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Hudson Institute

Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World



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Prophecy and the Jihad in the Indian Subcontinent

By Husain Haqqani

AL-QAEDA AND THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND AL-SHAM (ISIS) ARE competing with each other for recruitment on the South Asian subcontinent. As has been the case in other regions where radical Islamists have congregated (including Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria), jihadi recruitment in the region covering Pakistan, India and Bangladesh is aided by competing claims of divine support.

Radical Islamists invoke the Hadith (the oral traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad) to prophesize a great battle in India between true believers and unbelievers before the end-times. These references in the Hadith to the Ghazwa-e-Hind (Battle of India) infuse South Asia with importance as a battleground in the efforts to create an Islamic caliphate resembling the social order that existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly Guided Caliphs (632-661 AD).

The South Asian region has a long history with jihadi movements, dating back to the eighteenth century. During the 1980s, it became the staging ground for global jihad as part of the internationally-backed guerilla war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. At the time, radical Islamists poured into Afghanistan through Pakistan and received advanced military training to fight the Soviets. Later, many returned to their home countries to conduct terrorist attacks. The rise

of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Pakistan-backed insurgency in Kashmir against India also stoked jihadism in the region.

The first generation of al-Qaeda commanders and ideologues were veterans of the anti-Soviet Afghan war. ISIS, too, has been influenced greatly by the so-called Arab-Afghans and their disciples. During the war against the Soviets and the ensuing Taliban rule, ancient prophecies of Khurasan—which includes modern Afghanistan—resurfaced to inspire jihadists and promise great heavenly rewards. These prophecies foreshadowed the appearance of the Mahdi or Messiah and the final battle between good (pure Islam) and evil before judgement day. According to one Hadith, an army with black flags would emerge from Khurasan to help the Mahdi establish his caliphate at Mecca.

This was not the first time that the Khurasan Hadith had been cited to mobilize Muslim soldiers. Sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad were often transmitted orally; formal written compilations did not emerge until more than a century after his death in 632 AD. This made it possible for rulers and commanders to conveniently cite the Hadith to justify political decisions or advance battle plans. The Hadith describing an army from the east wielding a black flag was used by the Abbasids to orchestrate their revolt against the ruling Umayyad dynasty in 747 AD. At the time, Abbasid partisan Abu Muslim organized an army with black flags in Khurasan to march east on Damascus.

Like most medieval prophecies, the Islamic ones also comprise metaphorical statements open to interpretation. One Hadith instructs true believers to join the nation from the east with black flags “even if you have to crawl over ice.”¹ Another says, “Armies carrying black flags will come from Khurasan, no power will be able to stop them and they will finally reach Eela (the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem) where they will erect their flags.”² This prediction of final victory was a convenient recruitment tool for al-Qaeda when it was firmly established in Khurasan during the Taliban era.

Prophecies attributed to the Prophet Muhammad were also an important part of jihadist propaganda during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Radical Islamists cited the Hadith about a war on the banks of the Euphrates over a mountain of gold that would portend the rise of Dajjal (representing evil) and the emergence of the Mahdi. The Mahdi’s defeat of Dajjal is believed by many Muslims to be the final sign of the day of judgement. The prospect of joining the final battle against evil before the end of the world served as an incentive for many believers to take up jihad. It was not difficult for clerics to suggest that the reference to the “mountain of gold” was a metaphor for Iraq’s oil reserves.

ISIS shares the stated desire of all Islamist groups to replicate the social order

of Islam's pristine era, the time of the Prophet Muhammad and of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs that followed him. Soon after declaring himself the modern-day caliph, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi named the provinces of his caliphate after the provinces of the early caliphate. These provinces, or wilayats, consist of Algeria (wilayat al-Jazair), Libya (wilayat al-Barqah, wilayat al-Tarabulus and wilayat al-Fizan), Sinai (wilayat Sinai), Saudi Arabia (wilayat al-Haramayn), Yemen (wilayat al-Yaman) and Afghanistan-Pakistan (wilayat Khurasan). ISIS propaganda often speaks of defeating the West while referring to it as *Rum*, the historic Arab name for the Roman Empire.

Reverting to historic names for Muslim countries summons Muslim pride for Islam's early conquests, when inspired Arabs went forth from the cities of Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Peninsula to create a vast caliphate incorporating parts of the erstwhile Persian and Roman empires. Invoking the Hadith and pronouncements from Islam's earliest period foreshadows the resurrection of Islam's lost glory; in addition to seeking reward in the hereafter, young Muslims are motivated to fight battles and seek victories that were ostensibly foretold fourteen centuries earlier by the Prophet.

WHILE MUCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST FELL UNDER MUSLIM RULE during the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Muslims had to wait for several centuries before expanding their conquest to the Indian subcontinent. The Hadith predicting the great battle for India is often referred to as the Ghazwa-e-Hind Hadith, various versions of which have been recycled each time a Muslim leader or would-be conqueror attempted to raise an army to invade India.³

In one version of the Hadith, attributed to Thawban, a freed slave of the Prophet Muhammad, "[t]he Messenger of Allah said: 'there are two groups of my Ummah whom Allah will free from the Fire: The group that invades India, and the group that will be with Isa bin Maryam, peace be upon him.'"⁴ Isa bin Maryam is the Quranic name of Jesus, whose return to earth alongside the Mahdi is held in Islamic tradition to be a seminal event of the end of time.

In another version, narrated by Abu Hurairah, one of the companions of Prophet Muhammed, "[t]he Messenger of Allah promised us that we would invade India. If I live to see that, I will sacrifice myself and my wealth. If I am killed, I will be one of the best of the martyrs, and if I come back, I will be Abu Hurairah Al-Muharrar."⁵ Al-Muharrar translates as "the one freed from the fire of hell." In another version from Abu Hurairah, warriors "headed towards Sindh & Hind" were promised the reward of worldly success and freedom from Hell.⁶ Abu Hurairah quoted the

Prophet Muhammad as saying, “[d]efinitely, one of your troops would do a war with Hindustan. Allah would grant success to those warriors, as far as they would bring their kings by dragging them in chains. And Allah would forgive those warriors (by the Blessing of this Great War). And when those Muslims would return, they would find Isa Ibn Maryam [Jesus] in Syria.”

Just as the prophecies of Khurasan became popular during the wars in Afghanistan, the Ghazwa-e-Hind divinations became a staple of the Islamist discourse after the launch of jihad in Indian-controlled parts of Kashmir in 1989. Pakistani official media also encouraged discussion of the Ghazwa-e-Hind Hadith to motivate jihadists throughout the 1990s. In fact, every major Pakistan-based jihadi group that launched terrorist attacks across the border claimed that their operations were part of the Battle for India promised by the Prophet. For these Pakistani groups, supported by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the target of jihad should be the modern state of India and its “occupation” of Kashmir.

For example, Lashkar-e-Taiba has often spoken of Ghazwa-e-Hind as a means of liberating Kashmir from Indian control. Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, the group’s founder, has declared repeatedly that “[i]f freedom is not given to the Kashmiris, then we will occupy the whole of India including Kashmir. We will launch Ghazwa-e-Hind. Our homework is complete to get Kashmir.”⁷ Pakistani propagandist Zaid Hamid has also repeatedly invoked Ghazwa-e-Hind as a battle against Hindu India led from Muslim Pakistan. According to Hamid, “Allah has destined the people of Pakistan” with victory and “Allah is the aid and helper of Pakistan.”⁸

SEVERAL ISLAMIC SCHOLARS, ESPECIALLY FROM INDIA, HAVE QUESTIONED THE veracity of the Ghazwa-e-Hind Hadith and reject its repeated contemporary citation as “Pakistani terrorists’ anti-India propaganda.” According to Maulana Waris Mazhari of the Darul Uloom Deoband seminary in Uttar Pradesh, India, the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir was not jihad; the dream of establishing “Muslim hegemony throughout the entire world” was fanciful. “The term *ghalba-e Islam*, the establishment of the supremacy of Islam, used in the context of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith), refers not to any political project of Muslim domination,” Mazhari wrote, “but, rather, to the establishment of the superiority of Islam’s ideological and spiritual message.”⁹

Mazhari pointed out that “the statement attributed to the Prophet regarding the Ghazwa-e-Hind is found in only one of the *Sihah Sitta*, the six collections of Hadith reports of the Sunni Muslims—in the collection by al-Nasai.” He rejected its current interpretations as “rhetoric of the self-styled jihadists” that is “based less

on proper scholarly analysis of the Islamic textual tradition than on strident, heated emotionalism and a deep-rooted hatred and feeling of revenge.”¹⁰ It reflected a “distorted understanding of Jihad,” which started “in the very first century of Islam itself, when intra-Muslim wars were sought to be christened by competing groups as Jihads.”¹¹ In fact, Mazhari argued that the Hadith about Ghazwa-e-Hind would have been narrated by many more companions of the Prophet Muhammad and cited in multiple collections of the Hadith “considering the merits or rewards of the Ghazwa-e-Hind that it talks about.”¹² Given that only one companion of the Prophet reported it, Mazhari suggests that “it is possible that this Hadith report is not genuine and that it might have been manufactured in the period of the Umayyad Caliphs to suit and justify their own political purposes and expansionist designs.”¹³

Even if the Hadith were true, Mazhari argues, “[t]he battle against India that it predicted was fulfilled in the early Islamic period itself, and is not something that will happen in the future. This, in fact, is the opinion of the majority of the Ulema, qualified Islamic scholars.”¹⁴ Mazhari saw the Ghazwa-e-Hind Hadith as an instrument of propaganda in “the proxy war engaged in by Kashmir by powerful forces in Pakistan in the guise of a so-called Jihad,” which he and other Ulema consider “nothing but deceit.” He also noted that there was no historic record of the Hadith being cited by the many Muslim conquerors of the subcontinent and the Ulema that accompanied them.¹⁵

Other Indian clerics have offered alternative explanations of the Hadith. Maulana Abdul Hamid Numani of the Jamiat ul-Ulema-i Hind (Society of Indian Islamic Scholars) says that this Hadith was fulfilled at the time of the Four Righteous Caliphs, when several companions of the Prophet came to India in order to spread Islam. Mufti Sajid Qasmi, professor at Dar ul-Uloom Deoband, believes that the Hadith might also refer to the invasion of Sindh by Arabs under Muhammad bin Qasim in the eighth century. On the other hand, Maulana Mufti Mushtaq Tijarvi of Jamaat-i Islami India has suggested that the Hadith is not genuine at all and perhaps a fabrication intended to justify Qasim’s invasion.¹⁶

ALTHOUGH THE IDEA OF GHAZWA-E-HIND AS A WAR AGAINST THE CONTEMPORARY Indian state has not been universally accepted, it continues to feature in the jihadist discourse. Jihadists have differed on interpreting the Hadith, especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, when al-Qaeda was uprooted from Afghanistan and the Pakistani government led by General Pervez Musharraf chose to side, albeit only partially, with the United States. Divisions among jihad-

ists about attitudes toward the Pakistani state and government are reflected in their interpretation of Ghazwa-e-Hind as directed solely against modern-day India or encompassing also Pakistan.

