

# Jihadism on Its Own Terms

UNDERSTANDING A MOVEMENT

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What, exactly, is the United States at war with in the so-called war on terror? Is it a kind of political violence, terrorism, or the ideological movement giving rise to it? How ought we to identify and conceptualize the challenge posed by such groups as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State?

In this essay I argue that the answer to these questions can be found in the very language used by the actors in question—the jihadis themselves. These are men and women who identify foremost as Muslims, seeing themselves as the true representatives of a pure and original Islam that needs to be revived. Yet they also view themselves as forming a distinct and identifiable movement, one denoted by the Arabic term *jihadi*.

To be clear, I do not mean the more common Arabic word *mujahid* (pl. *mujahideen*), meaning literally a practitioner of jihad. Unbeknown to many in the West, the jihadis in fact describe themselves not only as mujahideen but as jihadis. They are, in their own words, “the jihadis” (*al-jihadiyyun*) and their movement is “the jihadi current” (*al-tayyar al-jihadi*), “the jihadi movement” (*al-haraka al-jihadiyya*), or simply “jihadism” (*al-jihadiyya*). The more elaborate “jihadi Salafism” (*al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*) is also sometimes used.

From my vantage point as a student of Islamic history and theology, as well as a close observer of this movement, including its internal Arabic debates over law and doctrine, it is unfathomable that one would try to make sense of these people and what they do without recourse to their own terms—terms that delineate the contours of their movement.

One ought to know that in the Arabic media the jihadis are frequently discussed as such. Articles in the Arabic press refer to “the jihadis” and “jihadi Salafism,” as do leading academic publications in Arabic. Some representative titles include “Studies in Jihadi Salafism” and “Jihadi Salafism in Jordan after the Death of Zarqawi.”<sup>1</sup>

The jihadi label is indicative of a recognizable movement in modern Sunni Islam—“the jihadi movement.” The Islamic State and al-Qaeda are its principal organizational expressions, but it is far greater than the sum of these parts. Jihadism is chiefly an ideology distinguished by a particular set of ideas elaborated by a recognized body of

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All translations from the Arabic are by the author.



scholars—or ideologues, if you prefer. It is also a culture with its own poetry, music, dream interpretation, and other things.<sup>2</sup> The cardinal tenet of the jihadis is simple enough: the regimes of the Middle East are ruled by apostate unbelievers who must be overthrown and replaced with a true Islamic government. But the ideology goes deeper than this. It is a highly developed system of thought deeply rooted in certain aspects of the Islamic tradition. The jihadis are highly intolerant of Muslims who do not share their views, including other Sunni Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the tendency in the West has been to speak of the jihadis in terms other than their own. Discussion has focused on terrorists and violent extremists, or Islamists and Islamic extremists. For the most part, only academic specialists in jihadism speak of jihadis or jihadists. Some academics seem not to understand that these are legitimate terms, ones inherent to the movement itself (“endonyms,” in academic jargon). One scholar of the Middle East, for example, has claimed that “jihadism” was invented when the idea of jihad “needed to be *-ized* for an American audience” after 9/11.<sup>3</sup> He dismissed the term jihadi as “an impossible Arabic construction.”<sup>4</sup> This is sheer ignorance. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head of al-Qaeda, uses “jihadi” in one form or another more than two hundred times in his memoir *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, speaking of “the jihadis,” “the jihadi trend,” “the jihadi movement,” “jihadi action,” and “jihadi operations,” among other things.<sup>5</sup> Jihadi is a modern construction—perhaps even of Western origin—but it is by no means impossible as anyone familiar with this movement will know.

The following text aims to explain jihadism as a phenomenon in and of itself, looking carefully at the nature and contours of the movement as it has developed over time and continues to develop. This is a task that requires getting to know jihadism on its own terms, not in terms of some other framework. To begin, then, it is necessary to review some of the alternative frames of analysis—namely terrorism, violent extremism, and Islamism—and to show where they come up short.

