

Modalities of Jihadism in The Middle East and North Africa: Ideological and Historical Roots

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In a recent article Middle East specialist Fawaz Gerges identified three 'waves' of jihadist activism.¹ 'Near enemy' jihadism, the dominant mode from the 1970s until the middle of the 1990s, consists of groups trying to topple their own governments. The second wave, 'far enemy' jihadism, begins with the al-Qaeda embassy bombings in 1998 and targets the United States and its allies rather than local regimes. The third wave is that of the Islamic State (ISIS), a brutally effective military organisation distinguished by effective use of propaganda, intense sectarianism, rapid acquisition of territory and the establishment of political control across state borders.

Gerges' three waves offer a useful heuristic device for conceptualising modalities of jihadist activism. They do not follow in neat chronological order, and each wave does not fully eclipse the preceding one. But they encapsulate prevailing patterns as they have evolved over time. These patterns reflect a complex interplay between jihadist strategies, regional state policies and global political dynamics. What enables us to view these quite distinct modalities of political practice, occurring in diverse localities over a long period, as a 'movement' is ideology. 'Jihadism' as an ideological repertoire merges vocabulary and symbols of Islam as a discursive tradition with elements of the modern ideologies that shaped the 20th century politics of the Middle East.

This chapter offers some reflections on the influence of regional ideologies on modern jihadism, particularly Wahhabi and Muslim Brotherhood thought. It also demonstrates the salience of the political and socioeconomic context, as well as the role of US foreign policy, with respect to the trajectory of jihadism. The main argument of this chapter is that jihadism evolved in tandem with shifts in the political, economic and international environment in the Middle East and North Africa. As such, the ideas and strategies of jihadist groups have a contemporaneous, rather than timeless, quality.

Jihadism: Religion or Ideology?

Jihadism clearly draws on ideas familiar to Muslims and others as 'Islamic,' and its adherents may consider themselves to be devout Muslims. Religious conviction may motivate individuals to take extreme actions. It is possible, as some scholars have, to view jihadism in the context of an 'Islamic' history, to trace the evolution in the meaning and operationalisation of jihad 'from Qur'an to bin Laden.'² But as a way of explaining or tracing the roots of current movements, this approach diminishes the importance of modern ideologies, forged through the prism of national liberation struggles, in addition to the policies of regional states within shifting social and economic environments, and the influence of great powers, not least the United States.

Although the symbolic repertoire of Islam is clearly an important dimension of jihadism, religious language should not blind us to the influence of

¹ FAWAZ A. Gerges, "ISIS and the Third Wave of Jihadism," *Current History*, 113, 2014, p. 339.

² Richard BONNEY, *Jihad: From Qu'ran to Bin Laden*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

regional ideologies. In the modern Middle East, in common with other populist idea systems, ideology has been distinctly 'negativist.'³ Ba'thism, Nasserism, communism, and Islamism (not to mention Zionism) were, as they became indigenised as local nationalisms, *anti-* a great deal of things. They were, variously, *anti-imperialist*, *anti-colonialist*, *anti-monarchical*, *anti-Zionist*, *anti-communist*, *anti-feudalist*, *anti-shi'a*, *anti-Arab*. They functioned as mechanisms of 'othering' in order to define external enemies and their domestic agents, and to mobilise populations against them. Most of these ideologies took shape around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, up to the end of the Second World War, in the context of national liberation movements.

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Another regional ideology that has had a pronounced impact on jihadism is Wahhabism, or Salafism, as it is manifested outside Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism was not sociologically 'populist,' but it served an analogous mobilisational purpose to the other modern ideologies mentioned above. Saudi Arabia was not colonised and had no meaningful 'middle class' driving its ideological development. This may partially explain the aversion its hegemonic ideology has toward politics. Wahhabism, the ideology of the Saudi State, refers to ideas adopted by an obscure group of Arabian religious reformists who called themselves the *muwahhidun* (believers in the oneness of God), and whose creed was devised by the 18th century preacher Muhammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab. It was replete with apocalyptic binaries regarding Islam's struggle against unbelief, against perfidious Shia, Jews and Sufis.

Wahhabism underpinned the expansion of the Al Saud among the Bedouin tribes of Arabia in the

18th and early 19th centuries. It was revived at the dawn of the 20th century, with British support, to motivate tribal warriors in a renewed jihad to acquire territory controlled by the Ottoman Empire. As the movement reached the limits of its expansion and became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism retained its mobilisational quality as an antidote to radical left-wing, and subsequently pluralist, ideologies both within the Kingdom and in the region at large. Wahhabism presents itself not as nationalism or ideology, but as 'Islam.' The Saudi regime has consistently sought to export its ideology in order to depoliticise Muslim populations, affirm the legitimacy of the Saudi system and maintain the stability of authoritarian regimes.