The defeat of the Taliban and the arrival of NATO forces in Afghanistan in 2001 shifted al-Qaeda's major operations to Iraq and Yemen even though Osama bin Laden continued to hide in Pakistan. For some time, discussion of the epic battle for India diminished in the jihadi discourse while grand strategies for the expulsion of Western influence from the Middle East took center stage. The death of Osama bin Laden and the rise of ISIS, however, have revived global jihadist interest in Ghazwa-e-Hind.

The Pakistani offshoot of the Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has declared war on the Pakistani state, maintains that their war is the Ghazwa-e-Hind forecast by the Prophet Muhammad. In their interpretation, the reference to India is said to cover Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. In one May 2013 TTP video, entitled "Ghazwa-e-Hind 3," footage of militants loyal to Mullah Fazlullah are supplemented with a critique of ISIS for limiting its jihad to Kashmir. According to Fazlullah, "the India jihad begins from Attock [in Pakistan]; the India jihad is in the land of Pakistan; the area of Lahore is in the India jihad; Multan is in India; all the towns of Punjab are in the India jihad that we are waging. Therefore, the Ulema should rise up and explain the borders of the India jihad, explain these sayings of Prophet Muhammad, explain to the public the boundaries of India, which areas were in India 50 years ago, what were their boundaries..."¹⁷

The militant Islamist group Jamaat ul Ahrar, itself a member of TTP's coalition, has argued that Hind at the time of the Prophet Muhammad referred to "a very large area which today includes Pakistan, Kashmir, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Burma." The group invited Muslims to "aid the Mujahideen in Khurasan" and "to work for an Islamic state in Pakistan." Jamaat ul Ahrar promised that "[o]ur jihad will not stop till Pakistan is conquered but we will keep fighting until entire Hind is under the Sharia of Allah. We shall keep going and conquer every country in our path [with Allah's will] until we reach Filisteen (Palestine) and there we shall erect the black flags in al-Quds (Jerusalem)."¹⁸

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an affiliate of al-Qaeda, has also adopted the broader definition of battle for the Indian subcontinent by naming its Urdu-language magazine "Ghazwa-e-Hind." The first issue of the magazine was posted on the Jamia Hafsa Urdu Forum (JHUF)—named after a seminary in Islamabad—on November 15, 2011. The magazine featured articles on jihad in Pakistan, including summaries of past speeches by Osama bin Laden and IMU scholar Abuzar Azzam.

One such article argued that the jihad in Pakistan did not depend upon the American presence in Afghanistan, as the jihadists were fighting for the implementation of Sharia in Pakistan and to avenge the deaths of prominent jihadists at the hands of the duplicitous Pakistani regime. “Undoubtedly, we will continue to wage jihad in Pakistan till we avenge the killings of Taher Jan, Abu Muhammad al-Turkistani, Baitullah Mehsud, Abdul Rahman al-Kanadi, Sheikh Osama bin Laden and many more,” argued IMU. “We will continue to fight till Islam arrives in Islamabad. It does not matter even if the Americans leave Afghanistan.”¹⁹

In May 2014, IMU released a video of its Mufti Abuzar Azzam discussing Ghazwa-e-Hind. He argued that “Hind” includes not just India but also Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Kashmir, Burma, and Bangladesh; and explained that the jihad in Pakistan—a part of Ghazwa-e-Hind—is necessary for the success of the jihad in Afghanistan—the jihad in Khurasan.²⁰

THE RECENT REVIVAL OF INTEREST IN THE GHAZWA-E-HIND PROPHECY REFLECTS rivalry between competing jihadi groups. Al-Qaeda, now led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, faces the prospect of extinction as its Arab cadres defect to ISIS, led by Baghdadi. Zawahiri has worked to build alliances with Pakistani jihadi groups and make inroads in India’s Muslim population because it helps him remain relevant in the face of ISIS.

Al-Qaeda has apparently sought support from Kashmiri and Uygur groups for its expanded battle on the Indian subcontinent. In an interview on December 2013, Kashmir-based Dukhtar-e-Millat (Daughters of the Nation) leader Asiya Andarabi revealed that a member of al-Qaeda had approached her to seek “the group’s support in the jihad in Pakistan for enforcement of Sharia and to start Ghazwa-e-Hind from Pakistan.”²¹ Moreover, the Pakistan-based Uyghur jihadi group Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) released a video in April 2014 proclaiming jihad against China as necessary for the fulfillment of the Prophet’s purported Ghazwa-e-Hind prophecy.²²

In September 2014, Zawahiri announced the formation of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which his ally Maulana Asim Umar reinforced with a call for global jihad by Indian Muslims. That same month, AQIS took responsibility for an attempt to hijack the Pakistan frigate PNS Zulfikar in the Karachi navy yard. The operation was most likely undertaken by terrorists who had already been operating with one of several regional groups active on behalf of al-Qaeda. But in the event, al-Qaeda sought credit for the parent group, almost as if it sought to assert its brand against the appeal of ISIS. Zawahiri may be banking on the Pakistani

state's entrenched policy of tolerating and supporting any group that targets India to ensure al-Qaeda's survival in the post-Osama bin Laden phase.

An AQIS spokesman explained on September 8, 2014 that AQIS seeks to raise the "flag of jihad" in the whole region, and that while they seek to "liberate" Indian Muslims from Hindus, Pakistan is its "doorstep" for jihad. The spokesman insisted that the Karachi "operation gives a clear message to India that Ghazwa-e-Hind has only just begun. We shall never forget your oppression of our brothers in Kashmir, Gujarat, and Assam; and you shall reap what you have sowed."²³

The formation of AQIS was announced only after ISIS leader Baghdadi proclaimed the revival of the caliphate during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in June 2014. In his call for global jihad, Baghdadi listed the countries and regions where mosques were being desecrated and Islamic sanctities violated. He argued in his video message that "Muslims' rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Somalia, Palestine, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Sham (the Levant), Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ahvaz, Iran (by the *rafidah*, or Shia), Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, in the East and in the West." Baghdadi exhorted, "So, raise your ambitions, O soldiers of the Islamic State! For your brothers all over the world are waiting for your rescue, and are anticipating your brigades. It is enough for you to just look at the scenes that have reached you from Central Africa, and from Burma before that. What is hidden from us is far worse. So by Allah, we will take revenge."²⁴

The newly proclaimed caliph's speech contained several references to India, Kashmir and Pakistan, in addition to Afghanistan, Burma and China. In the past, al-Qaeda has successfully recruited fighters from each of these countries and regions. Other than accepting Baghdadi's caliphate, Zawahiri's only option now seemed to be to protect his turf, to take advantage of Pakistan's rivalry with India and to rally groups that have pursued jihad in South Asia based on the Ghazwa-e-Hind prophecies.

Al-Qaeda's efforts to consolidate itself in the Khurasan-Hind battleground were complicated by groups in the region announcing their support for ISIS. In October 2014, Ansar al-Tawhid al Hind (Supporters of Monotheism in India) pledged allegiance to ISIS. The pledge came in an Urdu audio speech from the group's leader, Maulvi Abdul Rehman al-Hindi, and was made public by its media arm, al-Isabah.

Abdul Rehman al-Hindi had surfaced a year earlier with calls for Indian Muslims to join the group and wage jihad. Moreover, al-Isabah had released videos with titles such as "From Kandahar to Delhi." In pledging allegiance, Abdul Rehman al-Hindi spoke at length about the historical caliphates, describing the

religious necessity of re-establishing such an entity. He expressed support for the “sincere and lionhearted mujahideen” of ISIS and called upon all Muslims, and those in India in particular, to pledge allegiance to the group. As he concluded, “[a]fter the establishment of the Islamic State we do not consider allegiances to organizations and groups to be legitimate.”²⁵

“I take this opportunity,” Hindi intoned, “to call all Muslims, especially of India, to rise, aspire to be part of one Ummah, one army, under one leader, and break the shackles of humiliation and disgrace. This disgraceful pacifism will not benefit you, so why do you wait until your women are raped and blood of your sons spilled? And beware of the nationalistic democratic attitudes of some of our misguided Islamic organizations.”²⁶ Subsequently al-Isabah released a video eulogizing an Indian fighter killed in a suicide raid in Afghanistan, confirming that the group had turned operational.²⁷

In January 2015, ISIS announced the formation of the Khorasan Group, with former Taliban leader Hafiz Saeed Khan—also known as Mullah Saeed Orakzai—as its commander. The new ISIS offshoot covers Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Bangladesh, as well as some parts of Central Asia—areas deemed by jihadists as part of the historic Khurasan and Hind mentioned in the Islamic prophecies.

