradition, insisting that the role of the anthropologist is not merely to describe the world but to contribute to making it more just, more humane, and less violent.

5.4 The Forgotten Voice: Islamic Ethics and the Human Cost of the "Crusade" Narrative

A critical dimension missing from Hegseth's "American Crusade" narrative is any acknowledgment of the complex ethical traditions within Islam or the profound human suffering that such Manichaean framing inflicts on Muslim communities. Akbar Ahmed's (2003) work provides a crucial corrective, revealing that the Islamic tradition contains some of the most stringent ethical constraints on warfare in human history. This is not a matter of apologetics but of documented historical fact. The distinction between the "Greater Jihad" (internal spiritual struggle) and the "Lesser Jihad" (defensive war) is fundamental to Islamic ethics and fundamentally undermines Hegseth's caricature of Islam as a monolithic "religion of violence." The Greater Jihad is the struggle to become a better human being, a concept that resonates across religious traditions and has nothing to do with warfare.

The story of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, illustrates the ethical standard that defines Islamic warfare at its best. When Ali was fighting the champion of the opposing army, he knocked his opponent down and prepared to deliver the final blow. At that moment, the opponent spat in Ali's face. Rather than killing him in anger, Ali stood up and walked away. When his generals asked why, Ali explained: "That man was not my personal enemy. I was fighting in the name of God. But when he spat on me, he angered me and he became my personal enemy. If I had killed him then, I would have killed him in anger, not for the sake of God" (Ahmed, 2003). This story illustrates a standard of restraint and moral purity that would be difficult to find in any warrior tradition, Christian or otherwise. It demonstrates that Islamic ethics demand that warfare be conducted without personal animosity, without vengeance, and solely for righteous purposes.

The rules laid down by Abu Bakr, the first caliph of Islam, represent some of the earliest formal constraints on warfare in history. Abu Bakr instructed his armies: "Do not touch a woman or a child. Do not touch priests, a Christian priest or even a Hindu priest, for these are people of God. Do not destroy a tree or any vegetation" (Ahmed, 2003). These rules, articulated in 7th century Arabia, prohibited the targeting of civilians, religious figures, and the natural environment. They stand in stark contrast to the indiscriminate violence that Hegseth seems to endorse when he prays for "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy" (Stanley, 2026). The irony is profound: Hegseth claims to be fighting "religious fanatics," yet the ethical tradition of the religion he demonizes contains constraints on violence that his own rhetoric violates.

The irony of Hegseth's position extends further. He claims to be fighting "religious fanatics" while simultaneously violating the very ethical standards that define the tradition he demonizes. Ahmed's (2003) account of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which he explicitly condemns as un-Islamic, shows that Islamic ethics provide a framework for critiquing the very

actions Hegseth attributes to all Muslims. Saddam's soldiers raping, looting, and destroying oil wells were not acting in accordance with Islamic teachings; they were violating them. By erasing this internal diversity and complexity, Hegseth's narrative does not just misrepresent Islam; it actively prevents any possibility of recognizing and supporting the voices within the Muslim world that oppose extremism on ethical grounds. The "American Crusade" narrative makes allies of potential critics of extremism by painting all Muslims with the same brush.

This erasure is not merely intellectual; it has devastating real-world consequences. Ahmed's (2013) documentation of genocide against Muslim tribal communities Circassians, Chechens, Algerians, Oromo, Nuba, Darfuris, Pashtuns, Baluch, and others, reveals the scale of suffering that the "clash of civilizations" narrative obscures. These communities have been subjected to mass killing, displacement, rape, and cultural obliteration over centuries, often by states claiming to represent civilization against barbarism. Ahmed's accounts of individual atrocities provide a "thick description" of the human cost of dehumanizing rhetoric. These are not the stories of "religious fanatics" seeking "Armageddon." They are stories of ordinary people—farmers, shopkeepers, mothers, fathers, who have been systematically brutalized by state and non-state actors alike, with little recognition from a world that prefers simple binaries of good and evil.

When Hegseth speaks of delivering "overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy" (Stanley, 2026), he is not only violating the Christian ethical tradition he claims to represent but also contributing to a narrative that has historically justified genocide against Muslim communities. The language of "no mercy" is not merely rhetorical; it is the language of extermination. Ahmed's (2013) work demonstrates that when states have designated Muslim communities as beyond the pale of humanity, genocide has often followed. Hegseth's rhetoric echoes this dehumanizing tradition, even as he claims to be fighting for civilization.

The question Ahmed (2013) poses at the end of his harrowing account of genocide against Muslim tribes is one that haunts the entire "American Crusade" enterprise: whether humanity, in the end, will be defined by little more than its capacity to breed and kill. The tragedy of the 2026 Iran war is not only that it inflicts violence on a nation, but that it does so in the name of a sacred mission that erases the complexity, humanity, and ethical traditions of both the "enemy" and the self. By reducing Iranians to "religious fanatics," Hegseth denies them the complexity that makes ethical judgment possible. By reducing himself to a crusader, he abandons the ethical complexity that might lead him to question his own violence. The "American Crusade" is thus not only a war against Iran; it is a war against the recognition of shared humanity across religious lines.

