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THE IDEOLOGY BEHIND AL-QAIDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

Daniel Rudder and Christopher Heffelfinger

Islamist militancy is often equated solely with the term jihad, and while that concept is critical to the movement, Islamist militancy is a set of values, tenets, and ideas set forth—and often argued over—by numerous scholars and reformers. To understand Islamist militancy, it is crucial from the outset to establish the distinction between Islam and Islamism. As opposed to the religion of Islam, Islamism is the organized effort to advocate for *Sharia* (Islamic law) as the basis for society and the state. It is also known as political Islam. The Islamist movement is made up of dozens of groups globally. Some are violent, but many are peaceful.¹

The term “jihad” is most commonly understood in the West as holy war, or military action on behalf of Islam.² But to most Muslims over the centuries, the term—which simply means “striving” or “to exert oneself” in Arabic—referred to a believer’s spiritual struggle over the “base self,” avoiding sin and attaining greater piety. Jihad also includes non-violent efforts at reform and activism. It is important to understand the contentious term’s broader place within Islam as opposed to the exclusively militant connotation it has come to hold for radical Islamists more recently.

Among the other tenets and values of militant Islamism are *takfir* (the excommunication of other Muslims from the faith), the re-defining of Muslims’ religious obligations, and the primacy and need for a caliphate to establish legitimacy of leadership and an authentic Islamic state. Militant Islamists—in their pursuit of a society governed by strict, orthodox Islamic principles—have implemented these concepts.

This chapter provides an evolution of Islamism. It begins with an overview of Wahhabism and Salafism, essential to understanding Islamist activism. It then reviews the historical support for these concepts, beginning with an examination of 13th-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya’s historical role in shaping militant interpretations of Islam. The chapter then reviews the reformers and activists of the 19th and 20th centuries who revived Ibn Taymiyya’s ideas to effect change in their societies. Finally, these earlier foundational movements are connected to the modern, militant jihadi groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State that found rationales within them to carry out terrorist attacks.³

Wahhabism and Salafism: an overview

The terms Wahhabi and Salafi are widely employed in discussions of Islamism and terrorism, yet precise definitions for them, and how they differ, can be elusive. These two ideological movements, which are the most important and dominant strains of Islamism, had separate points of origin and differing trajectories

of development. While there is much overlap between the two, particularly in matters of Islamic law and jurisprudence, their critical distinction is in regard to political activism.

Wahhabism is a puritanical Sunni Islamic reform movement founded by the Hanbali scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in the Arabian Peninsula and is today the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. The term “Wahhabi,” however, is employed in a polemical or pejorative usage, and adherents of this movement instead call themselves Salafi, *muwahhidin* (supporters of monotheism), or simply Sunni Muslims. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab criticized many popular Islamic practices as idolatrous and called for a return to Islam as practiced during the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime and that of the first three generations of the Prophet’s followers, who make up the *Salaf al-Saliheen*, or “pious predecessors.”⁴

Both Wahhabis and the Egyptian-descendant Salafis argue that the Quran and the *hadith* (the sayings and recorded actions of the Prophet Muhammad) should be the only sources of religious conduct, and they reject Western influence and other forms of Islam such as Sufism and Shiism. While Salafism is also a puritanical movement within Sunni Islam that calls for a return to the traditions of the *Salaf al-Saliheen*, after which it is named, it emerged in a very different political environment. Wahhabis long held a pact with the Saudi ruling family to remain quiet in political affairs, while the Salafi movement that arose out of 19th and 20th century Egypt is expressly political in its activism.⁵

Salafi-jihadism, then, is a third, distinct category into which groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State fall. Salafi-jihadis generally agree with the political ambitions and awareness of the Salafi movement but differ on methodology and strategy. While most Salafi groups since the 19th century have largely eschewed violence, Salafi-jihadis went to lengths to justify their use of violence,⁶ including against unarmed civilians, to further the cause of reinstating their interpretation of God’s law.

Ibn Taymiyya and the foundations of modern militancy

To understand the theological rationale underpinning the militancy of al-Qaida and other Islamist terrorist groups, one must begin in 13th-century Mesopotamia with the scholar Taqi al-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya is considered a key figure in the evolution of the Salafi movement, establishing the concept of *takfir*.⁷

Ibn Taymiyya was a proponent of strict textualism (*athari*) and is widely considered the foundational thinker of the contemporary Salafi movement. He opposed the theory of textual rationalism (*kalam*) prevalent in his day in favor of a fundamentalist interpretation of the Quran and *hadith*.

Ibn Taymiyya was born in the Mamluk Islamic Sultanate in 1263, growing up under the constant threat of pagan Mongol encroachment from the east. Only five years before his birth, the Mongols had conquered the neighboring Abbasid Caliphate and sacked its capital, Baghdad. When he was six years old, his village fell to the Mongols, forcing his family to flee to Damascus.