If anti-political Wahhabism constitutes one important influence on contemporary jihadist ideology, another is the Islamism (or political Islam) of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). When the MB developed its political programme in Egypt in the 1930s, Egypt occupied the intellectual centre of the Middle East. The MB borrowed from, and competed with, socialist, fascist and even liberal ideological currents, as well as Wahhabism, which the Egypt-based Islamic reformist thinker Muhammad Rashid Rida repackaged in slightly more political form as 'Salafism.' Whereas Wahhabism, in its staid Saudi iteration, was anti-political, the MB's programme was oriented toward 'inside-out' socio-political reform: Islamise society, then the State and then the international system. For the MB 'jihad' was an expression of its overall mission to achieve a fully realised Islamic society in which the Muslim individual would be free to live a good and fulfilling life. Violent jihad was mandated to fight the coloniser as well as, although this divided the movement, the monarchy and social groups deemed to be agents of the coloniser.

MB ideology, although oriented toward Islamisation, had, in its scope and aspiration to universalism, strong modernist characteristics. This reflects the sensibilities of the MB's essentially middle class support base. Its aspiration was to educate society (*da'wa*), reshape the nature and scope of political power (the Islamic State) and, in so doing, change the world (by restoring the Caliphate). If the ideas

³ Elie PODEH and Onn WINCKLER, "Introduction: Nasserism as a Form of Populism," in *Rethinking Nasserism : Revolution and Historical Memory in Modern Egypt*, ed. by Elie PODEH and Onn WINCKLER, Gainesville, Fla. ; London: University Press of Florida : Eurospan, 2004.

of the MB influenced later jihadist groups it was partially because they expressed the essence of modern ideology in Islamic vocabulary. In their essential meanings they were similar to those of the regimes that would come to rule the states of the Middle East.

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By the 1960s, which is when the generally acknowledged godfather of modern Jihadism, Sayyid Qutb, published his most incendiary work, MB ideology had become harder and more uncompromising. Qutb insisted that secular rulers were keeping society in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jahiliyya*). So long as they failed to implement God's law (*shari'a*) they had no right to rule. The sharpening of the Brotherhood's message under Qutb's leadership, particularly in relation to the regime, can be attributed to the torture that he and his comrades endured in prison. It can also be considered an expression of the dissatisfaction of excluded parts of Egyptian society. In important structural ways, Qutb's ideas resembled Nasserist populism. As a modernist idea system that borrowed much from world ideologies on the left and right, Nasserism (as does Ba'thism) viewed society as an organic unity whose energies should be mobilised to bring about national renaissance.

Qutb's thinking mirrored this obsession with the inherent unity of state and society. It duplicated, in Islamic vocabulary, Nasserism's paranoia about enemies from without and agents within, its uncompromising attitude toward detractors, its hostility to pluralism, and its utopian aspirations to change the world. For Arab leftists of many stripes, revolution in Egypt would lead to Arab unity and ultimately the demise of world imperialism. Qutb's focus beyond Egypt was, similarly, not just the 'Muslim world' but humanity as a whole. Jihadism is as much a creature of Gamal Abdel Nasser as it is of the MB founder Hasan al-Banna.

Near Enemy Jihadism: in the Beginning is the State

The violent Islamist groups that emerged in the Middle East and North Africa from the 1970s, Gerges' first wave of 'near enemy' jihadists, incorporated Qutb's ideas to varying degrees as their manifestos. The main preoccupation for these groups, which bound them together as part of a transnational Islamist movement, was the nature of the State. Even the Palestinian Hamas, whose priority was to fight the Israeli occupation, justified its existence as an *Islamic* resistance movement as an alternative to the secular PLO (a quasi-state), which was seen as being unable to harness the true energies of Palestinians as Muslims and thus doomed to fail as a liberating force.

For Islamist groups elsewhere it was the State that oppressed them; the State that facilitated the influx of corrupting ideas; the State that prevented the flourishing of Islam in society. In Qutb's day the State had been 'strong,' identified with a popular ideology that resonated in society. For the jihadists that succeeded him from the 1970s until the 1990s, however, the post-populist State was 'fierce,' yet lacking in ideological legitimacy. As such it seemed more vulnerable to revolution from below.