## Terrorism

On the day they occurred, President George W. Bush described the attacks of September 11, 2001 as “evil, despicable acts of terror” and defined the struggle the United States found itself in as “the war on terrorism.”<sup>6</sup> One week later he introduced the better-known “war on terror.”<sup>7</sup> Soon the Bush administration tried out other phrases to capture the terms of the struggle, including the “global war on terrorism” (shortened to GWOT) and the “long war.” In all of these, the idea of terrorism was central.

Yet as critics were quick to point out, focusing on terrorism had its drawbacks. First of all, terrorism is not a proper adversary in the military sense. It is a violent tactic used by all sorts of actors. A country can be at war with terrorists but not with terrorism, and certainly not with terror. As the renowned military historian Michael Howard commented: “We

cannot be at war with an abstract noun.”<sup>8</sup> Terror, he went on, “is a meaningless term that may have rhetorical value for political leaders, but obscures rather than enlightens serious analysis. Our adversaries are *people*.”<sup>9</sup>

A second drawback is that terrorism is famously difficult to define and prone to politicization. While the basic meaning may be politically motivated violence carried out by non-state actors and intended to inspire fear, this is by no means a consensus view. The *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* lists some 250 definitions proposed by various researchers, governments, and organizations.<sup>10</sup> As the *Handbook* notes, the concept of terrorism has been politicized to such a degree as to be practically meaningless. It is invoked by governments to delegitimize an enemy, not accurately to describe it. As one scholar of the subject said, “*Terrorism* is often used to define reality in order to place one’s own group on a high moral plane, condemn the enemy, rally members around a cause, silence or shape policy debate, and achieve a wide variety of agendas.”<sup>11</sup> Nowhere is this truer than in the Middle East. The Bashar al-Assad regime of Syria, as is well known, refers to all its domestic opponents in the civil war as “terrorists.”

In the context of jihadism, the idea of terrorism has two other significant drawbacks. The first is that terrorism is not the jihadis’ *raison d’être*. Terrorism is merely a tactic in the jihadis’ tool-chest for achieving their larger aims, which include seizing territory and establishing a state. It does not capture what the movement is really about. Secondly, jihadis sometimes take pride in the word terrorism (translated by the Arabic *irhab*), since it occurs in the Koran in a passage about warfare. In the relevant verse (8:60), God urges the early Muslims to inspire dread in their enemies: “And make ready for them whatever force and strings of horses you can to terrify thereby the enemy of God and your enemy, and others besides them that you know not, but God knows.” Jihadis argue that Islam therefore not only allows terrorism but encourages it. The terrorist label can be worn as a badge of honor, as in a well-known jihadi poem by this title: “Yes . . . I’m a Terrorist.”<sup>12</sup> In a recent Islamic State video, a filmed fighter threatens the state of Jordan with the words, “We are coming to terrify you,” i.e., to perform terrorism (*irhab*) against you.<sup>13</sup>

## Violent Extremism

The idea of violent extremism is closely tied to the presidency of Barack Obama, but Bush administration officials were actually the first to propose it. In 2005, then defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld and national security adviser Stephen Hadley began speaking publicly of the “struggle against violent extremism,” the idea being that “war” was too militant and “terrorism” did not describe the enemy.<sup>14</sup> As George Packer observed at the time: “The war is now a struggle. The terrorist enemy is now the violent extremist enemy. The focus has shifted from a tactic to an ideology.”<sup>15</sup> The verbal shift was short-lived, however, as President Bush quickly clarified that the proper phrase was “war on terror.”<sup>16</sup> But the refocusing on ideology would remain. In his speech implicitly rejecting the change, Bush said, “Make no



mistake about it, this is a war against people who profess an ideology, and they use terror as a means to achieve their objectives.”<sup>17</sup>

Much later, the Obama administration retired “war on terror” in favor of “countering violent extremism” (CVE), bringing the United States into line with the British counterterrorist policy of “Prevent,” short for preventing violent extremism.<sup>18</sup> But what did violent extremism actually mean?