With the battle-hardened Mongols on their eastern doorstep, the Mamluks, who ruled Egypt and Syria from their headquarters in Cairo, had cause for concern. The sultan promptly called for a jihad against the pagan invaders. The Mamluk army, imbued with religious fervor, began to wage a brutal defensive war.⁸ Mahmud Ghazan, the Mongol leader, presented the Mamluk authorities with a dilemma in 1295, when he and his tribesmen converted en masse to Sunni Islam. The defensive war against Mongol aggression, which had until then been characterized as a jihad, suddenly became an intra-faith conflict.⁹

This put the Mamluk sultan in a precarious position. According to Sunni orthodoxy, any individual is considered a Muslim if he or she recites the *shahada* (declaration of faith)—“there is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger”—in front of witnesses.¹⁰ Furthermore, no matter how undesirable or cruel a Sunni leader might be, as long as he fulfills this minimum criteria, surrendering to his authority is incumbent upon Muslims. Creating *fitna* (discord) in the *umma* (Islamic community) is considered a serious sin. Rebellion against a Sunni ruler, regardless of the motivations or context, is forbidden.

In 1303, however, Ibn Taymiyya issued a *fatwa* (religious edict) that challenged, and for subsequent generations of militants destroyed, the orthodox classification of a true Muslim. Ibn Taymiyya argued that an essential indicator of belief and acceptance was left out of the traditional orthodox understanding of what defined a true Muslim: the individual must strictly adhere to, and a ruler must strictly enforce, *Sharia*.¹¹

Despite the Mongols' official conversion to Islam, they continued to promulgate their *Yasa* code, a blend of various elements from the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish legal traditions, along with aspects of the Mongols' own longstanding customs. This led Ibn Taymiyya, then an official of the Mamluk sultanate, to issue his famous *fatwa*, specifically directed toward a Muslim prince named Muzaffar who governed a city on behalf of the Mongols. His *fatwa* effectively pronounced *takfir* against the Mongols, labeled them apostates, and argued that their blood was then licit in warfare. It thus became obligatory for "true" Muslims to wage jihad against the apostate Mongol leaders and those Muslim citizens who had accepted the *Yasa* code.¹²

Ibn Taymiyya's other major theological mission, which modern militants have enthusiastically embraced, was to assert the primacy of militant jihad in the Islamic faith. Along with total, literal adherence to *Sharia*, he considered waging martial jihad a fundamental part of Muslims' religious obligation and a primary duty of all believers. He argued that by the Middle Ages, Muslims only acknowledged the personal spiritual connotation of jihad (as expressed in Sufism, prominent in his time), and this was a blasphemous misunderstanding of what he viewed as a central component of Islam.¹³

He is most revered by modern Islamist militants for the *fatwa* he issued in 1303 that labeled the Mongols apostates, despite their conversion to Islam five years earlier. The ruling challenged the accepted identifiers of a true Muslim—namely the simple profession of faith (*shahada*)—and would be a foundation for 20th- and 21st-century militants to justify militant jihad against political leaders in the Muslim world through the practice of pronouncing *takfir*.¹⁴

Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab advanced some of Ibn Taymiyya's 13th-century ethos in 18th-century Arabia, developing what would later become known as Wahhabism. Notably, he and his movement were religious reformers before all else. They sought to "purify" the practices of fellow Muslims by returning to the ways of early and "unadulterated" Islamic society. His purification process also included a heavy emphasis on excommunicating members of the faith, elucidated in works such as *Nawaqidh al-Islam* (Things That Nullify One's Islam) and perhaps his best-known writing, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Book of Monotheism).

Salafis, however, would turn their focus outward by the 20th century. For Wahhabis, the need to enforce strict interpretations of Islamic law—such as death for those labeled *kuffar*, or unbelievers, and corporal punishments for other transgressions of creed—was essential to the project of purifying Muslim society. Significantly, these practices and principles would be seen in action two centuries later with the Islamic State.

Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood

There is a clear lineage running from the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, through the cleric Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 18th-century Arabia, to reformers like Muhammad Abduh in late 19th-century Egypt. This lineage culminated in the emergence of 20th-century political and militant Islamist groups, which drew upon these arguments to justify opposition to local Muslim governments. For Egypt, the 19th and early 20th century was a period of renewal and revival of Ibn Taymiyya's brand of fundamentalism and generated the first Islamist reformers. Indeed, Egypt would serve as a wellspring for Islamism, as it saw more than 100 years of evolving Salafi thought and activism.

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was one of the first reformers to use the term Salafi as it is understood today. By the 1960s, it would be co-opted by more radical elements like Sayyid Qutb and his followers. Yet Abduh, an Egyptian religious scholar and liberal reformer, sought to demonstrate Islam's compatibility with European rationalism using the model practiced by the earliest Muslim generations, the *Salaf*. He

argued they had created a vibrant and thriving community and state because they creatively interpreted the Quran and *hadith* to solve new challenges as they arose. Among the primary goals of Abduh's activism was the rejection and defiance of Western imperialism.¹⁵

Following World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt would become a laboratory for the evolution and development of political and militant Islamist ideology. In 1928, a teacher named Hassan al-Banna founded a religio-political movement in Egypt called the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*).¹⁶ It would influence scores of subsequent Islamic organizations across the globe, both militant and non-violent. Al-Banna became increasingly disturbed by Egypt's political, economic, and social crises, all of which had facilitated the British occupation of his country. He believed that the root cause of these crises was Egypt's rejection of Islam in favor of Western secularism and materialism.¹⁷