The first state in the region to reveal this vulnerability was Iran. A range of revolutionary forces, including an increasingly powerful Islamist movement, harnessed widespread resentment against the pro-Western, oppressive, corrupt Shah's regime. The ideology of the Islamic Revolution, as the revolutionary faction that was able to consolidate power after 1979 would name it, drew on indigenous Iranian sources, including a particular interpretation of Shi'i Islam. But it also reflected leftist and Third-Worldist ideas more generally, as synthesised by revolutionary Islamist intellectuals like Ali Shari'ati. Sayyid Qutb was also known among Iranian Islamist intellectuals. It was none other than Ali Khamenei, who would become supreme leader following Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, who translated his work into Persian. The Islamic Revolution was, at least in some ways, a jihadist revolution of the type Sayyid Qutb and his followers hoped to see.

In the late 1970s, and especially following the Islamist success in Iran, jihadists in the Arab world

and Iran saw themselves engaged in a common endeavour: to overthrow secular regimes and establish Islamic states. The sharp sectarian divide, as will be discussed below, came later. The revolution sparked hope for many social forces, and panic for regimes, across the Arab world. For the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated or like-minded groups, the revolution provided an opportunity for them to redouble their efforts to build an Islamic social movement and pressure regimes into cultural and legal Islamisation. For jihadists, it sent a message that regimes were vulnerable and societies ripe for revolution.

State Policies and the First Wave of Jihadism

The jihadists that planned and carried out the assassination of Anwar Sadat believed Egyptian society to be on the brink of an explosion. The 1977 'bread riots' expressed the level of social malaise Sadat's open-door (*infatih*) economic policy had generated. But Egypt did not go the way of Iran. The regime survived with a new leader, who quietly allowed the Islamist opposition to regroup and expand. Members of the Gama'a Islamiyya, one of the groups involved in Sadat's assassination, were released from prison and allowed to proselytise so long as they confined themselves to the distant backwaters of Upper Egypt (the Sa'id).

The Gama'a grew rapidly, leveraging remittances from labour migration in the Gulf (the export of people was a central element of Sadat's deindustrialisation agenda) to build a network of mosques and charities. Gulf connections also led to the progressive 'Salafisation' of jihadism. This was manifested in social mores and dress, as well as a proactive approach to enforcing correct moral behaviour in society through Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil, or *hisba*. The Wahhabi influence on jihadism would continue to grow, which helps explain the more nihilistic, anti-political direction in which jihadism was evolving.

In addition to seeking to confine jihadist activity to marginal, deprived or strategically unimportant areas far from metropolises (a strategy still employed today by the Egyptian, Yemeni, Syrian and other regimes) regimes were also happy to see jihadist activists leave the country altogether. The multilateral campaign against the Soviet Union, coterminous

with the revolution in Iran, was a crucial chapter in the global Cold War. But for Arab regimes it was a welcome distraction from the Iranian Revolution and a diversion for home-grown jihadists. An epic confrontation with a superpower and standard-bearer of communism (part of Islamism's axis of evil) in which rulers and people could unite in a common struggle would take the wind out of Khomeini's sails. Islamists of all stripes embraced the great jihad. Regimes actively facilitated the travel of their citizens to Pakistan and Afghanistan to train, assist or fight. Networks created here formed the backbone of al-Qaeda.

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State policies played a significant role in the escalation of jihadist violence, but not in a vacuum. The importance of the regional political economy was revealed by the near-simultaneous eruption of civil conflicts in Egypt and Algeria in the early 1990s. During the previous decade the collapse in oil prices led to a contraction of the economy and massive youth unemployment. In Algeria, popular discontent toward the regime rose to such a peak that the government allowed the country's main Islamist movement, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), more room for political manoeuvre. When, in a blatant example of political hubris, the regime cancelled elections FIS was set to win, some Islamist activists felt the time was right to confront the State head on. The result was the bloody civil war in which the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which would evolve into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), was born.

In Egypt, too, socioeconomic conditions played a key role in precipitating the State's renewed confrontation with jihadism in the early 1990s. The curtailment of remittance revenues led more and more inhabitants of the Sa'id, the Gama'a's stronghold, to migrate to cities, especially Cairo and Alexan-

dria. This brought the jihadist group rather too close to home from the regime's perspective and toleration tipped over into confrontation. The result, albeit on a lesser scale than in Algeria, was a civil war that rumbled on until the Gama'a's unilateral ceasefire in 1997.