One year earlier, Saeed had lost out in a power struggle within Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and so joined the ISIS bandwagon in an effort to reassert himself. His allies include several key members of the TTP now influential within the Khorasan Group: former spokesman Shahidullah Shahid, Khyber tribal region leader Gul Zaman, Peshawar chief Mufti Hassan, Kurram chief Hafiz Quran Daulat and Hangu leader Khalid Mansoor.²⁸

Pakistani officials, including Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, have dismissed ISIS’ claims of having a significant presence in the country, arguing that such claims are in fact manifestations of leadership conflicts within the TTP. According to these Pakistanis, the TTP remains the potent force in Pakistan’s northwest tribal region. However, in June 2014, a group calling itself al-Wafa Foundation for Media Production released a video, entitled, “We are your Army in Pakistan.” In the video, one fighter named Habibullah Habib expressed brotherhood with ISIS and offered it money and men.²⁹

Another Pakistani jihadi group, Caliphate and Jihad Movement, similarly pledged allegiance to ISIS and Baghdadi in July 2014, and claimed credit for four attacks in Hyderabad and Karachi. The group praised ISIS and offered itself as an “arrow of the arrows” to Baghdadi in Pakistan, and also congratulated the declaration of the caliphate, praying that it will extend to Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. The group then claimed responsibility for the four attacks in Pakistan’s

Sindh province, which included the strikes on policemen in Karachi and the Latifabad area of Hyderabad between May 25 and July 6, 2014.³⁰

Jundallah (Soldiers of Allah), also based in Pakistan, followed Caliphate and Jihad Movement in pledging allegiance to Baghdadi. It promised to unify the ranks of fighters in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and India. In November 2014, a message posted on a jihadi online forum reported that Jundallah chief Ahmed Ghardan Abu Yahya had announced his pledge during a visit from a delegation led by ISIS' Zubeir al-Kuwaiti. The message added: "Praise be to Allah, many from the jihadi organizations, groups, and brigades in Khorasan and India agreed to meet with the delegation of the Islamic State. With permission from Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, you will hear another glad tiding."³¹

WHILE ISIS BOASTED OF SUCCESS IN EXPANDING INTO AFGHANISTAN, PAKISTAN and India, AQIS has been active in producing recruitment and propaganda material in Bengali. The Bengali section of AQIS has released videos encouraging Bangladeshi Muslims to enter the jihadi battlefield.³² There have also been credible reports of al-Qaeda affiliates being active in the Muslim-majority Maldives, as several Maldivian nationals are believed to have traveled to Pakistan's northwest tribal region for training alongside other jihadists.³³

In his speech announcing the formation of AQIS, al-Zawahiri had argued, "Bangladesh, which they claimed to have won from Pakistan so that it may get its freedom, is being turned into a subjugated surrogate of India. These anti-Islamic policies that assail Islamic beliefs, symbols and the noble Prophet of Islam are only a manifestation of complete subjugation to India. The events in Bangladesh enjoy the blessings of both India and America, since their interests in fighting Islam overlap, and this is why their bilateral relations are becoming stronger day by day."³⁴

In what was clearly an effort to appeal to the anti-Indian sentiment among Pakistan's jihadist in particular, Zawahiri railed against India. "It is democratic India that killed thousands of Muslims in Kashmir, Gujarat, Ahmadabad, and Assam... The events in Bangladesh and Burma are not too distant from the oppression and killings of Muslims in Kashmir or the racial cleansing in Assam, Ahmadabad, and Gujarat, either." He spoke of the need to "make a serious effort to bring an end to these oppressions on Muslims in Bangladesh, India, Burma and Sri Lanka" and reassured "our brothers and our people in Kashmir, Gujarat, Assam, and Ahmadabad who are living under the dark shade of Hindu occupation."³⁵

Al-Qaeda appears to be attempting to maintain support among radical Islamists in the subcontinent by directing its ire at India. Its leaders have been active in

Afghanistan and Pakistan since the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad and maintain close ties to the Pakistani-supported Afghan Taliban and Kashmiri jihadi groups. By focusing on India, al-Qaeda hopes to retain the support of Pakistan-backed groups, which interpret the Ghazwa-e-Hind Hadith to mean re-conquest of Hindu India without hitting Muslim Pakistan. Even in Zawahiri's statement about AQIS, Pakistan was mentioned only as a country that needed to be brought under full Sharia rule while Hindu India was portrayed as the enemy of Islam.

ISIS, on the other hand, has accepted the allegiance of groups that are violently opposed to both the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. ISIS affiliates appear to have opted for the alternative interpretation of Ghazwa-e-Hind, offered by groups such as the TTP, to pursue jihad in all parts of historic Hind. Indeed, in an ominous declaration, one South Asian ISIS member proclaimed, "[o]ur struggle is ongoing and Insha'Allah after defeating Pakistan Army, we won't just stop in Pakistan rather we shall continue our advance into Kashmir and India until the laws of Allah are implemented globally and the whole world comes under the rule of one Muslim Khalifah."³⁶

NOTES

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2. Muhammad Yousuf Khan, "Islam main Imam Mehdi Ka Tassawar" (trans. "Concept of Mahdi in Islam") (Lahore: Jamia Ashrafiya), p. 240; Bilal Khan, "The Bilad-e-Khurasan in Making," Research Paper, March 30, 2008, available at <http://www.grandstrategy.com/2009/06/research-paperbybilalkhanpaperis.html#ixzz3TXK-BZnPO>.
3. Hind and Hindustan are Arabic and Persian names for India.
4. Taken from Sunan an-Nasa'i 3175, Book 25, Hadith 91, Vol. 1, available at <http://sunnah.com/nasai/25/91>.
5. Taken from Sunan an-Nasa'i 3173, Book 25, Hadith 89, Vol. 1, available at <http://sunnah.com/nasai/25/89>.
6. Example of the Hadith referring to Ghazwa-e-Hind claiming to be from Sahih Hadith, available at <http://english.ghazwa-e-hind.org/>.
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AQAP's Ideological Battles at Home and Abroad

By Robin Simcox

AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA (AQAP) IS A GRAVE SECURITY threat to both Yemen and the West. This was most devastatingly proved on January 7, 2015, when the group carried out a bombing attack against police cadets in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, killing dozens. Shortly thereafter, they likely perpetrated their first attack on Western soil.

Said and Cherif Kouachi, who had both traveled to Yemen in 2011 and are thought to have received training and financing from AQAP, murdered twelve staff members at the Parisian offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical magazine that had published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.¹ In the days after the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, AQAP claimed credit for the operation.² In fact, the group had already identified *Charlie Hebdo's* editor as a target for assassination in the spring 2013 edition of *Inspire*, AQAP's propaganda magazine.

In recent years AQAP has carried out a series of high-profile attempted attacks on Western aviation, killed hundreds of members of the Yemeni military and security forces and bombed multiple foreign embassies in Sana'a. They are a highly formidable outfit.

Ominously, AQAP has also carved out multiple safe havens in Yemen, a task made easier by the chaos of Yemen's Arab Spring protests, which began in January 2011. Over 2,000 people may have died in that uprising, leading to the resignation of

President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had governed Yemen for over three decades.

However, AQAP was not the only group looking to take advantage of the shifting power dynamics of Yemen's Arab Spring. Other key actors—such as the Muslim Brotherhood-linked al-Islah party and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the hugely powerful military commander—have followed suit. Most dramatically, the Shiite movement known as the Houthis recently executed a coup that has extended its control over key territory, including parts of the capital city of Sana'a. Even by Yemen's standards, the situation today is chaotic as the government remains virtually powerless to shape events.

The competition for influence in which AQAP is embroiled in Yemen mirrors an ongoing competition for influence in the global jihadist movement provoked by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Following the capture of significant amounts of land in Iraq, ISIS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a caliphate in June 2014. How to respond to this development has divided jihadists, including al-Qaeda, and poses a conundrum for AQAP.

This paper studies the evolution of the AQAP and ISIS relationship in the context of ISIS' growth, and AQAP's approach to resolving the resulting disagreements. It then examines AQAP's influence in the overall context of Yemen's current political and ideological ruptures.

The Al-Qaeda—ISIS Split

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF AQAP'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ISIS in the context of the overall jihadist movement, it is necessary to elucidate the reasons behind the split between ISIS and al-Qaeda. Even before the rupture, relations between al-Qaeda and its Iraqi franchise had long been strained. Al-Qaeda's senior leadership lamented the group's unwillingness to take instructions and the harm its indiscriminate killings caused al-Qaeda's reputation in the Muslim world.³ Ultimately, however, it was the Syrian uprising of 2011 that precipitated the ISIS-al-Qaeda break.

As chaos engulfed Syria, al-Baghdadi sensed an opportunity to exert influence. From Iraq, he dispatched fighters to Syria to form the al-Nusra Front (ANF), which would develop into a highly effective fighting force against the Bashar al-Assad regime. In April 2013, al-Baghdadi incorporated the ANF into his own organization, which he rebranded the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, and asserted dominion over activities in Syria.⁴

When ANF emir Abu Mohammad al-Jolani objected, al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri was forced to intervene. Backing al-Jolani, in the summer of 2013 al-Zawahiri ruled that the groups should operate independently and instructed al-Baghdadi to focus on Iraq.⁵ Al-Baghdadi's subsequent refusal to do so led to open fighting between the ANF and ISIS in parts of Syria.⁶ By the end of 2013, al-Baghdadi was sending private correspondences to representatives of other al-Qaeda franchises, urging them to shift their allegiance from al-Zawahiri.⁷ In February 2014, with al-Baghdadi's intransigence apparent, al-Zawahiri severed al-Qaeda's ties with ISIS.⁸ In the ensuing months, some analysts speculated that al-Qaeda could splinter en masse, with some franchises aligning themselves with al-Baghdadi while others remained loyal to al-Zawahiri.⁹

Possible Reconciliation

THUS FAR, AQAP'S SENIOR LEADERSHIP REMAINS LOYAL TO AL-ZAWAHIRI. THE GROUP has not pledged allegiance to ISIS and, despite arguments to the contrary, there is no evidence to suggest that it will do so.¹⁰ In fact, AQAP has been focused on fostering unity among Sunnis, issuing conciliatory messages that support al-Zawahiri and calling for unity in the face of such mutual enemies as the United States and Iran.

In March 2014, just one month after the al-Qaeda-ISIS split, AQAP posted an audio message online that proclaimed, "[W]e have one stance toward all groups that wage jihad for the sake of God...[AQAP] have been careful from the beginning to have a brotherly stance toward all the mujahideen."¹¹ The timing of this message was particularly significant as it was released shortly after al-Qaeda's main representative in Syria, Abu Khalid al-Suri, was killed by ISIS fighters.