For al-Banna, Islam represented a panacea for all that ailed Egypt. He believed in the purity of the Islam practiced during the "golden age" of the Prophet Muhammad, argued that modern Muslims had strayed from God, and thus established the Brotherhood to guide society back to the right path.¹⁸ Like Abduh, al-Banna blamed Western secularism as a core cause of the Muslim world's decay and straying from its roots. Although the specifics of the state the early Brotherhood sought to create were vague, al-Banna consistently argued that sovereignty did not belong to the people or their leaders but to God alone. Any political system that failed to acknowledge this essential truth was unacceptable and destined for failure. Al-Banna argued that Egypt must abandon its secular and Western nature and adopt the Quran as its constitution and *Sharia* as the law of the land.¹⁹

To realize such a transformation on the political level, al-Banna believed in reforming the hearts and minds of the people so that the government would eventually have no choice but to change to reflect the masses' religio-political vision. To this end, the Brotherhood created a vast network of social services—such as schools, health clinics, and neighborhood clubs—through which its members propagated their vision of a pure Islam. In this regard, the Brotherhood's efforts at mobilizing the masses was a novel one and a divergence from the many other Islamist reformers who primarily worked through the publication of their writings.

At the same time that the Brotherhood developed its network of social services, it engineered a covert program to infiltrate its members into the military and police. It also established a militia. The militant wing of the Brotherhood became active in 1948 by attacking British and Jewish businesses throughout Egypt. They also participated in the unsuccessful military effort to block the establishment of Israel in 1948.²⁰

The Brotherhood was linked to the assassination of Cairo's police chief, which led the government to ban the activities of the Brotherhood and to arrest and imprison many of its members. In retaliation for the government's crackdown, the Brotherhood assassinated Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi in 1948. Responding in kind, the government's secret police killed al-Banna on February 12, 1949. Prior to his death, the Brotherhood had grown to an estimated 300,000 to 600,000 members within Egypt.²¹

By the time of his death, al-Banna had helped to create affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood beyond Egypt's borders. The most prominent branches were located in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. Members of these affiliates would eventually create their own offshoots, thereby rapidly increasing the number of radical groups in the region.

Many of these splinter groups would become far more militant than al-Banna's organization. In Palestine, for example, Brotherhood leader Ahmed Yassin formed his own militant Brotherhood splinter group called Hamas in 1987. Abdullah Azzam, a former senior member of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, partnered with Usama bin Ladin during the Afghan-Soviet war to establish the organization that would become al-Qaida.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood survived the death of its founder and established a tacit partnership with Lieutenant Colonel Gamal Abd al-Nasser and his Free Officers group during the last years of Egypt's

monarchy. It was a marriage of convenience as both groups sought the ouster of a corrupt and ineffective monarchy. Their association quickly dissolved, however, once al-Nasser began to consolidate his rule following his successful 1952 revolution. The Brotherhood discovered that he neither intended to establish an Islamic state nor to share power with them.²²

In 1954, a member of the Brotherhood shot at al-Nasser in a sloppy, unsuccessful attempt to kill him. The new Egyptian government immediately enforced a ban on the group, executed much of its leadership, and imprisoned thousands of its members. Those who remained at large were either forced underground in Egypt or were exiled. During these purges, a great number of the Brotherhood's members found refuge in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom and Germany, and influenced the development of Islamist activism in those countries. Likewise, those who immigrated to the United States would prove highly influential in the formation of the nascent Islamist organizations in America.

For those who stayed in Egypt, al-Nasser's brutal crackdown divided the Brotherhood. The majority of al-Banna's disciples emerged cautiously and resolved to avoid clashing with the regime. They evolved into a political party, renounced violence, and sought to work within the system to gradually effect change. This faction became an active force in Egyptian politics, holding seats in parliament beginning in 1976 and ultimately enjoying a short stint as the leaders of Egypt following the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011.²³

A smaller faction, sharply opposed to any accommodation with Cairo, coalesced around the ideologue Sayyid Qutb in the 1950s. Like al-Banna, Qutb believed that a return to the Islam practiced during the time of the Prophet and the *Salaf* was the only cure for the ills of the Muslim world. For Qutb, however, the creation of an Islamic state became imperative, an endeavor for which true Muslims needed to be willing to fight and die.

The ideology of Sayyid Qutb

Like al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb was also born in northern Egypt in 1906. During the 1930s and 1940s, Qutb worked for the Egyptian Ministry of Education. In 1948, he went to the United States on a scholarship to study the American educational system, earning a master's degree in education from the Colorado State College of Education and taking courses at Wilson Teachers College in Washington, DC.²⁴ Qutb returned to Egypt in 1950, disillusioned with the United States and more conservative in his religious beliefs. He would become one of the most militant voices of his era, calling for a vanguard to lead Muslims to establish a political state ruled by Islamic law, a quest that would result in his execution.