To combat jihadism in the 1990s, as well as to suppress opposition of all kinds, and to help contain the social unrest caused by economic restructuring, regimes set about boosting their coercive capabilities. Egypt was particularly successful at this, channelling huge amounts of US military aid into the domestic security sector. Algeria, similarly, could draw on international assistance to boost its counterinsurgency capabilities during the civil war. Countries otherwise less affected by jihadist violence, such as Tunisia and Syria (which had, in 1982, brutally crushed its own Islamist uprising) built formidable police states to stymie even non-violent opposition. To attract foreign support, regimes pointed out the jihadists' virulently anti-Western and anti-Zionist ideologies, conveniently neglecting to acknowledge that they had articulated and encouraged such sentiments themselves.

In addition to rallying troops for an apocalyptic jihad against communism (which, along with Zionism, was considered to be part of a Jewish conspiracy against Islam), Saudi and other religious figures drew on the anti-Shi'i repertoire of Wahhabism to denigrate the revolution in Iran. They were successful in rewriting the revolution as a specifically Shi'i event, one which could not be repeated in the Sunni world, and which must be vigorously contained as an existential threat to Sunni Islam. It is important to place this sectarianism, which with the rise of ISIS has become one of the most salient features of 'third wave' jihadism, in its correct historical context. There is nothing timeless or inevitable about it. Hostility toward the Shi'a became a part of regional political discourse largely thanks to Saudi influence. The foregrounding of sectarianism in contemporary jihadism says nothing about the intolerance of Islam and everything about the influence of Wahhabism, whose identification with the oil-rich Saudi regime elevated it from marginal cult to regional and global prominence.

The Far Enemy

The 11 September 2001 attacks confirmed the shift in jihadist strategy – from attacking regimes to targeting the United States – that had been inaugurated via the embassy bombing in Tanzania and Kenya three years earlier. The operation divided the jihadist community, with many (probably most) decrying it as a strategic miscalculation. Opponents, including those 'near enemy' jihadists that were trying to make peace with their regimes (as in Egypt and Libya), feared the inevitable crackdowns that, with international blessing, would ensue. They were also dismayed at the outpouring of international sympathy for the United States, including from within their own target populations (despite what tendentious Western coverage of cheering Arab crowds suggested) that the attacks aroused. This would make it yet harder to drum up support for their cause.⁴

The crusading West was, of course, a permanent member of the Islamist axis of evil. Intellectually the shift was rationalised as striking at the 'head of the snake,' to weaken backers of the near enemies, the infidel regimes. Strategically the plan was to provoke US retaliation, which would further tarnish its image, and that of its client regimes, in the region. It would lure the US into the same Afghan trap that had ensnared the USSR and exhaust public support for propping up (infidel) authoritarian regimes.

The United States took the bait, and unknowingly helped set the stage for phase three of jihadism. The US responded in three consequential ways to meet al-Qaeda's expectations. The first was to invade Afghanistan and, two years later, Iraq, in supposed retaliation for the 9/11 attacks. The second was to launch the catch-all 'war on terror,' which George W. Bush misguidedly termed a 'crusade,' and which was couched as a 'with us or against us' struggle against jihadism. In a kind of updated Eisenhower doctrine, support was extended to any regime trying to battle a loosely defined 'terrorism.' The third response was the so-called Freedom Agenda, an attempt to supplement the hard power of military invasion with the soft power of democracy promotion.

⁴ Montasser AL-ZAYYAT, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Laden's Right-Hand Man*, London; Sterling, V.A.: Pluto Press, 2004.

The invasion of Iraq created a focal point for jihadist fighters, placed formerly dominant Sunni elites in a subordinate position vis-à-vis an ascendant, as well as overtly sectarian, Shi'i elite, and weakened the central State's ability to assert its authority over the country. This established the perfect conditions for the rise of ISIS out of the ashes of al-Qaeda in Iraq, a decade after the invasion. The War on Terror, meanwhile, further augmented the coercive resources of the region's 'fierce' states. Redoubled repression, with unprecedented international blessing, combined with deepening socioeconomic problems to increase popular discontent. The Freedom Agenda, for its part, had the unintended consequences of sharpening Arab resentment against the United States for its hypocrisy. The renewed debate on the region's democratic deficit, however, contributed to the politicisation of Arab populations in the 2000s. Pro-democracy activism dovetailed with opposition to the Iraq war, solidarity with the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation and labour activism.