In July 2014, AQAP's emir, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, issued a tribute to al-Zawahiri; meanwhile, key AQAP ideologues released a separate, seemingly supportive video of al-Qaeda's emir.¹² These, too, were strategically timed messages of support, as they came only days after al-Baghdadi had declared his caliphate.

On August 12, 2014, AQAP released another ISIS-related video via its al-Malahim Media Foundation platform. In the video, key AQAP ideologue Ibrahim al-Rubaish praised the Sunni victories being won on the Iraqi battlefield.¹³ Although not naming ISIS explicitly, al-Rubaish stated, "I congratulate all the *mujahideen* on all battlefronts and all Muslims on the victories that our brothers in Iraq have achieved against the puppets of the [Iranians]...Who does not rejoice in the victory of the

Sunni Muslims and the defeat of the gangs of [former Iraqi Prime Minister] Maliki?”¹⁴

Two days later, AQAP published a statement offering security advice to “our brothers in Iraq” and announced “solidarity with our Muslim brothers in Iraq... we stand by the side of our Muslim brothers in Iraq against the American and Iranian conspiracy and their agents of the apostate Gulf rulers.”¹⁵ A Twitter account affiliated with Ansar al-Sharia, AQAP’s insurgent wing, sent a similar message.¹⁶

These messages have been misread by some as AQAP foreshadowing a possible break from al-Qaeda and a pledge of allegiance to al-Baghdadi.¹⁷ In reality, they were merely declarations of support for fellow Sunnis and the victories they were gaining over the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq. AQAP fighters’ hatred for Shiites likely outweighs any ill-feeling caused by the al-Qaeda-ISIS split.

Multiple AQAP statements in recent months seemingly confirm this. A joint statement released in September 2014 by AQAP and a fellow al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, encouraged warring jihadists in Syria to focus on the enemy that unites them: the United States and its supposed “crusader campaign to fight Islam and the Muslims.” The statement argued that divisions only weakened the jihadist movement and benefited its enemies: Christians, Jews, Shiites and Alawites.¹⁸

That same month, AQAP also released a video related to ISIS via al-Malahim Media Foundation that featured Sheikh Nasser bin Ali al-Ansi, a veteran al-Qaeda jihadist who had ties to Osama bin Laden. In the video, AQAP implored the jihadists to “form a coalition to strike the leader of invalidity and the head of disbelief”; and to “forget their difference, unite their efforts, and join their ranks against their crusader enemy.” Al-Ansi encouraged striking the U.S. (referred to as the “main enemy”) and “its interests everywhere.”¹⁹

Al-Ansi was also keen to stress the importance of Iran as an enemy, ascribing Houthi territorial gains in Yemen, and the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, to an Iranian plot. In doing so, Al-Ansi linked not just AQAP and ISIS, but all Sunnis, in an epic contest against their mutual enemies. Again, the message is that jihadist infighting should come to an end in order to focus on the larger strategic battles at hand. Even so, al-Ansi is not afraid to criticize ISIS when necessary. For example, he also described the group’s filming and marketing of beheadings as “barbaric” and “not acceptable.”²⁰

In October, AQAP again addressed the issue of common enemies. On Twitter, it specifically referred to the war against “our brothers in the Islamic State” and how, “on this occasion,” it supported them “against the global crusader campaign.” AQAP made a further call for “the mujahideen to forget their disputes and to

stop the infighting among them, and to be diligent in pushing away the crusader campaign that targets all.”²¹

Clearly, AQAP’s leadership desires more unity, not greater division. While this conciliatory approach has not been reciprocated by ISIS, it is one that is broadly in line with that of al-Zawahiri, who has attempted to mend ties with ISIS since its February 2014 expulsion.²² These efforts have been aided by the fact that, thus far, no key AQAP figure is known to have joined ISIS. Due to his seniority, the most significant defector who could have switched sides would have been AQAP emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi, who is thought to be a mediator for intra-al-Qaeda disputes. It is possible that he mediated between al-Qaeda and ISIS prior to the latter’s expulsion.²³

Al-Wuhayshi’s mediation was likely an attempt to improve relations between the groups, rather than a signal that he was considering defecting. In fact, not only has al-Wuhayshi explicitly praised al-Zawahiri since al-Baghdadi declared his caliphate, but he also was promoted to the role of al-Qaeda’s “general manager” by al-Zawahiri in the summer of 2013.²⁴ This was the first time that al-Qaeda bypassed its core Pakistani leadership to promote a leader from a regional affiliate to such a senior role. Today, al-Wuhayshi has emerged as a leading contender to replace al-Zawahiri as overall emir of al-Qaeda, should the Egyptian leader be killed. For al-Wuhayshi, defecting to ISIS makes little sense on any front.

Speculation that Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP’s key bomb-maker, has aligned himself with ISIS is also likely wide of the mark.²⁵ Admittedly, al-Asiri aspired to join up with the jihad in Iraq following the U.S. invasion of 2003. However, he was jailed in his home country of Saudi Arabia for planning to do so, which seemingly led to a shift in attitude toward his own government. Al-Asiri commented that “[u]p until that point I didn’t know that the Saudi government was in the service of the crusaders” (i.e. the U.S.).²⁶

Al-Asiri’s subsequent plots have reflected this shift in focus. In August 2009, for example, al-Asiri constructed a bomb with which his brother Abdullah attempted to assassinate Muhammad bin Nayef, the Saudi Minister of Interior. Al-Asiri also constructed the underwear bomb of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, which the Nigerian attempted to detonate on Christmas Day 2009 aboard an airliner traveling from the Netherlands to the U.S. Al-Asiri’s focus on the U.S. and Saudi Arabia matches AQAP’s priorities, and there is no evidence to suggest al-Asiri is moving away from AQAP ideologically. Furthermore, as one of the most wanted terrorists in the world, traveling from (in all likelihood) AQAP strongholds in southern Yemen to ISIS strongholds in northwest Iraq would be a risky proposition for al-Asiri.

While AQAP's leadership remains stalwart in its loyalty towards al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, its rank-and-file has proven more restless. U.S. officials observed the trend of AQAP defections to ISIS quickening as ISIS expanded its territorial control in the summer of 2013.²⁷ One Yemeni-based analyst even claimed that ISIS was training AQAP-linked fighters in Yemen, and that AQAP members had moved to Iraq and Syria in order to affiliate themselves with the group.²⁸

Some Yemeni jihadists have also made public statements in support of ISIS, including the ideologue Abdul Majid al-Hitari. Arguably the most outspoken has been Mamoun Hatem. A tribal leader and AQAP ideologue, although AQAP has not confirmed his role, Hatem's reputation made him the rumoured target of a U.S. drone strike in March 2014.²⁹ Hatem posted a series of supportive messages on Twitter both prior to, and after, al-Baghdadi's declaration of a caliphate.³⁰ Yet, as Thomas Joseclyn of the *Long War Journal* has pointed out, even Hatem failed to back the actions of those Yemeni mujahideen fighters who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In fact, Hatem took to Twitter to say that while he had attempted to persuade AQAP to swear fealty to al-Baghdadi, he did not want support for ISIS to weaken AQAP and divide the Yemeni jihadist movement.³¹ Another AQAP fighter sympathetic to ISIS is Jalal Baleedi, an AQAP field commander in the governorates of Abyan, Shabwa, Hadramout, al-Bayda and Lahj in southern Yemen.³² However, he has not suggested any intent to formally break from AQAP over the ISIS issue.

In September 2014, a new group called "The Supporters of the Islamic State in Yemen" released a video of nine mujahideen fighters pledging their allegiance to al-Baghdadi.³³ A month later, journalists in Yemen received an email from a group announcing itself as "Supporters of the Islamic State in the Arabian Peninsula."³⁴ Then, in mid-November, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi accepted a pledge of allegiance from a group known as the "Mujahideen of Yemen" and proclaimed all other jihadist groups' activities in Yemen invalid.³⁵ Little is known about these various groups, including whether they are even three separate entities. It is possible that they consist of AQAP fighters unhappy with the group's distance from ISIS, though this too cannot be confirmed.

Regardless, senior AQAP official Harith bin Ghazi al-Nadhari felt compelled to respond to al-Baghdadi, stating that ISIS' caliphate is not legitimate, that it had not been approved by Islamic authorities and that ISIS had no real presence outside of Syria and Iraq. He also blamed divisions in the jihadist movement on ISIS, contending that they "split the ranks of the mujahideen, and scattered them..." However, even in this speech, al-Nadhari stressed that AQAP "did not want to talk about the current dispute" between ISIS and al-Qaeda so as to avoid encouraging

“the enemies of Islam.” He explicitly reiterated AQAP support of “our brothers with what we can, and we still hold to that position, as we believe in the necessity to support our mujahideen brothers, including all of their groups and entities, regardless of their inclinations.” Al-Nadhari also emphasized AQAP’s “utmost joy” at the reports that mujahideen infighting had potentially abated in Syria.³⁶

Following the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attacks, the debate concerning the AQAP-ISIS relationship took yet another twist. On January 8, Amedy Coulibaly likely shot and killed a police officer in Paris. The next day, he held up a kosher bakery and killed four hostages before French police managed to kill him. While Coulibaly had pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, he also claimed his attack was coordinated with the Kouachi brothers’ operation against *Charlie Hebdo*.³⁷ Given the division between AQAP and ISIS, there was significant speculation as to whether the groups had coordinated the Paris attacks.³⁸ Stated simply, this is unlikely. As the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s Aaron Zelin has pointed out, any coordination between the Kouachi brothers and Coulibaly is more likely due to their personal relationships rather than joint planning by the respective groups.³⁹

Therefore, the overall prospect of AQAP splintering the jihadist movement further by aligning itself with ISIS is highly unlikely. Even so, ISIS’ declaration of a new caliphate poses some challenges to AQAP through its appeal to Yemenis impatient with al-Qaeda’s lack of progress. After all, AQAP controlled “emirates” in Abyan and Shabwa, south Yemen, in the spring and summer of 2011, only to be expelled the following year. ISIS appears to have much more durability and a demonstrated ability to hold territory, which may increase the appeal of the group the longer it carries on as a semi-coherent state.