In 1951, he published a magazine article called, "The America I Have Seen: In the Scale of Human Values," which contained passages such as:

I fear that a balance may not exist between America's material greatness and the quality of its people. And I fear that the wheel of life will have turned and the book of time will have closed and America will have added nothing, or next to nothing, to the account of morals that distinguishes man from object, and indeed, mankind from animals.²⁵

While al-Banna sought to effect socio-political change by cultivating citizens' piety so that the state would eventually be transformed from below, Qutb would demand that a vanguard force wage war against apostate governments to effect socio-political change from the top down. Once the character of the state was changed, Qutb believed, the hearts and minds of the people would follow.

Qutb took Ibn Taymiyya's anti-Mongol, epoch-specific ruling and interpreted it to apply to modern conditions, offering a fresh take on Muslims' right to rebel against apostate rulers. Qutb believed that the dominant ideologies of his day—capitalism, democracy, socialism, and communism—had failed the people. In his groundbreaking work, *Milestones (Ma'alim fi 'l-Tariq)*, Qutb wrote that "mankind today is on the

brink of a precipice . . . because humanity is devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress. . . . It is essential for mankind to have new leadership!”²⁶

This “new leadership,” he argued, was signified by a wholehearted embrace of Islamic law, the perfect alternative to the failed ideologies of the West. Viewing the promulgation of *Sharia* as a divine commandment, Qutb believed that it was incumbent upon all Muslims to work toward implementing it in their own societies. Since the repressive nature of the governments in the Islamic world prevented Muslims from fulfilling this religious obligation, it would be futile to try to work peacefully and constructively from within the system to effect political change.²⁷

With no other recourse, a vanguard of dedicated individuals should be created to, as Qutb wrote,

establish the reign of God on earth and eliminate the reign of man, to take power out of the hands of those of His worshippers who have usurped it and return it to God alone, to confer authority upon divine law alone and to eliminate the laws created by man.²⁸

Qutb demanded an international revolution with the goal of creating Islamic states throughout the Muslim world. In his call to arms, Qutb pronounced *takfir* against the leaders of “so-called” Muslim countries. They were apostates, he claimed, and therefore legitimate objects of martial jihad. Qutb updated Ibn Taymiyya’s argument by substituting the West for the Mongols as the enemy of Islam, an evil adversary that uses “Muzaffars”—the prince whom Ibn Taymiyya accused of apostasy—to prevent the Muslim community from following the true word of God.²⁹

When Qutb’s death sentence was announced to him in 1965, he responded, “Thank God, I performed jihad for 15 years until I earned this martyrdom.”³⁰ Fixated on sacrificing his life for this movement, his words continue to inspire contemporary generations of Salafi-jihadis. Indeed, *Milestones*’ literal interpretations of the Quran and *hadith*, and of the lives of the *Salaf*, are frequently found in their modern literature.³¹

Despite his recognition of the existential threat posed by the West, Qutb focused his revolutionary rhetoric on apostate regimes in the Islamic world. Just as he had built upon the thoughts of Ibn Taymiyya, the ideologues of the transnational Islamist militant movement would later build upon his views years after his death in 1966. By that time, the West—and specifically the United States—would be in the crosshairs.

The Arab Cold War

During the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia engaged in a bitter ideological contest to define the identity of the Arab world. During the conflict, known as the Arab Cold War, Egypt propagated a pan-Arab ideology that placed primacy on Arab identity over religious or national affiliations and argued for unity among all Arabs. It attacked the Saudi royal family with propaganda, relentlessly seeking to expose its improprieties.

The Saudis responded with a vision of their own, pan-Islamism, which viewed all other identities as subordinate to religious affiliation and sought to shore up their credentials as leaders of the Islamic world. The doctrine of pan-Islamism first emerged as a means to resist Western encroachment during the late 19th century. It essentially argued that unity among Muslims is not only central to Islam but is critical to the strength of the Muslim world. Yet through the creation of various Saudi-funded institutions intended for the propagation of Islam around the world, it became clear this ideology was little more than a rebranding of Wahhabism.

In May 1962, Saudi Arabia hosted a conference of Islamic states to formulate ways to fight secularism in the Arab and Muslim world. The meeting created the Muslim World League, which was funded by the Saudi monarchy with its permanent headquarters in Mecca.³² The league would become one of the Saudis’ main weapons against secularism, and it proved instrumental in providing an Islam-focused alternative to

the secular pan-Arab ideology of al-Nasser. Through its establishment, the Saudis created an extremely well-funded center for Salafi outreach and education based around the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

Saudi Arabia's King Faisal recognized that to realize his dream of a unified Islamic community and to strike a decisive blow against pan-Arabism, there had to be a standardized reading of Islam—namely the Wahhabi variety—that would supplant the wide variety of Islamic interpretations. By paying the salaries of *imams* (prayer leaders) at mosques throughout the world, offering scholarships to Saudi universities, and funding the printing and dissemination of topical literature, the Muslim World League sought to establish a standard that was ultra conservative and fundamentalist to inform how the contemporary Muslim world should be ordered.³³

The Muslim World League engaged in a wide range of charitable activities, such as the funding of health clinics, soup kitchens, and other relief activities to aid needy Muslims—often in conflict zones. But along with these publicly charitable actions, the Muslim World League and its subsidiaries regularly spread militant ideology, provided arms to militants, and funded jihadi training. Some of these operations would also later be undertaken by Saudi charities such as the Benevolence International Foundation and the al-Haramayn Foundation, which were both designated by the United States as supporters of terrorism.³⁴ Like the league's offer to pay foreign *imams'* salaries, however, these humanitarian endeavors came with strings attached. Local beliefs and customs, which had long been integral parts of Muslims' religious practices, began to be suppressed, and the humanitarian facilities were used as propagation bases.

