

THE GLOBAL JIHADI THREAT

MODULE 4: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

NADAV MORAG
CENTER FOR HOMELAND DEFENSE AND SECURITY
DEPT. OF NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS
NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

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The Global Jihadi Threat

Module 4: The Development of Islamic Extremism: From Abd al-Wahhab to Bin Laden

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Introduction

This module will focus on the development of Islamic extremism as well as some of the approaches of different groups of Muslim radicals.

At the end of the previous module, we dealt with the importance of honor in Islamic societies. The advantage to adopting the Islamic Fundamentalist option, as opposed to those advocated by the Reformists and the Westernizers, was that it reinforced the flagging sense of honor among Muslims faced with the reality of Western power and their own obvious weakness in the face of it.

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Fundamentalist Principles

The basic argument held by the Fundamentalists was not that Islam was outdated and had to be reinterpreted or largely thrown out, but rather that the true, authentic Islam, had been diluted and corrupted through the introduction of new ideas and practices over the centuries. Recall that Innovation (Bid'a) is a negative concept in Islam. One of the primary results for the dilution and corruption of the true faith over the years, according to Fundamentalists, was that it had caused Muslims to fall out of God's favor and consequently God had allowed the Western Infidels to temporarily triumph over Muslims.

It was not that Muslims and Islam were in some way flawed, but rather that Muslims had been lead astray by corrupt rulers and ulemma. It was therefore not necessary for Muslims to admit that there were defects in their fundamental beliefs – which affected their fundamental sense of themselves and their honor – but rather only to recognize that they had been led astray and needed to return to their original, pristine faith and moral conventions. Rather than accepting modernization, and certainly Westernization, Muslims needed to return to their own roots to realize the greatness and superiority of their own civilization and thus regain their lost honor.

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Wahhabism

The phenomenon of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism can be traced, at least in part, to the rise of the preacher Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Eighteenth Century Arabia. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab viewed the growing weakness of the Ottoman Empire (of which the Najd region from which he hailed was a nominal part), as a product of what he considered the moral corruption and impiety of Ottoman rulers and Ottoman society. He developed a set of religious doctrines that broke with the traditional, institutionalized Sunni Islam of the Empire. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab claimed that the identity, livelihood and very life of the Muslim could not be secure unless he not only advocated a belief in one God (based on the traditional Islamic principle of Tawheed – the unity of God), but also actively worked to deny any other object of worship (by force, if necessary). This idea represented an innovation in Islam as it had never been part of the traditional Islamic concept of Tawheed. Moreover, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab argued that: 1) ritual is superior to intentions, 2) the dead may not be revered as this may threaten the principle of the singularity and uniqueness of God and 3) that the Prophet and saints cannot be the vehicle for prayer to God.¹ The third concept was taken from the ideas of the fourteenth century jurist Ibn Tamiyya, who considered intercessory prayers to be a form of polytheism, despite the fact that previous generations of Muslims had made it their practice and the Prophet himself had condoned this. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's followers also developed an anthropomorphic perception of God, despite the fact that ascribing a human form to God was considered scandalously heretical in traditional Islam.² Ibn Abd al-Wahhab also developed a series of innovations in the method of prayer, frowned upon the practice of making pilgrimage to Mecca (known as the Haj, and constituting one of the five pillars of Islam) and condemned traditional forms of festivities as well as all forms of music. While Ibn Abd al-Wahhab called for a return to the fundamentals of Islam that existed during the time of the Prophet and demanded that

¹ Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: Saudi Fundamentalism and its Role in Terrorism* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 76.

² *Ibid.*, 77.

all Muslim men grow beards (in emulation of the Prophet), he also actively downgraded the status of the Prophet (believing that too much admiration for the Prophet threatened the principle of Tawheed). Upon capturing Mecca and Medina, he allegedly destroyed the Prophet Muhammad's grave as well as those of saints. The practice of visiting tombs of prominent religious figures, incidentally, was and is a time-honored custom among Muslims, as it is among many Christians and Jews.

While Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers can thus be considered fundamentalists in their desire to return to what they viewed as the original form of Islam of the time of the Prophet uncorrupted by innovations (Bid'a) added on by subsequent generations; in fact, Wahhabists were recreating Islam in their image and introducing an entire corpus of innovations to the faith in the name of the so-called return to the roots of Islam.

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Wahhabism: Principles

Wahhabism, like other fundamentalist movements, accepted only the Quran and the Sunna (which consists of, as noted earlier, the Hadith – sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet, and the Sira – life story of the Prophet). Wahhabists and other fundamentalists reject the Tafsir (which consists of commentary and analysis of the Quran and Hadith) as well as the Ij'ma (consensus), a body of rulings made by subsequent generations of Islamic jurists as innovations that have corrupted the purity of Islam. Traditional Muslims, on the other hand, view the Quran, Sunna, Tafsir and Ij'ma all as essential texts of the faith and Islamic way of life.