Beyond jihadist circles, AQAP is also involved in a struggle for power and influence within Yemeni society. The next section examines this struggle, with a particular focus on the group AQAP currently has the most reason to fear: the Zaidi Houthi rebels.

Enter the Houthis

ZAYDISM IS A FORM OF SHIISM THAT WAS FOLLOWED BY YEMEN’S ELITE RULERS until the country became a republic in 1962. The new leadership, backed by Saudi Arabia, attempted to minimize the influence of the Zaidis, who constituted a majority in parts of the north but a minority in Yemen overall. Wahhabism and Salafism were subsequently strongly promoted as alternatives from the 1970s onwards.⁴⁰ A

series of institutes espousing these alternatives were subsequently formed, which enjoyed some popularity with lower-class Zaidis outside of the old governing aristocracy.

Zaidi fears regarding the gathering strength of Salafist and Wahhabist ideology were exacerbated by the formation of the al-Islah party in the aftermath of the May 1990 merger of north and south Yemen. Al-Islah was co-founded by Abdullah l-Ahmar, a key tribal leader with close links to Islamists, and Abdul Majid al-Zindani, a man now designated as a terrorist by the U.S.⁴¹ The organization has been described as representing “a wide coalition for Sunnis of the Muslim Brotherhood and apolitical backgrounds, Wahhabi Salafis, and tribals seeking patronage, some from Zaydi backgrounds.”⁴²

Two main Zaidi responses emerged to this growth in Wahhabi Salafi influence. The first was al-Haqq, which was led by Zaidi elites and contained future Houthi leaders. Al-Haqq aimed to establish a closer relationship with Saleh and those in government, and thereby gain greater access to patronage. However, al-Haqq failed to harness grassroots or youth support.⁴³

More successful was the Believing Youth network of summer camps and sports clubs in northern boarding schools. The Believing Youth’s teachings contained a more religious and ideological slant, with a particular focus on social issues. The founders of the movement included several members of the al-Houthi family, and the socio-religious identity that developed in the Believing Youth network would contribute to the Houthi rebels’ outlook.⁴⁴

Following a series of protests in 2002 in Saada, north Yemen, a Zaidi insurgency led by Husayn al-Houthi emerged. Al-Houthi delivered religious speeches assailing the government for its corruption, and bemoaned high unemployment and food prices. His star rose throughout the mountain towns of north Yemen; in June 2004, he launched an armed rebellion against the government.⁴⁵ Saada would emerge as the rebels’ stronghold.

In September 2004, after government forces killed Husayn al-Houthi, his younger brother Abdulmalek took command of the group. Under his leadership, the Houthi rebels would fight five wars with the government, interrupted only intermittently by uneasy truces. Following the last ceasefire, in 2010, the Houthis began to expand their presence through intermarriage with key tribal families. A year later, the movement developed a political wing.

Considering this history, the violence that broke out between the Houthis and the Yemeni government in 2014 was predictable. However, what few could have predicted at the time was that Houthi-initiated protests in August 2014 would—in just over a month—lead to a political coup and the fall of Sana’a.

To understand how this happened, it is vital to understand the conditions behind Ali Abdullah Saleh's protracted departure.

Exit Saleh

SALEH AGREED TO STEP DOWN AS EARLY AS APRIL 2011 AS PART OF A GULF Cooperation Council (GCC) brokered deal. Power was formally handed over to his vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, in February 2012.

The deal, however, retained considerable influence for Saleh in the new government. The General People's Congress party, of which Saleh remained the head, was well represented in the new cabinet, and members of Saleh's family kept their jobs in the military and security apparatus. This ensured him continued influence and control over parts of the military, complimenting his other tribal alliances. The deal also established a power sharing agreement with the main opposition party, al-Islah. Importantly, Saleh received immunity from prosecution for the deaths that occurred during that year's uprising.

This arrangement posed a severe problem for the Houthis, who gained no ministerial posts as part of the GCC deal. Not only were none of their natural allies strengthened, but their relationship with al-Islah, with which they had aligned in calling for Saleh's departure, even deteriorated.⁴⁶ A further source of Houthi discontent sprang from the shape and form of the proposed new federal Yemen. This has its roots in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), created as part of the GCC deal. The NDC convened 565 representatives from various political factions—including youth representatives, southern secessionists, Houthis, women as well as established government figures—for almost a year to discuss political reconciliation and other key issues concerning Yemen's future.

The delegates agreed that Yemen would evolve into a federal system comprised of six states.⁴⁷ After initially withdrawing in protest, the Houthis accepted the principle but stressed their dissatisfaction at how the borders would be drawn. Specifically, the Houthis objected to being isolated from certain resources and a specific port.⁴⁸ They demanded that a single region in the north be created and that they gain more access to federal government institutions.⁴⁹ This set the scene for the clashes that broke out in 2014 between Houthis, the army, and tribal groups friendly to both the government and al-Islah. The Houthis achieved a major victory by taking control of the city of Amran, north of Sana'a. While they agreed to withdraw in late July, they nonetheless emerged from the clashes emboldened.

Moreover, in May 2014, the Yemeni finance minister announced that fuel subsidies were to be cut as part of a \$500 million loan negotiation with the IMF.⁵⁰ Once these cuts came into effect in August and fuel prices increased by 90 percent, the Houthis demanded an immediate restoration of the subsidy.⁵¹ Tens of thousands of their supporters gathered on the outskirts of Sana'a while their bulldozers levied buildings to make way for makeshift protest camps.⁵² This was an opportunistic and tactical move, capitalizing on a deeply unpopular policy in order to legitimize a Houthi power grab. After initial violent skirmishes, the government relented, agreeing to reintroduce fuel subsidies and form a new cabinet.⁵³ However, emboldened by their successes, the Houthis continued their advance. Before long, they conquered the influential al-Iman University, run by Abdul Majid al-Zindani, and overran the state security forces defending the state television building. They also took control of a nearby stadium.⁵⁴

Fighting centered on a military base northwest of Sana'a, where the Houthis defeated military units loyal to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. This was a significant moment, as Ali Mohsen—an enemy of the Houthis who had led the state's wars against them—had huge levels of influence in the government.⁵⁵ Importantly, Hadi did not deploy his most loyal military units in support of Ali Mohsen. Possibly, the president was content to watch two aspiring rivals bludgeon one another. Once Hadi's forces declined to engage the Houthis, al-Islah-aligned fighters chose to abstain as well.⁵⁶

As the Houthis advanced on Sana'a, Yemen's military abandoned their posts and Interior Minister Abdo al-Torab ordered troops to co-operate with the advancing forces.⁵⁷ Houthis seized the Central Bank, government buildings, and television stations and banks, setting up checkpoints throughout Sana'a while its leadership went to the presidential palace to negotiate terms. Even the Houthis may have been surprised at how easily Sana'a fell.

On September 21, 2014, an agreement was signed calling for the appointment of a new prime minister within three days, followed by the formation of a technocratic government within a month. Unsurprisingly, the agreement also stipulated the reintroduction of fuel subsidies.⁵⁸ Furthermore, the Houthis were to put forward an adviser to the president, populate the Shura Council, and participate in election monitoring, among other tasks related to the outcome of the NDC.⁵⁹ Finally, Houthi militias were to be integrated into the Yemeni security and police forces. In return, they were to dismantle their protest camps and checkpoints. Ultimately, however, the Houthis refused to cede control of Yemeni territory, agree to disarmament and abide by a ceasefire in the contested areas.⁶⁰ With that, the deal was in doubt.

That Hadi could not unilaterally enforce these terms highlighted a lack of state power and testified to the comprehensive nature of the Houthi victory. That the truce was even partially brokered by the United Nations—which had criticised the Houthi aggression and whose acquiescence on the GCC deal had paved the way for Hadi in the first place—laid bare the scope of domestic and international dysfunction in Yemeni politics.

The Houthi victory is already translating into significant levels of political influence. On October 7, as part of their demand that a new prime minister be installed, Hadi attempted to appoint his ally, Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak. The Houthis, however, nixed the appointment and called for a return to mass protests.⁶¹ Bin Mubarak subsequently turned down the position. Yemen's ambassador to the U.N., Khaled Bahah, perceived as more amenable to the Houthis, was selected days later.⁶² One of his first moves was to give the Houthis control of the oil ministry.⁶³

The Houthis are matching their political expansion with territorial gains. Weeks after their triumph in Sana'a they captured Damar, to the south of the capital, before proceeding to Hodeida, a port city in west Yemen. This was an understandable strategic move. Hodeida provides access to Bab al-Mandab, a southern entrance to the Red Sea. Bab al-Mandab links up with the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean and separates East Africa from the Arabian Peninsula. Approximately 4 percent of the world's oil supply passes through this waterway.⁶⁴

Saleh and the Houthis

WHEN THE HOUTHIS CAPTURED DAMAR AND HODEIDA, THEY DID SO WITHOUT A fight. The ease with which they swept through Sana'a can be attributed to the shambolic nature of the Yemeni military.⁶⁵ However, it also suggests a possible deal. Saleh may have seen the Houthis as a vehicle with which to wreck the Yemeni political process, defeat adversaries such as al-Islah and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and even manoeuvre back into power.

Saleh-aligned army units were rumoured to have reached truces with the Houthis even before their takeover of Sana'a, while the capture of Damar is thought to have been assisted by tribesmen loyal to Saleh.⁶⁶ There have also been suggestions that tribesmen fighting alongside the Houthis were Saleh loyalists, and that Saleh instructed his supporters to help control the streets of Sana'a once Ali Mohsen had been defeated. One Sana'a resident who had observed certain checkpoints in the capital commented, "I know these people. They aren't Houthis.

They... couldn't care less about the Houthis."⁶⁷ The implication is that Saleh loyalists struck up an alliance of convenience. The former president's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, is one possible collaborator. Until August 2012, he was head of the elite Republican Guard.