Offering safe haven to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood marked another significant component of the Saudis' political and ideological offensive against al-Nasser. Bitter enemies of the Egyptian government, members of the Brotherhood were welcomed into Saudi Arabia en masse by King Faisal during the late 1950s and 1960s. This was a pragmatic move to put pressure on al-Nasser. Faisal also saw his embrace of the Brotherhood—a group that many Muslims viewed favorably for challenging the secularism of al-Nasser's regime—as a way to advance his credentials as the leader of the Muslim world.

While many members of the original Muslim Brotherhood, such as Qutb, had stayed in Egypt after al-Banna's assassination, once relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia began to sour in the late 1950s, the Saudis courted many of these disaffected men. Saudi Arabia gave sanctuary and generous stipends and encouraged them to spread anti-Nasser propaganda from Saudi soil.

Two particularly noteworthy members of the Brotherhood who found refuge and became professors in Saudi Arabia were Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, who had fled Egypt in the mid-1960s, and Abdullah Azzam. They both worked at King Abd al-Aziz University in Jeddah, another popular institution for Saudi and foreign students, established in 1967. They both also taught an undergraduate Usama bin Ladin at the university.³⁵

Azzam, a Palestinian member of the Brotherhood, had taught Islamic law at the University of Jordan. He moved to Cairo, where he completed a master's degree and PhD in Islamic Jurisprudence at al-Azhar University. Saudi Arabia subsequently offered him a job at King Abd al-Aziz University in the late 1970s. The fact that Azzam dedicated himself to fomenting martial jihad notwithstanding, the Saudi government made him the head of the Muslim World League's education division while he was in residence at King Abd al-Aziz University.³⁶

Yet Saudi Arabia also understood the importance of preventing rebellious splinter groups from taking hold in their country, both out of self-protection and to guard against endangering their goal of worldwide Islamic unity. Toward that end, in 1971 a formal initiative to protect and promote a "pure" Salafi doctrine was created: the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Guidance. The committee has been composed of a body of clerics consistently loyal to the Saudi royal family who issue *fatwas* on matters of belief, worship, and society.

It is difficult to overestimate the effect of Brotherhood members on Saudi society. Some obtained jobs as *imams* in mosques, while others worked as teachers, professors, and top officials in the Ministry of

Education, designing school textbooks and syllabi. They had a tremendous impact on an entire generation of Saudi youth, as well as on thousands of foreign Muslims who flocked to the kingdom for subsidized schooling.

The Saudis had largely been cut off from the outside world and had been conditioned to leave political considerations to their rulers in the House of Saud, in line with the pact formed by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab nearly two centuries ago. Their worldview was generally devoid of any political considerations. But this began to change when the Brotherhood arrived. The Brotherhood's activist ideology mixed with the indigenous fundamentalism of the Saudis. While the doctrine of Wahhabism was largely apolitical, the political activism of emigrant Brotherhood members threatened to upend that status quo.³⁷

In 1961, King Faisal seized on al-Nasser's decision to place the revered al-Azhar University in Cairo under government control by creating a rival religious university in Saudi Arabia. Under the leadership of Brotherhood members, the Saudi government opened the Islamic University of Medina, designed to be an alternative to al-Azhar following its loss of legitimacy through its association with the secular al-Nasser regime.

As Saudi Arabia used its vast wealth to enable the Muslim World League—and several other organizations under its umbrella such as the International Islamic Relief Organization and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth—to globally propagate its religio-political vision on a massive scale, the next generation of militant groups emerged in Egypt.

By the late 1960s, the Egyptian economy was in ruins, the people suffered at the hands of the elite, and an acute identity crisis had developed. Secularism, with a focus on Arab solidarity, was seen to have failed the Arab world. Egyptians and other Arabs began to reconnect with their Islamic heritage with renewed vigor. It was in this context that the arguments of Sayyid Qutb provided a bridge from the gradual bottom-up approach of al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood to the more immediate and violent approaches of the post-1967 militant groups.

The most important of these groups that emerged in the post-war period were the Egyptian Islamic Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad. The significance of these groups is two-fold. First, they were trailblazers in locally focused terrorism and were relatively successful in waging war against their government. Second, these two groups were among al-Qaida's earliest and most militarily effective feeder groups and affiliates. Their eventual alliance with Bin Ladin's organization drastically expanded al-Qaida's operational and logistical capabilities and greatly enhanced Bin Ladin's role as a major player in the world of transnational terrorism.

Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj and *The Neglected Duty*

Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj became an influential facet of the Egyptian, and later global, Salafi movement by the 1960s. His embrace and advocacy for violent jihad came in succession to the prominent Salafi reformers before him—Abduh and his student Rashid Rida, Hassan al-Banna, and finally Sayyid Qutb.