Wahhabism also rejected the use of critical thinking (Ijtihad), something that had been part and parcel of traditional Islam, as well as the use of allegorical interpretations of the Quran, demanding the believers not be “distracted” by individual reflection and simply obey divine commandments in their entirety in the most literal way.

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Wahhabism: Claims

Perhaps most importantly, at least for our purposes, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and subsequent followers of his or similar fundamentalist creeds, made two additional claims which were also unprecedented in Islam. Firstly, these fundamentalists claimed that they had the right to excommunicate any Muslim (in other words, to declare that individual an apostate). The principle of excommunication in Islam is known as Takfir and is traditionally considered to be an extremely grave act that can only be employed in a very limited and restricted manner. The Quran enjoins Muslims to accept at face value the profession of faith and

allow God, when judging individuals after their death, to determine the true sincerity of one's faith.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, on the other hand, claimed for himself and his followers the right to liberally employ the tool of Takfir in what was perhaps the most odious of the innovations that he introduced in the name of a return to the "original" Islam. What this meant in practice was that Wahhabis sat in judgment of other Muslims and pronounced those who did not buy in to their philosophy and innovations to the faith apostates. As apostates are usually deemed worthy of death in Islam, it is not surprising that Wahhabis mercilessly slaughtered men, women and children who did not practice the puritanical form of Islam that they advocated.

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Wahhabism: Relations

Wahhabis thus, in effect, declared a Jihad of the Sword against fellow Sunni Muslims. With respect to the Shi'a, the Wahhabis were even harsher and, when in 1801, Wahhabis sacked the Shi'a holy city of Karbala in Iraq, they massacred thousands of its inhabitants and destroyed the tomb of the Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet and a figure universally revered by the Shi'a.

Subsequent generations of radical fundamentalists have also viewed their contemporary co-religionists largely as apostates because they did not follow the specific practices and doctrines preached by the fundamentalists. Moreover, subsequent generations of extremists not only denied the validity of the Islam practiced by the overwhelming majority of Muslims, they also claimed that contemporary Christians and Jews were following corrupted versions of Christianity and Judaism and hence were not worthy of the second-class, but protected status afforded these "People of the Book" (Ahl al-Khittab) during and immediately following the Prophet's time.

In sum then, radical fundamentalists reserved the right to de-legitimize anyone and justify the waging of Jihad to the death against them.

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Contemporary Wahhabism

The Wahhabist doctrines may have ultimately died out had they not formed the basis for the legitimacy of the contemporary Saudi kingdom: which not only controls the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, but also employs its vast oil wealth in order to proselytize and propagate the creed of Wahhabism. Saudi efforts to promote Wahhabist teachings and

ideas have made Wahhabist ideas available to a broad audience throughout the Sunni world. For the Saudis, this serves the dual purpose of propagating the creed to which they adhere and which forms the religious and ethical underpinning of their rule and also to strengthen their political influence throughout the Islamic world – particularly in the face of an aggressive Islamic Republic of Iran which has also made significant efforts to portray itself as a global Islamic leader.³

Incidentally, the followers of Wahhabist doctrines reject the term “Wahhabi,” which is generally used by the detractors of this ideology, preferring the term “Salafist” (from the Arabic – Salaf, which means “ancient ones” or “pious forefathers” and refers to the first three generations of Muslims, who are considered to have lived an exemplary life).⁴

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Twentieth Century Fundamentalism

Just as Salafist ideas developed in reaction to Western encroachment in the Islamic world and the weakness of the primary Islamic empire of the time, that of the Ottomans, radical Islamic thinkers in the twentieth century, were also reacting both to perceived Western encroachment and to the perceived weakness of contemporary Muslim states.

By the middle decades of the twentieth century, European rule over the core regions of Islam in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia was giving way to independent Arab states and to an independent Pakistan. These states however, were established along European-influenced lines (indeed, their very existence as independent nation-states was based on the ideology of nationalism – which is a European concept and not indigenous to the Middle East).

Islamist thinkers such as the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and the Pakistani, Maulana Maududi (1903-1979), argued that the modernizing values of the new nationalist elites running these countries were illegitimate and that Islam should be the sole standard for behavior and values among Muslims. Qutb rejected the legitimacy of all post-independence Muslim states and declared that their populations and leaders were living in a state of Jahiliyya (a Quranic concept which describes the state of ignorance, or barbarism, in which the Arabian peoples existed before the arrival of Islam). In Qutb’s estimation, the Muslims

³ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 73, 119-120.