An alliance with Saleh's may make sense for the Houthis in the short term, but it is not a move that will gain them popular support. The Houthi takeover of Sana'a has already cost them some of the goodwill they had accrued during their anti-corruption campaign. By cooperating with the unpopular Saleh, who is hated in Yemen and against whom the Houthis had agitated for so long, the group runs significant risks.

Iran and the Houthis

WHILE THE HOUTHIS ARE A HOME GROWN MOVEMENT WHOSE STRENGTH IS LARGELY based on exploiting local grievances, they also have important connections to Iran.

In December 2009, Arab and Egyptian sources reported that meetings were taking place between the Houthis, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, Iran's Lebanese proxy.⁶⁸ Months before, the U.S. had largely dismissed Saleh's attempt to link the Houthis to the Iranian government.⁶⁹ In September 2009, the U.S. assessed that "Iranian influence in Yemen has thus far been limited to informal religious ties between Yemeni and Iranian scholars and negligible Iranian investment in the energy and development sectors."⁷⁰

However, suspicions concerning Iranian ties to the Houthis strengthened in January 2013 when a boat containing anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades was intercepted on its way to Yemen. The Yemeni government believed that the large weapons cache was loaded in Iran and destined for "armed insurgents" in Yemen.⁷¹ One Yemeni official has claimed that Iran continues to ship weapons while Western officials charge Hezbollah with channelling cash to the Houthis.⁷²

As the Yemeni tribal and conflict analyst Nadwa al-Dawsari points out, some Iranian leaders publicly celebrated the Houthi triumphs. For example, Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior adviser to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, stated that Iran "supports the rightful struggles of [the Houthis] in Yemen and considers this movement as part of the successful Islamic Awakening movements."⁷³ In return, the Houthis have also been known to profess support for Iranian religious figures, including Khamenei.⁷⁴

Furthermore, another Iranian official has stated that the elite IRGC Quds Force has a military presence in Yemen and is training Houthis. It has also been alleged that Hezbollah dispatched military operatives to the Houthis.⁷⁵ In fact, suspected Hezbollah members and IRGC officers were arrested at Sana'a International Airport under the suspicion that they had come to train rebels.⁷⁶ These individuals were freed after the Houthis seized Sana'a last September.⁷⁷ Iranian training of Houthis does not occur just in Yemen. According to members of the Yemeni government, Iran has also used Hezbollah to train Houthis in southern Lebanon. This training is thought to be overseen by the IRGC.⁷⁸

Iran's potential ties to Yemen have significant geopolitical consequences, particularly for Saudi Arabia. Yemen's northern neighbour has historically wielded significant influence in Yemen via large cash payments and aid to key political and tribal figures.⁷⁹ The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, has called on Iran to remove its "occupying" forces (not just from Yemen, but also from Iraq and Syria).⁸⁰ The GCC, too, issued a warning of not "stand[ing] idly" while foreign powers took over Yemen.⁸¹ As the ongoing Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen demonstrate, the Saudis have been willing to match their rhetoric with action.

AQAP and the Houthis

SHORTLY AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 21 AGREEMENT, ABDEL MALEK AL-HOUTHİ delivered a speech from Saada in which he stated that "the most dangerous obstacles" facing Yemen—seemingly a reference to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and his tribal and Sunni associates, such as al-Islah—had been removed. The only "remaining obstacle" was AQAP.⁸²

In fact, AQAP had been taking advantage of the unrest by inserting dozens of operatives into Sana'a to join pre-existing sleeper cells. In an AQAP video released weeks before the Houthis entered the capital, AQAP leader Jalal Beleidi warned that "[o]ur fighters have entered Sana'a and we are waiting for this battle. Our fight will be against both the Houthis and the government."⁸³

This was not an empty threat. At the end of September, AQAP targeted a house in Saada owned by a prominent Houthi and a Houthi-controlled hospital in Marib, east Yemen.⁸⁴ Shortly after bin Mubarak declined the prime ministership, AQAP launched two subsequent suicide attacks. One occurred in Sana'a, targeting Houthis gathered at Tahrir Square, and killed over forty people, while the other in Hadramawt, southeast Yemen, targeted the military and killed at least

twenty soldiers.⁸⁵ Between October 16–20, AQAP claimed responsibility for sixteen separate attacks, largely in central Yemen.⁸⁶

AQAP will increasingly come into conflict with the Houthis in the months ahead as both groups strengthen their presence throughout Yemen and look to make inroads into new territory. For example, in October, AQAP took control of Udain, a town in southwest Yemen. This was potentially a retaliatory move after the Houthis took control of nearby Ibb, a known AQAP area of operation.⁸⁷

Another example is the current Houthi attempt to expand into Radaa, al-Bayda province. This is bringing them into conflict with both AQAP and tribal fighters.⁸⁸ The escalation of Houthi–AQAP violence is already becoming clear. Following the Houthi push into Radaa, AQAP military commander Qasim al-Raymi warned that their actions “will not just pass unnoticed and you will pay the price dearly.”⁸⁹ These were not empty words. Days later, AQAP and allied tribal fighters launched six attacks over one weekend against the Houthis.⁹⁰ On December 3, AQAP launched a car bomb attack targeting the home of the Iranian ambassador; and, on December 15, a co-ordinated AQAP car bomb attack against Houthi positions in Radaa led to the deaths of twenty five people, including fifteen children.⁹¹

The Radaa tribes are not supportive of AQAP’s ideology, but they also regard the Houthis as outsiders and are wary of their attempts to appropriate land and usurp power. Therefore, the more the Houthis expand, the greater will be AQAP’s ability to recruit. As Nadwa al-Dawsari has noted, a similar situation occurred in the summer of 2014 when al-Islah and the tribes fought Houthis in Marib and Jawf.⁹²

The Houthi–AQAP clashes are likely to lead to increased sectarianism. While this has generally not been a motivating factor in the various battles throughout Yemen, AQAP regards the Houthis as heretics and will attempt to frame the conflict in sectarian terms. This could play into a latent concern among Sunnis about the rapidity and scale of the recent Houthi expansion.

AQAP and the Future of Yemen

IN RECENT TIMES, YEMEN HAS SUFFERED FROM A LACK OF SUCCESSFUL GOVERNING models, making the conditions ripe for a group such as the Houthis to gain a solid level of support. However, their recent actions have undercut much of this support. The Houthis ability to hold onto territory in the face of pushback from AQAP, Saudi-led air strikes and potential resistance from actors such as al-Islah and Ali

Mohsen al-Ahmar remains to be seen. In a country beset by violence, division and poverty, whoever manages to emerge from this struggle in the long term remains an open question.

AQAP has always sought to take advantage of this type of instability in Yemen. Fortunately, AQAP's style of jihadism has proven unable to attract popular support. Furthermore, in the past, the group has displayed an inability to hold territory in the face of concerted military opposition from the army, state-backed militias and tribes. This sets it apart from ISIS, which has shown itself capable of seizing and holding territory. Yet the impact that ISIS' rise has had on Yemen's jihadist movement should not be overstated. It may have generated some expressions of sympathy and a small number of defections from AQAP, but AQAP's senior leadership remains united in their loyalty to Ayman al-Zawahiri and are leading the effort to foster unity among likeminded Sunnis. Furthermore, with President Hadi having fled to Saudi Arabia, there is no legitimate central government in Yemen. AQAP will exploit this weakness by expanding into new territories across the country and potentially helping convince wavering Yemeni jihadists that AQAP is well equipped to match ISIS' achievements.

As AQAP attempts to take and hold territory, the group will increasingly come into conflict with the aggressively expansionist Houthis. Whoever comes out on top will help dictate Yemen's future. Unfortunately, neither option provides much reason for optimism. An uptick in violence is certain and a rise in sectarianism remains possible. Inevitably, AQAP will be at the heart of both.

No matter the developments within Yemen in the months ahead, AQAP will remain relevant to not only that country, but the jihadist movement as a whole. It is a highly resilient organization. Its key leaders have been killed in drone strikes, its territorial gains at times have been reversed, and its spectacular transnational terrorism has raised the ire of Western governments. Yet—as recent events in Paris have proved—it continues to thrive and manages to retain relative unity in the face of ISIS. It is no surprise that defeating the group remains such a priority for governments across the world.

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Jordanian Salafism and the Jihad in Syria

By Kirk H. Sowell

THE CONFLICT WHICH ERUPTED IN SYRIA IN 2011 BEGAN AS AN opening for Jordanian Salafists, but it has morphed into a challenging dilemma: caught between two competing Salafist-Jihadist movements in Syria and an increasingly tough crackdown at home, Jordanian Salafists wanting to support the jihad in Syria have been forced to weigh their words and actions carefully. In fact, due to geographical proximity and historical ties, Jordanian Salafists have made one of the largest manpower contributions to Syria's sectarian war. Yet the Jordanian government's increasingly tight rein on both the movement's leaders and its rank-and-file has forced Salafists to trade rhetorical restraint for operational freedom. In turn, these rhetorical concessions threaten to alienate the Salafist youth from its leadership. Moreover, from the government's point of view, the tacit entente by which Salafists are granted a margin of freedom in exchange for a guarantee of peace at home has always carried within it the danger of the pro-jihadist current growing.

Salafism is an Islamic movement whose contemporary form stems from Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi religious establishment. Like Saudi Arabia, Jordan developed a pro-government Salafism referred to as "traditionalist Salafism." In response, there arose in the 1990s a "Salafi-Jihadist current" (the Saudi equivalent became al-Qaeda and emigrated from the Gulf). The godfather of this current is a Palestinian known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqqisi, who by the 1990s had emerged as a key intellectual architect of global jihadism. But even this radical wing split between Maqqisi and a faction led by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who

post-2003 transformed the faction into al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Maqdisi was Zarqawi's mentor in the 1990s; the split within this wing continues, and was on global display during the drama over the captivity and filmed immolation of Jordanian airman Moaz al-Kassasbeh in early 2015.¹

This study focuses on the impact of the Arab Spring—or “Salafi Spring”—and the subsequent rise of Salafi-Jihadism in Syria on Jordanian Salafi-Jihadism. The repression of Syria's protest movement in 2011 gave birth to an armed insurgency which became ever more Islamist and Salafist over time. Simultaneously, Jordanian Salafists in 2011 focused their efforts at home on demands for Islamic law and the freeing of Salafist prisoners.