The phrase, it turns out, is as difficult to define as terrorism, from which it never really escaped association. An early Obama administration report defined “violent extremists” as “individuals who support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political goals,” which was to say terrorists. Other documents and laws similarly defined violent extremism in terms of terrorism. The Countering Violent Extremism Act of 2015 explains “violent extremism” as “ideologically motivated terrorist activities.”<sup>19</sup>

Conceptually, violent extremism suffers from vagueness. While its promoters were right to place emphasis on ideology, they were reluctant to focus on any particular ideology. As one Obama administration report put it: “Violent extremists have many motivations and are not limited to any single population, region, or ideology.”<sup>20</sup> The concept thus comprises a broad range of unsavory actors, from far-right extremists to eco-terrorists to jihadis—a one-size-fits-all approach to all sorts of unrelated bad guys. It often suggests that those drawn to violent extremism are mentally unstable, socially disconnected, or otherwise troubled or delusional. In a certain context, of course, these are important factors to consider, but by and large jihadism should not be seen as a movement of the rationally impaired. It has a logical and coherent ideology and appeals largely to the sane. It is not mindless, amorphous radicalism.

## Islamism

Those looking for the particular ideology underlying the violence of al-Qaeda and related groups have tried out numerous designations, from Islamism and radical Islam to Islamofascism. Here I will focus on “Islamism,” but the shortcoming I see is common to all of these—namely imprecision.

The English word Islamism comes from the French *islamisme*, a word first used by Voltaire in the eighteenth century as an alternative to *mahométisme*, the common term at the time for Islam. In the 1980s, *islamisme* was revived and repurposed by certain French academics as a synonym for Islamic fundamentalism; gradually, American researchers followed suit. After 9/11, the word gained traction in the American press.<sup>21</sup> Islamism, like jihadism, also appears in Arabic as an indigenized term, so that one reads in the Arabic press of “the Islamists” as one does about “the jihadis.” The two are not, however, interchangeable.

Islamism is a catchall term for a variety of modern Islamic political movements. It cannot be equated with jihadism. All jihadis are Islamists—call them jihadi Islamists—but very few Islamists are jihadis.

Islamism refers to those movements that seek to raise the political profile of Islam in some way, usually by means of “implementing the sharia,” or Islamic law. Despite agreement on this general objective, Islamists disagree widely. Most, for example, are willing to work within the framework of the modern nation-state, which usually means participating in elections. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) are examples of Sunni Islamist movements that have advanced their interests by means of the ballot box. They are also examples of the autocratic tendency of these movements, though there are also noteworthy exceptions to this. One is Tunisia’s Ennahda Party, founded in 1981 on the model of the Muslim Brotherhood. Having won a parliamentary majority in 2011, the party oversaw a peaceful transfer of power in 2014.

The basic point is that Islamism is not an undifferentiated phenomenon. Islamists range from Sunni to Shiite and from violent to nonviolent. Different Islamist groups pose different policy challenges. One need not have a favorable view of any to recognize that there is a vast difference between mainstream Islamists and jihadis. Only the jihadis deny outright the legitimacy of the state and threaten, as a matter of doctrine, unremitting violence until they have their way.

The temptation to view all Islamists as the same is a strong one, however, among some analysts on both the left and right. Often one sees the distinction being drawn between Islamism on the one hand and Islam on the other. The idea here is that Islamism is a modern political ideology that needs to be contrasted with Islam, the traditional Abrahamic religion that the Islamists are distorting and exploiting.<sup>22</sup> It is usually mentioned in this regard that Islamists seek to capture the state and impose their religious ideas on society in a way that has no precedent in traditional Islam.

To some extent this is true, but it is also true that modern political structures and basic expectations for popular representation today are wildly different than in the past. Most Muslims would not accept the Islam/Islamism distinction, and indeed the primary objective of the Islamists—implementing the sharia—enjoys broad public support. A 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that a strong majority in the Middle East and North Africa (91 percent in Iraq, 74 percent in Egypt, and 71 percent in Jordan) favor making the sharia “the official law of the land.”<sup>23</sup> Such calls for implementing the sharia will likely continue on account of the distinctive relationship between religion and politics in Islam, particularly as regards law. Princeton historian of Islam Michael Cook summarizes the historical role of the sharia thus:



One of the central commitments of Islam is to a divine monopoly of the making of law. The Shari'a is the law of God, revealed through his Prophet; it is comprehensive, covering both religious and worldly affairs; it is central to his religion . . . God's law is the only valid law . . .<sup>24</sup>

The centrality of the sharia took a major hit with the introduction of new legal norms in the nineteenth century, mostly based on Western legal codes. In the view of the Islamists, it was important to bring the sharia back. The jihadis have agreed with the Islamists on this basic principle—and a few other things as well, including the need to resurrect the caliphate one day—but not too much else.