⁴ Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 157.

living in newly-independent states were ignorant of Islam and, just like the pagan Arabs of the days of the original Jahiliyya, they worshiped false idols.⁵ During Qutb's time, those false idols were the nation-state, modernism, Western ideas and the new leaders of these nation-states, many of whom, like Egyptian leader Jamal Abdul Nasser, were busy creating their own cults of personality.

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Qutb and Jihad

Qutb also preached the doctrine of a violent Jihad as a kind of permanent revolution against enemies (both domestic and foreign) who tried to commandeer the ultimate sovereignty of God. This Islamic doctrine of divine sovereignty, known as Hakimiyya, is based on the principle that all authority over mankind belongs to God and God alone and this means that human rulers can only govern legitimately provided they follow the letter of Islamic law (Shari'a) and do not introduce any "non-Islamic" innovations. Qutb viewed Jihad of the Sword as an intrinsic (and permanent) part of the faith necessary to prevent an unending chain of human usurpers from trying to prevent the establishment of divine authority on earth.⁶

For his efforts, Qutb was hanged by Nasser in 1966, both for the views that he espoused as well as for his membership in the banned al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (The Society of Muslim Brothers, more commonly known as the Muslim Brotherhood).

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The Muslim Brotherhood

In 1928, Egyptian schoolteacher and political activist Hassan al-Bannah formed the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's thinking was similar to that of other Muslim revivalists in that it believed that only a return to a more pristine and original form of Islam would restore the lost greatness of the Umma (Islamic community) and drive out the Christian powers – Egypt at that time, while nominally independent, was heavily dominated by Britain. The credo of the Ikhwan (Brotherhood) is: "God is our objective, the Quran is our Constitution, the Prophet is our leader, Jihad is our way, and death for the sake of God is the highest of our aspirations."

⁵ Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam*, 25.

⁶ Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4-5.

The Brotherhood's ideas proved popular and many Muslim Brotherhood chapters were opened in other Arab countries. While the Brotherhood espoused fundamentalist Muslim ideas such as Jihad and the re-creation of an Islamic Empire and Caliphate, they did not, like Qutb, consider the general population to be living in a state of Jahiliyya, nor did they go even farther, as did the Salafists, and advocate the unrestrained application of Takfir (excommunication) towards the general population. Consequently, the Brotherhood's views were comparatively more moderate, though, of course, still very much within the camp of Islamic extremism. Over time, the Brotherhood largely abandoned the call to violence, at least within their own societies, and adopted the view that social and political activism were the key to achieving power in the individual Arab and Islamic states in order to re-establish divine authority.

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Islamism vs. Jihadism

The Muslim Brotherhood thus helped create what is now known as Political Islam or Islamism. There is no real consensus as to what this concept implies and how it differs from traditional Islam (since Islam was always "political" in the sense that it is a holistic system of life, including governance, rather than just a religious faith). Nevertheless, today, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and its various offshoots focus on activities akin to those of grassroots political parties and associations that work within existing political systems and existing nation-states in order to transform them (in principle, either by peaceful, evolutionary means or by violent revolutionary means - though the Egyptian Brotherhood is currently focused on the former rather than the latter). While the long-term goal may still be the revival of the Caliphate, the focus is most decidedly on obtaining control within existing states and establishing theocratic regimes based entirely on the Shari'a. Although it is Shi'a, and the Muslim Brothers are Sunni, the Islamic Republic of Iran represents a Shi'a version of the Islamist state.

However, not all Islamic extremist groups agree with the Islamist approach focused on the state and political and social activism. Part of the reason that the Jihadists do not A more universalist-oriented segment of the extremist community, which we will term Jihadists, rejects the more narrow (though more politically pragmatic) state-oriented approach of the Islamists, in favor of the immediate demand for a revival of the Islamic Empire and Caliphate over all of the present and past "Islamic lands." accept the Islamist approach is that they themselves are usually outcasts from their own countries and societies and form a kind of international cadre of committed extremists following Salafist ideas. Many of these Jihadists began their militant careers as Islamists, but, with the failure of Islamist attempts to take power in Egypt (with the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981), Algeria (following the 1991 elections) and elsewhere, they gravitated towards the Afghan Jihad and became Jihadists.

Such was the case with the former Muslim Brother, Ayman al-Zawahiri, chief ideologue of Al-Qaeda.

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The Afghan Jihad

The contemporary Jihadist movement which spawned Al-Qaeda and similar groups became a major element within the Islamic extremist community as a result of the Jihad in Afghanistan carried out in the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion of that country.

The Soviet invasion, initially designed to prop up a Marxist Afghan government that was in danger of collapse, enraged much of the Muslim world and strengthened popular support for Jihad against the “Godless” Soviet Union through combat in Afghanistan.