The rise of Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) as the dominant jihadist wing of the Syrian rebellion in 2012 marked a second stage in the Syrian uprising; before long, Jordanian Salafists began making their way to Syria. During 2012 and 2013, Jordanian Salafist leaders became increasingly open in their support for “jihad” in Syria, even while holding to Maqdisi's doctrine of “peaceful mission” at home in Jordan.

A third post-2010 stage began in April 2013 with the split between JAN and the organization that began calling itself Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The leader of ISIS, an Iraqi named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the organizational and ideological successor to Zarqawi, renewing the conflict in Jordan between the Maqdisi and Zarqawi factions. Most senior members of the Salafist current sided with JAN, including Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, a Jordanian citizen close to the Salafi-Jihadist current's other famous spiritual guide, Osama bin Laden. But a large segment of the rank-and-file sided with the Zarqawi wing, and after ISIS' dramatic victories in eastern Syria and Iraq in 2013 and 2014, it appeared that Maqdisi and other “realists” of the current were faltering, a perception driven in part by an openly pro-ISIS demonstration in the city of Maan in April 2014.

The past year has proven tumultuous for both Maqdisi and Abu Qatada: both increased their criticism of ISIS, were released from prison for a time, and were suspected of having betrayed jihadist Islam in order to escape the ire of the Jordanian authorities and jail. While the grisly murder of Kassasbeh has turned many Jordanians hard against ISIS, Maqdisi's failed attempt to secure Kassasbeh's release served only to raise more questions about his credibility. At the same time, the Kassasbeh incident may also raise questions over the Jordanian government's judgment for giving free reign to the openly pro-al-Qaeda Maqdisi. Today, with traditionalist, pro-government Salafists marginalized and “Zarqawists” on the defensive, Maqdisi and like-minded Salafi-Jihadists may have an opportunity to rebuild.

Jordanian Salafism Prior To 2010

SALAFISM IN JORDAN HAS LONG MIRRORED TRENDS IN THE REGION. PRIOR TO THE 1970s, Salafism was primarily associated with reformist efforts to draw upon Islam's origins to address contemporary concerns in a practical way. However, with Wahhabi educational and religious propaganda flooding the region under Saudi Arabia's King Faisal, Salafism increasingly took on the theologically militant but politically quietist bent of the Saudi kingdom's own establishment.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan gave this Saudi brand of ruler-friendly Salafism wide scope as a way of checking the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing Salafists to gain a notable, albeit not mass, following in the 1980s. The founder of Jordanian Salafism was an Albanian scholar, Muhammad Nasr al-Din al-Albani, who first joined the "Damascus wing" of the Muslim Brotherhood close to the Salafists in Syria. In the early 1980s, after a period in Saudi Arabia, he moved to Jordan.² Albani then recreated in his adopted homeland a Salafism based on the Saudi model: conservative, non-violent, and pro-government.

In the 1990s, even as Jordan welcomed apolitical Salafism, a new Salafi-Jihadist movement rose across the region. In Jordan, this trend was most prominently embodied by the West Banker and Jordanian citizen, Asim al-Barqawi, known as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.³ Maqdisi's family moved to Kuwait from the West Bank when he was young, but he spent time studying in Saudi Arabia with brief sojourns to Mosul, Sarajevo, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These travels exposed him to, and allowed him to connect with, other Islamists.

Maqdisi created the Salafi-Jihadist current in Jordan. His two most important books, both in circulation by the 1990s, made him an intellectual architect of al-Qaeda's global jihad through his concepts of "loyalty and disassociation" and "not seeking the aid of the infidels." These doctrines were pillars of al-Qaeda's theological assaults on Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and its alliance with the United States.⁴ Maqdisi arrived in Jordan in 1992; like many Palestinians, his family was evicted from Kuwait in retaliation for Palestinian support of the Iraq invasion. Upon his arrival, Maqdisi encountered a militant scene that peppered Jordan with night club attacks and the like, but lacked ideological coherence and vision. He moved to fill the void, providing an ideological framework for those Islamists who favored Islamist law and jihad over elections and peaceful relations with non-Muslim powers.⁵

Over the ensuing decade a split emerged between Maqdisi and his most promi-

ment pupil, a Jordanian from Zarqa named Ahmad al-Khalayaleh, known to the world as the infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Maqdisi's jihadism incorporated what he called *silmīyat al-dawa*, or "the peaceful mission"; if Salafists could not hope to defeat the state, as in Jordan, Maqdisi believed that they should focus on converting a critical mass of society first. Zarqawi, a much more confrontational personality, instead opted to take up arms immediately, leading to a split between the two while imprisoned in the late 1990s. After their release in 1999, Zarqawi took his faction to Afghanistan and Iraq, where he launched bloody attacks until his own death thanks to a U.S. airstrike in 2006.⁶

As the Zarqawi-driven bloodletting escalated in post-2003 Iraq, Maqdisi publicized his dissent in a letter from prison, *al-munasira wa al-munasiha*, "Aid and Counsel."⁷ Maqdisi criticized Zarqawi's jihad for its cost in Muslim lives (weighed against the likelihood of success), its targeting of civilians, and its use of suicide bombers. In July 2005, after his release from prison, Maqdisi escalated his criticisms in an interview with al-Jazeera. Maqdisi broadsided Zarqawi on a range of issues, rejecting his attacks on civilians, including Shia, and arguing that suicide bombers could only be used "exceptionally, in case of necessity," and then only against military targets. Maqdisi, consistent with his "peaceful mission" in Jordan, supported jihad in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine against foreign powers, but said in Muslim countries Salafists should focus on preaching rather than "blowing up cinemas."⁸

Importantly, however, Maqdisi was still advocating war against countries with which Jordan was at peace, a crime defined in the Hashemite kingdom as "undermining relations with other states."⁹ Moreover, his release was thought to have been conditioned on a general media ban, which his al-Jazeera interview had blatantly violated. As a result, authorities promptly arrested him again. On November 6, 2005, just as Maqdisi was settling into his prison cell, Zarqawi's organization launched spectacular terrorist attacks against three hotels in Amman, killing 60 people. The attacks sparked popular outrage against the Salafi-Jihadists across the kingdom, and put them on the defensive.

As soon as he was released in March 2008, Maqdisi launched an effort to rehabilitate the current and guide it back toward the path he had envisioned in the 1990s, a project made easier by Zarqawi's death. Maqdisi focused on three priorities: returning to the "peaceful mission" inside Jordan so as to build up a network; warning against "extremism" in *takfir*, or "excessive killing of Muslims by declaring them apostates"; and, shifting the focus of jihad to Palestine, which meant preparing for war against Israel. Despite Zarqawi's death, however, Maqdisi faced a range of competitors and obstacles. Unlike in the 1990s, Maqdisi was suddenly

confronted with the global jihadist polemics of the internet era, which allowed many Zarqawists to target him relentlessly. One online tract, mockingly entitled “Islamic Judgment on Ruling While Fleeing from the Field of Jihad,” sarcastically referenced Maqdisi abandoning the jihad in Afghanistan and later criticizing the jihad in Iraq from the safety of his Jordanian prison cell.¹⁰

Maqdisi is not in any real sense a “moderate Islamist.” He praised the 9/11 attacks and has not broken with al-Qaeda. He also remains an advocate of jihad. Indeed, his professed reason for leaving Afghanistan rather than staying to fight is illustrative. During a series of lectures after his release in 2008, Maqdisi spoke about an open disagreement he had once had with the revered Abdullah Azzam, bin Laden’s mentor. According to Maqdisi, when Azzam instructed young men to overlook “polytheistic practices” by locals in order to ensure the unity of jihad, Maqdisi defied him in front of the other students by arguing that he could not tolerate the “polytheism” of Afghan Muslims who venerate tombs, among other practices.¹¹ By contrast, Zarqawi’s split with bin Laden appears to have been motivated by wanting to fight and lead his own group.

Maqdisi was arrested again on December 23, 2010 for recruiting individuals to join the Taliban.¹² Given Maqdisi’s open advocacy of “jihad” in Afghanistan, his August 2011 conviction was predictable.¹³ The key implication of this event was that Maqdisi was sidelined and in prison just as the popular revolts of 2011 seized the Arab world. This allowed more junior members of the Salafi-Jihadist movement to come to the fore.

Indeed, multiple actors filled the void created on the Jordanian Salafist scene by the death of Zarqawi and the imprisonment of Maqdisi. Their actions are significant indicators of the shifts between the wings of the current Zarqawi and Maqdisi represent. The most well-known is the Palestinian Umar Mahmud bin Umar, or Abu Qatada al-Filistini. Abu Qatada represented Osama bin Laden in Europe, and was embroiled in a long extradition battle with Great Britain. He spent only a short period in Jordan in the 1990s, and did not return until 2014. Nonetheless, he and Maqdisi alone are habitually described in Arabic media as *al-munathir al-salafi al-jihadi*, or “the Salafi-Jihadist Guide.” Other key actors include Muhammad al-Shalbi, or Abu Sayyaf, and Saad al-Hunayti. Abu Sayyaf is the leading Salafist of Maan, a southern province which along with Zarqa is a Salafist stronghold; like Abu Qatada, Abu Sayyaf positioned himself within the pro-Jabhat al-Nusra Maqdisi wing and by 2012 had gone from being a local personality in Maan to the current’s key spokesman nationwide.¹⁴ Hunayti, on the other hand, hails from Irbid, north of Amman, and is the most prominent Jordanian to join Islamic State.