The Third Wave

The US response to 9/11, in other words, helped create the conditions that led to the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011: increasingly fierce regimes, protests and resentment against the complicity of regional states in US bellicosity. Although the uprisings seemed initially to discredit jihadism, their militarisation in Libya, Yemen and of course Syria, brought jihadism to the forefront of political life. A new generation of fighters was brought into an expanding jihadist orbit, helped or facilitated by donors and supporters in the Gulf.

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ISIS has become the poster child of the third wave of jihadism. The group, which has filled a power vacuum in Iraq and Syria, engages with essentially the same

ideological canon as did those of previous waves. At the time of writing, ISIS controls some 50% of Syria and a significant part of Iraq. Its brand of rough justice, expertly converted into propaganda to inspire fear and respect, seems to exceed all others in brutality. Intellectuals sympathetic to al-Qaeda, now ISIS' main rival, quibble with the group on matters pertaining to the interpretation of scripture, or on the tactical wisdom of egregious acts of violence, particularly against fellow jihadis. But they are similar in their overall worldview, as is demonstrated by the relative ease by which pre-existing jihadist outfits, from Nigeria to Yemen, have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. ISIS uses its quasi-state authority to enforce *hisba*, the morality policing that is the hallmark of Wahhabism. The group also foregrounds sectarianism to a level beyond that to which even al-Qaeda was willing to subscribe. For ISIS the struggle against the '*rafida*,' as Shia are derogatorily termed, exceeds in importance and urgency that against the Jews in Palestine or the crusading West.

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ISIS has, however, reversed the Muslim Brotherhood order of business. Whereas the MB strategy was inside-out (from individual to society, to the State and the Caliphate) ISIS is outside-in. In June 2014, ISIS announced the formation of the Caliphate, customarily the endpoint for Islamists. It was derided across the Muslim world for such a cart-before-the-horse approach. The Caliphate has survived, however, and continued to expand as ISIS takes more and more territory and secures the allegiance of more and more '*wilayas*,' or provinces, throughout the region.

ISIS' preoccupation is not so much with toppling regimes as it is with setting up its own state on whatever territory it can acquire. This is not, however, a completely novel orientation for non-state actors in the region. More than anything it resembles the expansion of the Wahhabi movement itself in its methods, ambitions and claims to represent all of Islam. But the scale is unprecedented in the post-inde-

pendence period. Jihadist groups have tried to formalise political authority on a smaller scale: the Gama'a Islamiyya, for example, set up a short-lived 'emirate' in the Cairo suburb of Imbaba, as did the GIA in Algeria. This replicated, to some extent, existing self-help practices of those living on the margins of urban society.

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ISIS' strategy also resembles that of Fatah and the PLO in seeking a state in territories occupied in 1967, rather than waiting for the total liberation of Palestine. The theory was that such a state could then serve as a base of resistance and focus for Palestinians around the world. Closer still, given that many ISIS fighters and supporters lack all but a religious connection with Syria, is the example of Zionism, which established a state with ambiguous borders as a home for the world's Jewry. And it is not even so different to current al-Qaeda practice. In order to benefit from the new opportunities afforded by the Arab uprisings, al-Qaeda has encouraged the proliferation of Ansar al-Shari'a groups, which seek through morality policing, charity and preaching to 'prepare the ground' and structure grassroots sup-

port for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is adapting to the realities of the third phase of jihadism.

A Road not Taken?

In 2011 a leader of the Gama'a Islamiyya quipped that if al-Qaeda were allowed to operate in Egypt they would form a political party. The uprising in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country and the epicentre of political Islam, had yielded a huge dividend to Islamists of all stripes, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis and the post-revisionist jihadists of the Gama'a Islamiyya and Jihad organisations. Each of these trends established political parties and fielded candidates in elections. Salafis and jihadis wielded unprecedented influence on mainstream politics, hoping to hold the Muslim Brotherhood to its ostensible commitment to implement shari'a.

The militarisation of uprisings in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, as well as the harsh clampdown on all Islamist activity that has occurred in General al-Sisi's Egypt, have precluded any such jihadist moderation in the Middle East today. The future of jihadism is uncertain, but the curtain is unlikely to come down on Islamist militancy anytime soon. What the history of jihadism has shown, however, is that the trajectory of jihadism has not been inevitable. Contemporary political and ideological dynamics affect its evolution as much, if not more, than ideas inherited from an Islamic past. Jihadism has been no aberration, but rather a central player in modern Middle Eastern history.