## Jihadism

Jihadism is a discrete subset of Sunni Islamism with a unique approach to religion and politics. Indeed, jihadi identity is defined in opposition to the mainstream Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood and AKP. The jihadis consider these groups deeply flawed in creed and methodology, too tolerant of “wayward” Muslims such as Sufis, Shia, and autocratic rulers deemed heretics, and too willing to work within the structures of the state to achieve their aims. Against these flaws the jihadis set their own approach: a strict monotheism (*tawhid*) that brooks no deviation from a rigid theology and an unswerving commitment to armed struggle, or jihad, against the state and all they deem to be unbelievers. It is this “rejectionism” that is their hallmark, framed around the creed of monotheism and the methodology of jihad.

As noted above, the jihadis further distinguish themselves by their distinctive vocabulary, speaking of themselves as “the jihadis” and their movement as “the jihadi current,” *inter alia*. To give one a sense of this usage, here is a brief passage from a book by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, the famed Syrian jihadi strategist, giving a brief definition of the jihadis:

“The jihadis” or “the jihadi current” are those groups and individuals who have taken up the idea of armed jihad against the standing governments of the Arab Islamic world, or against foreign enemies, and have adopted a clearly defined ideology based on the principles of God's sovereignty (*hakimiyya*), the principles of association and dissociation (*al-wala' wa'l-bara'*), and the basics of contemporary religio-political jihadi thought as detailed and known in their writings.<sup>25</sup>

This is from al-Suri's 1,600-page tome, *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, which he finished shortly before his capture in Pakistan in 2005 and subsequent rendition to Syria. (His whereabouts today are unknown.) What is significant in these words is the self-awareness that al-Suri demonstrates, his recognition that the jihadis are a particular movement possessed of a particular system of thought that is spelled out in an established literature.

The specific ideas referred to here—*hakimiyya*, *al-wala' wa'l-bara'*, and the other “basics”—are best understood in the context of jihadism’s historical development, which al-Suri treats at length in his book.

As al-Suri writes, the modern jihadi movement can be traced to the 1960s and Egypt. A crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood beginning in the 1950s led to the emergence of radical splinters inspired by the writings of one Brotherhood leader, Sayyid Qutb. Before his execution in 1966, Qutb formulated a more exclusivist and revolutionary version of Brotherhood thought. Drawing on the ideas of the Indo-Pakistani Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, Qutb argued that modern Islamic society had reverted to *jahiliyya*, a Koranic term indicating the age of ignorance and idolatry prevailing in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Muslims had ceased to be true Muslims for failing to ascribe sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) to God. Instead, he charged, they had come to ascribe sovereignty to other humans, by engaging in such innovative practices as holding elections, forming parliaments, and passing laws not revealed by God. Qutb’s use of *hakimiyya* suggested that the regimes in the Islamic world needed to be replaced with true Islamic ones.

The mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood distanced itself from Qutb’s views, but these lived on in the splinters that emerged in the 1960s and ’70s. One such splinter was the Jihad Group, which would assassinate President Anwar Sadat in 1981 in an act that marked another important ideological turn. This was the development of a doctrine of jihad for rebelling against such rulers, a doctrine first set forth by Jihad Group leader ‘Abd al-Salam Faraj. In his short book *The Absent Duty*, Faraj articulated a legal rationale for revolutionary jihad rooted in the traditional notion of defensive jihad.

In traditional Sunni Islamic legal discourse, jihad was of two kinds, offensive jihad (*jihad al-talab*) and defensive jihad (*jihad al-daf'*). The first was understood as a collective duty; as long as some were engaged in it, the rest were exempt from it. In ideal circumstances, a caliph was to prosecute offensive jihad at least once a year for the purpose of expanding the boundaries of the faith. Defensive jihad was considered an individual duty incumbent on all able-bodied Muslims; when the realm of Islam came under external attack, all were compelled to come to the defense of the community.