Egyptian Islamic Jihad, an alliance of several small clandestine groups, emerged in the late 1970s under the leadership of Faraj. Unlike the Egyptian Islamic Group, which focused on universities for recruitment, many of Islamic Jihad's members were underprivileged urbanites. Ayman al-Zawahiri would later become the head of Islamic Jihad before he began to merge it with al-Qaida in 1998.

Heavily influenced by Ibn Taymiyya, Faraj published Islamic Jihad's manifesto in 1981. Called *The Neglected Duty*, it was a call for action that focused on the primary importance of martial jihad. It became one of the most significant treatises of the militant Islamist movement and impacted the thinking of Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri.³⁸ Like Qutb, Faraj classified jihad against the Egyptian state as an individual obligation, requiring the participation of all Muslims. Faraj sought to establish martial jihad as the sixth pillar of Islam.³⁹

For Faraj, jihad was not just the most important method for establishing an Islamic state but the only method, the essential means for reinstating the glory of Islam. In *The Neglected Duty*, Faraj rejected a number of strategies favored by other militants that he felt were counterproductive to the *umma's* realization of God's rule on earth.

Faraj had watched as the approaches of al-Banna and Qutb failed to bring about the creation of an Islamic state. He knew that it would be playing with fire to challenge the Egyptian authorities. Accordingly, the longer that one waited to attack the state, the more likely one was to be arrested or killed. The execution of a rapid and violent blow against Cairo was the only path.

In *The Neglected Duty*, as in the works of Qutb and Ibn Taymiyya, Faraj embraced the argument that implementation of *Sharia* was the most critical indicator of a political leader's piety and of whether a particular community could be considered truly Islamic. Faraj wrote that

one of the necessary conditions to make a state Muslim is that it be governed by the laws of Islam. Yet the laws regulating the life of the Muslims are infidel laws—laws conceived by infidels and imposed by them upon Muslims. . . . The situation of Muslims [today] resembles that of the believers under the yoke of the Mongols.⁴⁰

Accordingly, Faraj pronounced *takfir* against Egypt's leaders, quoting the Quranic verse, "Whoso judgeth not according to what God hath revealed, they are the transgressors."⁴¹ The solution was martial jihad, and Islamic Jihad dedicated itself to targeting those who were responsible for the governing of the country, the leaders who acted as a wedge between the people and true Islam.

Faraj formulated a three-step strategic plan toward his ultimate goal of the restoration of the caliphate.

Step 1: The Near Enemies. Faraj was unflinching in his assertion that groups must begin their struggle by overthrowing their local governments and overseeing the promulgation of Islamic law in their own countries.⁴²

Step 2: The Far Enemies. Once the near enemies have been subdued, Muslims should attack outside, far enemies who aided and abetted the local apostate rulers.

Step 3: The Caliphate. The newly established Islamic states, free of interference from their far enemies, should unite to reinstate the caliphate and restore the glory of the transnational Muslim community.

Faraj's thinking marked a significant step in the evolution of militant Islamist movements as they moved along the path from a local to a global focus. While other earlier thinkers, such as Qutb, addressed the treachery of Israel and the West, they did not present any explicit program for waging war against them. Thus, on this subject, Faraj represents a middle point between Qutb and later leaders such as Bin Ladin, who agitated for a permanent shift in targeting priorities from the near to the far enemy.

After Islamic Jihad's members assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Egyptian authorities executed Faraj on April 15, 1982. Islamist activists, including members of the groups that fell under the Islamic Group's umbrella, were arrested by the thousands. Among them was Omar Abd al-Rahman, known as the "blind sheikh," who was later acquitted of all charges and released, and an Islamic Jihad member who would rise to prominence with al-Qaida, al-Zawahiri.

The formation of al-Qaida

With the creation of al-Qaida, the evolution of Salafi thought culminated in a movement centered around militant uprising against the United States and its allies. Its leaders and the contemporary Salafi-jihadi scholars that they used for legitimacy, such as Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, came at the

end of a Salafi lineage stretching back two centuries, greatly influenced by Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb, and other prominent 20th-century Egyptian Islamists.

Usama bin Ladin would ultimately become the leader and chief spokesman of the transnational Islamist militant movement known as al-Qaida and its most recognizable face. The 17th of 24 children fathered by an extraordinarily wealthy construction magnate, Bin Ladin's religious awakening is said to have begun while he was a student at King Abd al-Aziz University in Jeddah. Also influential to Bin Ladin was the preaching of Abdullah Azzam.⁴³

Often called the "*amir* of jihad," Azzam was unyielding in his advocacy of holy war. "Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues," was one of his more well-known catch-phrases.⁴⁴ Azzam had also moved to Peshawar in the early 1980s to support the Afghan jihad. He was a fervent advocate of martial jihad, viewing it as a primary duty of all Muslims.⁴⁵

Azzam traveled the world to set up fundraising and propaganda offices. He issued a number of *fatwas* categorizing the Afghan struggle as a defensive jihad. In the United States, Azzam established al-Kifah Refugee Center, which had its headquarters inside the al-Farooq Mosque on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. The Brooklyn center quickly became a hotbed of militant activity, attracting the so-called "blind sheikh," Omar Abdel Rahman, and many of the individuals involved in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, as well as El Sayyid Nosair, the assassin of Jewish Defense League leader Rabbi Meir Kahane.