New recruits for the Jihad began arriving in Afghanistan almost immediately with the support of Pakistan and the United States and included fighters from many Arab countries and students of Deobandi madrassas (religious seminaries) - The Deobandis are a Pakistani Salafist movement.

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Abdullah Azzam

In 1984, Palestinian Salafist Abdullah Azzam moved to Peshawar, Pakistan and formed the Maktab al-Khidamat (Bureau of Services) to assist foreign Mujahideen (Muslim fighters in the Jihad). Azzam claimed that fighting or providing material support for the Jihad in Afghanistan was a religious requirement for every individual Muslim (Fard 'Ayn) and, in keeping with the more extremist stream in Islam, he insisted that Jihad of the Sword was, in fact, a fundamental pillar of the faith. Though he was a Palestinian, Azzam was not an Islamist (unlike members of Hamas, who are Islamists), but rather a Jihadi who favored a global struggle for Islam rather than a more narrow struggle for an Islamic Palestine.

Azzam tried to inculcate recruits for the Jihad with the desire to die in battle and repeatedly quoted the single Hadith in which the Prophet promises the Shahid absolution from all sins, seventy-two beautiful virgins and permission to bring seventy members of his family with him into Paradise.⁷

⁷ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 69.

Azzam also believed that the growing international cadre of Mujahideen he was helping to assemble would act as a strike force promoting the cause of Jihad universally and not only in Afghanistan.

Azzam's plans were bolstered by the arrival of hardcore activists from the Arab world, particularly from Egypt, such as the former Muslim Brother and former leading figure in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization, Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as from the wealth and business acumen of the Saudi millionaire Osama Bin Laden – both of whom were in place in Peshawar by the mid-1980s.

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The Birth of Al-Qaeda

In February 1989, the Soviet Union withdrew its forces from Afghanistan thus effectively bringing to an end the Afghan Jihad (though a pro-Soviet government was left in Kabul to continue, for a time, the hopeless struggle against the Mujahideen). With the Afghan Jihad effectively over, militants largely returned to their countries of origin and it seemed that Jihadism would give way to Islamism in the individual countries to which the “Afghans” (as the veterans of the Afghan Jihad were known) returned.

Moreover, the prominent ideologue of Jihadism, Abdullah Azzam, died later that year (November 1989) in a mysterious car bombing. Some attribute his assassination to his hesitancy to shift the focus of the Jihadi movement towards an all-out war with the West.

It was thus left to his successors, al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden to try and re-energize the Jihadi movement by shifting focus from the Soviet enemy to the American one. In fact, both men had already been lobbying for this change in focus as the Afghan Jihad wound down. In February 1988, Bin Laden announced the creation of the so-called “World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” known more commonly today as Al Qaeda (the base). As a result of their efforts, hatred of the West, and particularly the United States, which al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden viewed as the “head of the snake,” would lead them to plan and execute terrorist attacks against the United States worldwide capped by the unprecedented, tragic attack on September 11, 2001.

Finally, following the US overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, both these countries became focal points for the new Jihad, that against the West.

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The Jihadi Challenge

Subsequent American and international efforts to crack Jihadist networks have led to a fragmentation of this extremist community. Unfortunately, this fragmentation will not necessarily result in a reduced terrorism threat. Since Jihadists do not view their power as being based on popular support and, unlike most Islamists, do not have clear political goals or an articulated agenda, the fact that their movement has atomized does not necessarily pose an insurmountable problem.

For the Jihadists, the true goal is to die whilst fighting the Jihad.⁸ Though they espouse amorphous political aims such as the “re-Islamization” of the Islamic world, the ejection of the Western presence in Saudi Arabia, the destruction of Israel and the revival of the Caliphate, Jihadists have not taken any concrete steps to achieve any of these goals. Somewhat similar to the Anarchists of nineteenth century Russia, the Jihadists are focused on the act of violence itself, not as a means to an end, but rather as an end in and of itself.

The implication here then is that political dialogue and concessions will have no real effect on them. For the Jihadists, violent Jihad is the essential *raison d’etre*. Moreover, Jihadists have been very good at feeding on and channeling the personal frustration of their adherents in the direction of violence and destruction. This reality thus poses a serious security challenge for Western countries, particularly as Jihadist movements work not only to encourage attacks emanating from Muslim countries, but also work to recruit disaffected Muslim youth residing in Western countries (who are perfectly placed to attack the vulnerable “underbelly” of Western societies).

The challenge of coping with Muslim communities in the West is thus not only social and cultural, but has profound security implications. This will be the topic of our next and final module in the series.

⁸ Brian M. Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Santa Monica: The RAND Corporation, 2006), 77.

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References

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Closing Credits

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