Faraj presented resistance to the Egyptian government as defensive jihad, arguing that since the government did not rule by God’s law, its status was that of an infidel aggressor. He relied for this argument on a set of fatwas by the Syrian Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), who famously judged the nominally Muslim Mongol leaders invading the Middle East to be unbelievers on the grounds that they failed to rule in accordance with God’s law. Ibn Taymiyya stated that the Mongols relied not on the sharia but rather on a man-made law code known as the *Yasa*, so Muslims were compelled to resist them in defensive jihad. Faraj applied the same logic to modern Egypt, and this has been the basis for the jihadis’ violence against regional governments ever since.



The last ideological development was the adoption by the jihadis of the theological tenets of Salafism, a purist movement in Sunni Islam associated with Ibn Taymiyya and the Wahhabi movement of Arabia, which dates to the mid-eighteenth century. Salafism brought to the jihadi movement a single-minded focus on correct belief, meaning the strict and intolerant monotheism elaborated by Ibn Taymiyya and the Wahhabis. With this came the requirement of the excommunication (*takfir*) of Muslims holding views at odds with Salafi theology, as well as the requirement of dissociating from and disavowing these deviants and associating with and being loyal to true Muslims only (*al-wala' wa'l-bara'*). Al-Suri places this “salafization” of the jihadi current in the 1980s and '90s, the end result being, in his words, “the school of jihadi Salafism” (*madrasat al-salafiyya al-jihadiyya*).<sup>26</sup>

Many of the jihadi Salafis congregated in and around Afghanistan, where Arabs had traveled either to wage jihad against the Russians or to seek refuge from hostile governments. Those who passed through included some of the self-styled scholars (*'ulama'*) of jihadism, foremost among them a pair of Palestinian-Jordanians, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada al-Filastini. Al-Maqdisi's books from the 1980s and '90s were particularly influential, combining the radicalism of Qutb and Faraj with the purist dogma of Salafism. Sooner or later, al-Maqdisi and his disciples would couch their ideas in an entirely Salafi idiom, with particular reference to the most radical elements of the Wahhabi tradition.

Jihadi scholars have mostly embraced the label jihadi Salafism, though according to al-Maqdisi the term did not originate from within the movement. “We did not give ourselves this name,” he said in an interview before proceeding to use it repeatedly to describe his thinking: “Jihadi Salafism is a current that combines the call to monotheism in its totality with jihad for this end . . . Or, say, it is a current that strives to actualize monotheism by waging jihad against the false gods [i.e., apostate rulers].”<sup>27</sup> Other scholars in the movement embraced the term emphatically. One penned an essay in 2003 titled, “Why Jihadi Salafism?” urging his readers to “join the caravan, take the path of jihadi Salafism! Be Salafi in creed, jihadi in methodology.”<sup>28</sup>

Jihadi Salafism provided the framework within which terrorism against the West was theorized and justified. Plots such as 9/11 were conceived as part of the great plan to remove the region's “apostate” rulers, perceived as propped up by the United States. For al-Qaeda, founded in the late 1980s by the Saudi Osama bin Laden, attacking the United States was a necessary step in the direction of achieving local rule. The Islamic State and its forerunners, however, had a different strategy. Less interested in the “far enemy,” they intended to establish God's rule on earth sooner rather than later.

### Jihadism Divided

The jihadi movement had seemed a rather united one before the rise of the Islamic State in 2013. Organizationally, al-Qaeda looked to be in charge, commanding broad support in the



movement and controlling local branches from North Africa to Yemen. In terms of religious authority, al-Maqqdisi and his associates ran an influential website publishing books and fatwas that seemed to speak with one voice. Yet tensions had built up in jihadism over the past two decades, and when they surfaced they quickly tore the movement asunder.