In 1984, Bin Ladin and Azzam established the Afghan Services Bureau (*Maktab al-Khidamat*) in Peshawar, which was designed to provide a wide range of services to the anti-Soviet jihad, including generating propaganda to encourage recruits and donations.

Meanwhile, al-Zawahiri relocated to Pakistan and Afghanistan in 1986. He had spent three years in an Egyptian jail for his alleged involvement in the assassination of Sadat. He was routinely tortured, but that only enhanced al-Zawahiri's militant fervor. In the tradition of Faraj, he believed that only rapid strikes executed by a vanguard could bring about revolutionary change and impose a pure Islam upon a spiritually awakened populace. Al-Zawahiri saw no need to involve the masses in his revolution, believing—like Qutb—that a vanguard would lead the *umma* to this end. Once in South Asia, al-Zawahiri began to nurture a relationship with Bin Ladin.

In early 1988, the Soviets announced their intention to fully withdraw from Afghanistan by the following year. The senior figures among the foreign fighters agreed that the jihad should not end with the liberation of Afghanistan. They supported Azzam's move to establish a network of loosely affiliated militant Islamist groups and individual *mujahidin* to wage a global holy war. Writing in *al-Jihad*, the journal of record for foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Azzam described the function of the new militant coalition: "This vanguard constitutes the strong foundation (*al-Qaida al-Sulbah*) for the expected society."⁴⁶ It would become known as al-Qaida.

In August 1996, Bin Ladin released his first major statement outlining his religio-political agenda. In the document, called "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites," Bin Ladin was highly critical of the Saudi government, castigating it for trading some aspects of *Sharia* for secular law.

Furthermore, he accused the Saudi royal family of siding with infidels against Muslims by inviting the American military into the Saudi kingdom in 1990 after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Despite his hatred of the Saudi royal family, Bin Ladin saved most of his ire for the United States, the greater enemy that he believed lurked behind the Saudis, just as the Mongols lurked behind the prince Muzaffar in the days of Ibn Taymiyya.

Deeply concerned about Saudi Arabia's growing financial troubles, Bin Ladin complained about the amount of money the United States had taken from Saudi Arabia to finance its military presence and to arm and train the ineffective Saudi military. He also railed against Saudi oil policy, which he argued was

controlled by the United States to suit its pricing needs to the detriment of Muslims. He blamed Saudi Arabia's economic decline on the United States.⁴⁷

The "Declaration of Jihad" is perhaps the first formal and articulate call for Muslims to switch their focus from the near to the far enemy: "The occupying American enemy is the principal and the main cause of the situation. Therefore efforts should be concentrated on destroying, fighting and killing the enemy until, by the grace of Allah, it is completely defeated."⁴⁸ Prioritizing the far enemy was critical because

the situation cannot be rectified (the shadow cannot be straightened when its source, the rod, is not straight either) unless the root of the problem is tackled. Hence it is essential to hit the main enemy who divided the *umma* into small and little countries and pushed it, for the last few decades, into a state of confusion.⁴⁹

On February 23, 1998, Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri, along with several other militant and religious leaders, announced the creation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders. The coalition was a conglomerate of numerous militant groups that had until this point been primarily focused on their local struggles. On many levels, the content of the World Front's statement was similar to that of Bin Ladin's "Declaration of War," but it expanded Bin Ladin's call for martial jihad from one that sought to simply expel the U.S. military from Saudi Arabia into one that called for indiscriminate attacks on Americans wherever they might be found.

The statement gave the United States a taste of the new campaign being waged against it by militants operating around the world. As the document made clear, the diverse signatories had firmly shifted their targeting priorities from the near to the far enemy. No longer would Bangladeshis solely fight the Bangladeshi government or Saudis exclusively target the Saudi state. The efforts of all members of this new alliance, irrespective of their national origin, would be employed to wage war first and foremost against the United States.

By asserting that "all these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims," the Front argued that jihad against the Americans must be waged out of necessity: "and *ulama* [Islamic religious scholars] have throughout the Islamic history unanimously agreed that jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries."

Therefore, the statement concluded,

the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it . . . in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.

To be clear, the goals of the transnational Islamist militant movement remained the overthrow of local regimes in the Muslim world and the re-establishment of the caliphate. Al-Qaida viewed the United States as a roadblock on the path to the realization of those objectives. Thus, attacks on the United States were not necessarily intended to destroy or conquer it for Islam in the short term but rather to remove American support for local governments so that the Muslim world could once again be ruled by "true believers." Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri argued that this fundamental obstacle must be destroyed before the movement could address its primary goal of defeating local leaders.

It was this view that led directly to the most spectacular terrorist attack in world history: a series of four coordinated strikes in the United States on September 11, 2001, that killed nearly 3,000 people, destroyed New York City's World Trade Center, damaged the Pentagon, and caused billions in damages to property and infrastructure.

While 9/11 was the single bloodiest and most damaging attack in al-Qaida's history, it also effectively marked the beginning of the end of the group. Its leaders would be driven deep into hiding and many of

its lieutenants killed. Over the next decade, a number of regional affiliates would emerge, among them: al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabaab, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (formerly Nusra Front, also known as al-Qaida in Syria), al-Qaida in the Sinai Peninsula, al-Qaida in Gaza, and al-Qaida in Iraq.