5.5 Implications for Muslim Urban Society Development

The preceding analysis carries direct implications for the development of Muslim urban society, both in the West and across the Muslim world. Contemporary cities are the primary sites where the consequences of the "American Crusade" narrative are lived out: it is in dense, pluralistic urban environments, where Muslim minorities interact daily with neighbors, employers, and institutions shaped by the dominant public discourse, that dehumanizing rhetoric translates most directly into social exclusion, surveillance anxiety, and diminished civic trust. When a sitting Secretary of Defense frames Islam as an immutable civilizational enemy, the discursive damage does not remain confined to foreign policy; it filters into the everyday urban experience of Muslim communities, reinforcing suspicion in workplaces, schools, and public institutions.

Ahmed's (2003; 2013) documentation of the ethical restraint embedded in classical Islamic teachings on warfare provides more than a historical corrective to Hegseth's caricature; it also models the kind of internal resource that urban Muslim communities can draw upon in developing their own institutions of resilience. Indonesian empirical scholarship offers a concrete illustration of this dynamic. Djalal and Huda's (2020) study of millennial religiosity in the city of Surabaya found that young urban Muslims overwhelmingly narrate moderate Islam as relaxed, flexible, and peaceful, while identifying rigid, non-adaptive religiosity—not moderation—as the marker of radicalism; this is a striking inversion of the essentializing binary that Hegseth's rhetoric imposes on Islam from outside. Similarly, Darajat (2017) shows how Indonesia's two largest civil-society organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, function as durable institutional guardians

of Islamic moderatism, embedding wasatiyyah in everyday religious life rather than treating it as an abstract slogan. At the level of a single urban congregation, Surya, Amali, and Hakam (2016) document how Majelis Rasulullah, a large dhikr assembly in DKI Jakarta, deliberately builds its social identity and da'wah method around gentleness, moral counsel, and the explicit exclusion of political and confrontational content, the direct inverse of the sacralized, violence-endorsing rhetoric analyzed in this article. Together, these cases suggest that urban religious institutions, mosques, community centers, and non-formal educational forums, can serve as sites where Wasatiyyah (Islamic moderation) is actively taught and modeled, offering residents a lived counter-narrative to the Manichaeic framing that Hegseth's rhetoric propagates. In this sense, the anthropological task of "thick description" undertaken in this article is not purely diagnostic: it also points toward the constructive role that well-organized, ethically grounded urban Muslim institutions can play in absorbing external stigmatization and sustaining social cohesion.

Muslim urban society development, in this light, is best understood as a form of resilience-building that runs parallel to, and in tension with, the geopolitical currents analyzed above. Where the "American Crusade" narrative seeks to collapse the distinction between religion and politics in the service of war, urban Muslim communities face the inverse task: sustaining religious institutions that strengthen social solidarity, intellectual literacy, and ethical leadership without being drawn into the same Manichaeic logic. The anthropological analysis offered here therefore contributes not only a critique of Hegseth's rhetoric, but also an argument for why investment in the moral and institutional infrastructure of urban Muslim communities remains an urgent priority in an era of resurgent religious nationalism.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Pete Hegseth leading a war in the Middle East under the banner of an "American Crusade" is a moment of profound anthropological significance. This analysis has demonstrated that it is far more than the story of a controversial political appointee; it is a case study in the resurgence of religious nationalism, the re-enchantment of state violence, and the enduring power of religious symbolism in the modern world. By applying the theoretical tools of the anthropology of religion and war, we have seen how Hegseth's actions construct a coherent cultural system. His rhetoric provides a powerful symbolic framework that transforms a complex geopolitical conflict into a cosmic struggle between good and evil, a tradition with roots stretching back to ancient Persia. His Pentagon prayer services and public rituals act as mechanisms of collective effervescence, forging a sense of sacred solidarity among the military leadership and the nation. His policies represent an active attempt to redirect the military institution toward a Christian nationalist worldview, while his tenure exposes the deep structural contradiction between America's secular constitutional identity and the push to sacralize its highest institutions.

Crucially, this analysis refutes the notion that this war is an inevitable expression of human nature. Instead, it reveals the "American Crusade" as a deliberate political and cultural construction, a choice made by leaders to advance their own interests by creating a narrative of existential, sacred threat. The tragedy of war is that it can indeed serve to reinvigorate a social order, but at a devastating human cost. The response to this tragedy must be a refusal to be silenced, a commitment to providing the kind of "thick description" that reveals the complex realities behind simplified narratives of good and evil. This refusal is, in essence, an anthropological act, one that insists on complexity, context, and humanity in the face of Manichaeic certainties.

The "American Crusader" is thus revealed as a powerful cultural archetype: the holy warrior who sees his political and military role as a divine calling, a ritual leader who consecrates state violence, a reformer who seeks to purge his institution of perceived impurity, and a symbol of a political movement that rejects the secular settlement of the Enlightenment. Yet this archetype is built on a profound ignorance of the traditions it claims to oppose and the human lives it claims to protect. The Islamic tradition contains ethical constraints on warfare that rival or exceed those in the Christian tradition, and the human suffering that occurs when Muslim communities are dehumanized and targeted demands recognition. The "American Crusade" is not a relic of the

11th century; it is a living, contested, and deeply consequential feature of the 21st, and its consequences are measured not only in geopolitical shifts but in the shattered lives of ordinary people caught in its path. For Muslim urban society development, the lesson is twofold: dehumanizing religious-political rhetoric at the highest levels of state power has direct, corrosive effects on the everyday lives of urban Muslim communities, and the ethical resources embedded in Islamic tradition, as documented by Ahmed and enacted through urban religious institutions, offer a durable, community-grounded counterweight to that corrosion.

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