The split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State that began in 2014 was anticipated by earlier disputes among the jihadis. The Afghan Arabs of the 1990s were beset by similar doctrinal divisions. As one jihadi veteran of the period recalled, some of the youthful Afghan Arabs took a harder Salafi line than their elders, considering the surrounding Afghans who did not adhere to the tenets of Salafism to be polytheists. They even deemed the Taliban—because of their non-Salafi creed, their tolerance of certain devotional practices around gravesites, and their engagement with international institutions such as the United Nations—beyond the pale. Sometimes this group of young zealots was known as “the School of Jalalabad.”<sup>29</sup> Al-Qaeda was opposed to this absolute narrowing of the boundaries of the faith, advocating instead a more ecumenical approach that downplayed doctrinal differences among Muslims.

This basic divide would reappear in the first decade of the 2000s, this time in Iraq. Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian Afghan Arab and onetime follower of al-Maqqdisi with a rigid doctrinal bent, headed the group that became al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. Despite giving fealty to al-Qaeda, Zarqawi was at odds with it in several ways. His greater doctrinal severity meant he saw the Iraqi Shia as polytheists, and he set out to stoke Sunni-Shiite civil war through acts of mass sectarian violence. Al-Qaeda protested and chided Zarqawi, but the latter defended his approach and defied al-Qaeda’s orders.<sup>30</sup>

The same issues of theology and violence resurfaced a few years later, when the Islamic State of Iraq, the successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq founded just after Zarqawi’s death in 2006, announced its expansion to Syria in spring 2013. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its leader, proclaimed that the Islamic State of Iraq was now the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, intending to incorporate the Syrian jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra. The expansion precipitated a split with al-Qaeda when Zawahiri instructed Baghdadi to stay in Iraq and leave Syria alone. Baghdadi claimed that Zawahiri had no authority over the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham—and never had.

The next year Baghdadi announced the return of the caliphate, retitling his group the Islamic State and asserting global jurisdiction over all the world’s Muslims. When the United States and its allies began an air campaign to roll back the group in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State responded with a strategy of terrorist retaliation. Indeed, a majority of the group’s terrorist acts in the West have been cast as retaliation for air strikes.

Most of the world’s jihadis rallied to the flag of the Islamic State as against al-Qaeda, though the latter has remained a more durable rival than some predicted. In 2014 and 2015, the



rift between the two groups grew only deeper. With the Islamic State's increasing levels of violence, some of it directed against al-Qaeda itself, Zawahiri—along with many jihadi scholars—denounced the Islamic State as extremists, or Kharijites, in reference to an early radical sect in Islam. Responding in kind, the Islamic State branded al-Qaeda and its supporters “the Jews of jihad.” The divide had become unbridgeable.

### **Jihadism “Fracturing”**

Soon there emerged yet another rift in the jihadi movement, this time concerning the al-Qaeda wing in Syria. In July 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, formally renounced ties to al-Qaeda in an effort to placate other rebel groups and unify with the larger Islamist opposition. The move was choreographed, with some al-Qaeda leaders expressing their support and urging the Syrians to do what was necessary to strengthen the jihad. But hardliners within Jabhat al-Nusra quickly jumped ship, perceiving a betrayal of al-Qaeda and what it stood for. In particular, they opposed outreach to non-jihadi Islamist groups, especially as some of those groups received financial support from states considered heretical, such as Turkey and Qatar.

In early 2017, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who had remained a supporter of al-Qaeda and become a staunch opponent of the Islamic State, started heaping abuse on the latest incarnation of Jabhat al-Nusra, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which formed in January. In a series of diatribes online he accused HTS of “diluting” the principles of monotheism by making light of such issues as the excommunication of secular rulers, particularly Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan. For al-Maqdisi, the excommunication of such rulers was nonnegotiable. HTS responded by saying it was a complicated issue admitting of differences of opinion.<sup>31</sup>

Al-Maqdisi fumed, complaining that the influence of “the diluters” in HTS had grown and asserting that breaking ties with al-Qaeda was a mistake. In a written exchange with an HTS religious scholar in February, he claimed that the separation had not been carried out in good faith. Jabhat al-Nusra, he claimed, had deceived him into believing it would be superficial and had the support of Zawahiri's deputies. But as it turned out, he said, the split came to be real; Zawahiri, who had never approved of it in the first place, was against it.