The Islamic State

The Islamic State is the re-incarnation of the al-Qaida affiliate in Iraq initially led by the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Al-Zarqawi had studied under Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the prominent Jordanian Salafi-jihadi scholar whose work al-Qaida leaders frequently cited to bolster their legitimacy.

The Islamic State has focused on retaliation of perceived grievances through gruesome displays of violence as their primary *modus operandi*. The group's leadership has explicitly labeled their fighters as part of "the current of Jihadi-Salafism."⁵⁰ But to a large extent, they set aside the complex questions of theology and ideology that al-Qaida's leadership—and the Egyptian Islamists before them—delved into. Their tactics have earned them the condemnation of not only mainstream Muslim clerics but also hardline Salafi ones like al-Zawahiri and the prominent cleric Abu Basir al-Tartusi.⁵¹

The Islamic State wholly embraced the theology of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, widely distributing Wahhabi textbooks among schools it controlled. Many Islamic State publications, such as *al-Taghut* (the Tyrants), for example, contain extensive Wahhabi quotes, making clear their place within Salafi and Wahhabi traditions.⁵² The Islamic State even created a religious police akin to that of Saudi Arabia (the *Mutawwaa*), which corralled citizens to worship at prayer time, enforced dress codes and the separation of genders, and sought to stop any public vices.⁵³

Unlike most other Wahhabi adherents, however, they have militarized and politicized Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's calls for the purification of Islamic practices and taken the punishment of offenders to nearly unimaginable extremes.⁵⁴ Significantly, the Islamic State also condemns Saudi Arabia's leaders as illegitimate Islamic rulers unfit to preside over the Two Holy Mosques of Mecca and Medina.

In this regard, the Islamic State created a new brand of Wahhabi Islam, which had changed little since its inception in Arabia in the late 18th century. This blend of the creed of Wahhabism—marked by puritanical obsession over concepts such as *shirk* (associating partners with God) and rooting out *bida* (theological or legal innovation)—and the political ambitions of 20th-century Salafism marks a significant turn in the development of Islamism. No longer did adherents of Wahhabi Islam need to remain quiet politically and demonstrate obedience to the Saudi monarchy in exchange for patronage; instead, there became what was essentially a new habitat for Wahhabi thought to imprint on a very different political and social environment that was to become their caliphate.

In 2014, the Islamic State's announcement of a caliphate—under which all Muslims across the globe were to be subject—was dismissed almost universally. Nevertheless, the viability of such an enterprise was established. The Islamic State declared previous Islamic states, such as the Ottoman Empire that ruled from North Africa to western Asia for over six centuries, illegitimate and un-Islamic.

In the language for which Salafis and Wahhabis are best known, the Islamic State demanded a return to early Islamic practices and principles as the sole means of reviving a pure Islamic society and state. In this sense, the Islamic State went beyond the ambitions of al-Qaida and the Egyptian Salafi activist groups of the past century, essentially putting the end goal of establishing a caliphate up front.

Conclusion

From its earliest days with Ibn Taymiyya, Islamism has been defined by its response to the political environment and how the reformers who took up this ideological endeavor attempted to address the issues of their times. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Islamist reformers of Salafi or Wahhabi persuasion

did the same, attempting to “purify” their society from elements that diverged from the earliest Muslim generations. This has often meant violent upheaval, at times for Western countries like the United States but most often for Muslims themselves.

Today, despite the deaths of some of these foundational jihadi leaders—including Bin Ladin, al-Zarqawi, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—the legacy of militant Islamist ideology persists. Just as the Islamic State built on previous jihadis’ actions and made strides toward establishing a caliphate that would govern Muslims under the strict and exclusionist standards they embody—an outgrowth of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and the other early Salafi scholars and activists who established the ideological underpinnings of militant Islamism—one must expect new generations to take up the mantle of this unfinished work.

Notes

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- 3 Note: this chapter focuses exclusively on Sunni-based Islamist militancy, which is by far the dominant form. Shia militant activism, which can be labeled Islamist but is not Salafist, is treated in subsequent chapters.
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- 9 Denise Aigle, *The Mongol Empire Between Myth and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
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- 19 Ibid.
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- 24 The Colorado State College of Education, located in Greeley, Colorado, has been called the University of Northern Colorado since 1970. Wilson Teachers College is now part of the University of the District of Columbia. Some reports have also claimed that Qutb studied at Stanford University in California. See Sayyid Qutb, “The America I Have Seen: In the Scale of Human Values,” 1951, www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/3F/3F56ACA473044436B4C1740F65D5C3B6_Sayyid_Qutb_-_The_America_I_Have_Seen.pdf.
- 25 Ibid.
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- 27 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “A Genealogy of Radical Islam,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28, no. 2 (2006): 75–97.
- 28 Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*.
- 29 Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers*.

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- 37 This phenomenon was manifest in the *al-Nahda*, or Awakening, movement led by Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda in the decades that followed. For more, see Heffelfinger, *Radical Islam in America*.
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