In sum, Jabhat al-Nusra, in trying to broaden its appeal in Syria, distanced itself from the more exclusionary aspects of jihadi ideology and likely ended things with al-Qaeda on a bad note.

These changes prompted reflection from other thinkers in the jihadi universe, including al-Maqdisi's ally in Jordan, Abu Qatada al-Filastini. In a searching fatwa in March, Abu Qatada said that what was happening in Syria was only the beginning. “Believe me, there are going to be more changes within the [jihadi] current,” he wrote, predicting that the movement would see further “fracturing” in the coming years. “The jihadi current has long

vacillated between partial openness and isolation,” he opined, and the former tendency, in the form of HTS, seemed to be advancing.

A lower-profile jihadi writer offered an even more insightful take on the accumulating divisions in jihadism. In his view, HTS and the Islamic State were both representative of what he called the “neo-jihadis” (*al-jihadiyyun al-judud*). Each was departing from the center of the current but in the opposite direction. Each defied and ultimately abandoned al-Qaeda, the one choosing the path of extremism, the other the path of dilution.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, as the choice of terminology here suggests, the divisions in jihadism remain a family affair. Their doctrinal and strategic differences aside, all jihadis still look to Osama bin Laden as a model leader and source of inspiration. As far as the United States is concerned, neither breakaway tendency—extremism or dilution—bodes well for national security.

### Countering Jihadism

Jihadism cannot, and must not, be confused with Islam at large. Nor should it be conflated with the greater phenomenon of Islamism. It is, as I have tried to show, a distinct movement, one not only discernable but also conscious and even proud of its separateness. Though the jihadis now admit of divisions—and these appear to be multiplying—jihadism still poses a unique and pressing challenge. It is revolutionary, sustained by ideological fervor, and has witnessed tremendous growth over the past decade and a half.

In terms of its numerical following, jihadism’s progress is truly astonishing. On 9/11 al-Qaeda may have had a membership in the hundreds; according to one scholar, there were only some 150 members in the Afghanistan region.<sup>33</sup> During the Bush and Obama presidencies, by contrast, the number of al-Qaeda members and other jihadis surged. Whether the policy was “war on terror” and greater American military involvement in the Middle East, or “a new beginning” with the Islamic world and less American involvement in the region, jihadism was on the rise. Thousands upon thousands of fighters from across the world went to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and though many have died the jihadi movement continues to grow.

Exact numbers are difficult to gauge, but the adherents to jihadism run easily into the tens of thousands, being concentrated in the Arab states. This includes thousands who choose not to take up arms at this very moment, preferring to bide their time or play a supporting role from home. In Jordan, for example, a country of some eight million people, the jihadi Salafi community has been estimated at between six thousand and eight thousand.<sup>34</sup> The country also hosts some of the world’s most influential jihadi ideologues, including al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, who live openly and write prolifically online. Most Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, are much less tolerant of their jihadi populations, which makes estimating their numbers more difficult.



If countering jihadism is *the* American priority in the Middle East, this requires strengthening relations with neighboring Sunni powers—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey in particular—and working with them to create better, more durable political conditions in the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. The perception is widespread in these areas, and in the broader Sunni Arab community, that Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East—in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—constitutes a bid for regional hegemony at the expense of Sunni power. The jihadis have done well to exploit this sense of disenfranchisement; incidentally, the recently struck nuclear deal with Iran confirms Sunni perceptions of an American tilt in Iran’s favor.

There is no silver bullet in the struggle against jihadism in the Middle East. It promises to be long, with more twists and turns to come. But the necessary starting point should be to understand the enemy on its own terms.

## NOTES

1 Akram Hijazi, *Dirasat fi 'l-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya* (Cairo: Madarat lil-Abhath wa'l-Nashr, 2013); Hasan Abu Haniyya and Muhammad Abu Rumman, *al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya fi 'l-Urdun ba'da maqtal al-Zarqawi* (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2009).

2 See Thomas Hegghammer, ed., *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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## *The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order*

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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