Jordan's Limited Salafi Spring: 2011

IN LESS THAN TWO MONTHS IN LATE 2010 AND EARLY 2011, THE ARAB WORLD'S political map changed decisively. In Tunisia, President Ben Ali was driven from power, followed by Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In both cases Salafists were marginal players; in Egypt, Salafists had been close to the government and initially did not even participate in the uprising. Once it became clear change was inevitable, however, Egyptian Salafists joined the "revolution" in an effort to Islamize it and institute Islamic law. As a power void developed, Tunisian and Egyptian Salafists focused their energies on checking secularists; meanwhile, in Jordan, the protest movement showed no likelihood of overthrowing the monarchy. Secular activists and rival Muslim Brothers sought only to "reform the regime" and return to the 1952 constitution, which was closer to a genuine constitutional monarchy than the 2011 status quo.¹⁵

So when Jordanian Salafists held their first protest on March 2, 2011 in Amman, they narrowed their focus on Islamic law and the release of 300-odd prisoners who they claimed had been mistreated in prison. Salafists took up the Tunisian and Egyptian slogan—*isqat al-nitham*, "overthrow the regime."¹⁶ At that point Jordan's Salafists were still focused inward, inspired by events in North Africa, but not yet engaged regionally. Another protest in Amman on March 20 similarly employed chants demanding the release of imprisoned Salafists, and "No Bail Except the Law of God," while waving the flag of Islamic State (which Jordanian Salafi-Jihadists had taken as their own).¹⁷

With the jihadi wing activated, Salafi traditionalists could not stay silent for long. Ali al-Halabi, the leading student of Shaykh Albani, who had founded Jordanian Salafism, issued a video lecture on March 12 criticizing the protests as "far from the law of God" and driven by materialistic motives.¹⁸ By June, Halabi felt compelled to provide a more detailed statement in which he approved of protests in the case of apostasy (*takfir*) by the ruler or when in the interests of the Islamic nation, but he saw neither criteria met in Egypt, just chaos and suffering brought about by "party activists (*hizbiin*), takfirists (al-Qaeda-style Salafists) and Qutbists (Muslim Brothers)."¹⁹

The traditionalist Mashhur Hassan had already spoken out on February 5, even before the jihadist wing had activated, arguing that what was happening in Egypt was a "conspiracy" that "brings divisions among the people which is the worst form of *fitna*." He added that while change was necessary, it should come through

individual spiritual change, rather than the protesting ways of “communists, nationalists and party activists.”²⁰ Mashhur was also the Jordanian representative to a group of clerics—dominated by Saudis—which in January had issued a statement declaring the protests un-Islamic.²¹

The Salafi-Jihadists moved on April 13, 2011, holding a press conference that launched a frontal attack on regime-loyal Salafists. According to Saad al-Hunayti, the traditionalists were “allied with the oppressive, dictatorial regimes and are in turn allied with the Jews and the Americans.” Hunayti added that “there is a deal between that current and the regimes,” and the fatwas opposing anti-Hashemite protests “are entirely contrary to the beliefs of Sunni authorities.” He added that “their doctrine is flawed to the point that even Saudi clerics have critiqued them.” Abd al-Qadir Shahada, a Salafi-Jihadist from Irbid who is called Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, described the traditionalist wing as “those who represent one of the regimes’ organizations, like a tourism commission or other institution which governments create.”²²

Shortly thereafter, on April 15, the first direct clashes between Salafi-Jihadists and the government broke out in Zarqa. Salafists blamed pro-government *baltajiya* (an Egyptian word for “thugs”) for attacking and provoking peaceful protesters, thereby giving the security services a pretext to intervene.²³ The following day, the Jordanian government arrested three key Salafists—Tahawi, Hunayti, and Jirah al-Rahahala.²⁴ Activists filmed the ensuing street melees, and issued a series of videos juxtaposing public comments from government officials with footage of riot police beating unarmed individuals in the streets.²⁵ For Salafists, Zarqa remains a touchstone to this day.²⁶

One notable Salafist preacher who participated in these events was Ayman al-Balawi. The imam of the Sanjaqiya Mosque in Amman, Balawi is known for being the brother of Humam al-Balawi, the Jordanian who conducted the infamous 2009 suicide bombing at the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan that killed seven CIA officers and a member of the Hashemite royal family. Authorities arrested him shortly after the clashes.²⁷ He was later released, and then rearrested in April 2013. According to his attorney, he was detained after questioning by the security services and after the Waqf Ministry—which had barred him from preaching—had allowed him to resume his activities.²⁸

Wisam al-Amush, a former Guantanamo detainee and Jordanian Salafist, cleverly argued that it wasn’t in the interest of the Jordanian government for Salafists to go peacefully “because it benefits from what is referred to as the war on terrorism, thus viewing Salafist groups as like oil wells from which they can gain large sums of money from the West and America.” According to Amush, the

clashes in Zarqa were precipitated precisely because the movement had turned to peaceful tactics.²⁹ In June 2011, about 300 prisoners at three separate prisons began a hunger strike.³⁰ Amush's reasoning is an extension of Maqdisi's "peaceful mission" doctrine, focusing on building the movement rather than wasting lives in a pointless fight with the state.

In September, the Salafists picked up efforts to find a way to work within the Hashemite state framework. From prison, Maqdisi called for the cessation of public sit-ins in order to improve the environment for talks with the government. Moreover, public reporting indicated that Maqdisi had "prohibited the formation of an armed wing or the conduct of operations on Jordanian territory." Abu Sayyaf, who had been in prison for alleged terrorist organizing but was freed at the beginning of the month, quickly moved to narrow the gap with the Muslim Brotherhood. Brotherhood leader Humam Said visited him in Maan, and Abu Sayyaf conducted an interview with the Brotherhood's newspaper, *al-Sabeel*.³¹

September was a busy month for the Salafists. Until this point they had merely been a current with no formal structure, but now they began openly discussing the possibility of forming a Shura Council. Abu Sayyaf announced that the council would have two offices, comprising an executive branch and a media center. He said it would focus on Islamic law and prisoner releases.³² Two weeks later, Abu Sayyaf denied any intention of forming a political party, arguing that such a move was un-Islamic. At the same time, however, he blurred the lines between Salafi-Jihadists and traditionalists by declining to declare *takfir* against Muslims with different views. He also said that he had visited Maqdisi in prison, and gained his blessing for these moves.³³ Perhaps most interestingly, Syria is not mentioned in any of the source reporting on the Shura Council during this period. As of late 2011, Jordanian Salafists remained focused on their own affairs. They never received the general amnesty they sought, although some prisoners were released gradually on an individual basis. But while the prisoner issue never went away, events in Syria soon took precedence.

Jabhat al-Nusra and the Turn Toward Syria

THE EMERGENCE OF JABHAT AL-NUSRA IN 2012 WAS A TURNING POINT FOR Jordanian Salafists. Individuals began emigrating to Syria to fight, but there was

neither an open declaration of jihad nor a statement of support from the Salafi-Jihadi current's leadership, as this could have meant arrest. However, over the course of 2012, press reports began to appear of Jordanians fighting and dying in Syria.

Illustrating the current's two-fold strategy of jihad abroad and "peaceful mission" at home as expounded by Maqdisi, Abu Sayyaf publicly proclaimed in April 2012 that Salafists "will never give up on jihad against the Syrian regime," while also emphasizing jihad against Israel, which he claimed was being stymied only by security forces. Inside Jordan, Abu Sayyaf continued, "the government and security services fear we will enter the movement for reform, and so they arrest our members."³⁴ That same month authorities arrested a prominent Salafist from Maan, Abdullah Qaba'a, and eight others as they sought to cross the border into Syria.³⁵ Given Abu Sayyaf's prominence in Maan, it is clear that the government would tolerate jihadi rhetoric—something that would change by 2014—but arrest those acting on it.

In August 2012, Syrian television ran a program featuring "confessions" from young Jordanian Salafists claiming to have been sent to Syria. Despite its past public sympathies for the war effort, the current rejected any ties to the individuals.³⁶ Interestingly, the program also cited Abu Sayyaf as having sent people for "jihad" to Syria, although it framed his statement as the current "announces sending terrorists to Syria."³⁷

Over time, Salafi-Jihadist rhetoric grew bolder. In early September 2012, before a crowd of 200 in Amman, Abu Sayyaf reportedly boasted that there would be more attacks in Syria, expressly confirming that Jordanians were going to Syria to join Jabhat al-Nusra.³⁸ In public, Salafist leaders adopted a nuanced position, offering general statements of support for the war against the Syrian government—sometimes even described as "jihad"—while denying any and all operational involvement. By October, leaders acknowledged "more than 100" Jordanian Salafists had died in Syria, and the Jordanian *al-Watan News* noted that local activists were holding memorial services for the fallen in Irbid, Maan and Baq'a.³⁹ In November, when the Salafist Imad al-Naturi of Irbid executed a suicide bombing in Dara, just north of the Jordanian border, Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi commented that Naturi had "obtained the honor of martyrdom."⁴⁰

Tahawi illustrates this shift in focus. As mentioned, Tahawi participated in the April 15, 2011 protest in Zarqa. That evening, speaking to al-Jazeera, he vehemently denied any armed intentions, arguing that photos showing Salafists with light weapons (knives, etc.) were fabricated.⁴¹ The next day, the government arrested him. Tahawi was later released, and with the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra he shifted the focus of his preaching to jihad in Syria. On February 24, 2012, he issued a

video lecture with instructions for those going to Syria, drawing on examples from Afghanistan to identify the kinds of groups to avoid (e.g. mercenaries and secular actors).⁴²

At that point, in early 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra was still low-profile, but as late as December 2012 Tahawi denied that the current was tied to JAN. That same month, however, he attended a “martyr’s funeral” for a Jordanian Jabhat al-Nusra suicide bomber, and praised the group: “To our heroes in Jabhat al-Nusra...[you] will first conquer the Levant, and then after that Tel Aviv.”⁴³ The Jordanian authorities arrested him on January 17, 2013.⁴⁴

By September 2012, the Jordanian role in Syria was also attracting more pan-Arab media attention. Al-Jazeera interviewed various Salafists on and off the record, concluding that while the number of Jordanians in Syria was not large, “they constitute special significance since most of them fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.” In other words, they were viewed as Zarqawists. The report quoted Abu Sayyaf as saying Jordanians were going to Syria “after a number of scholars issued fatwas saying that jihad in Syria had become an individual duty [*fard ayn*] upon every Muslim.”⁴⁵ The use of the phrase *fard ayn* is significant, as it casts the jihad in Syria not as an offensive jihad requiring only the participation of some Muslims, but as a defensive one defending Islam and thus incumbent upon all.

Quoting the Jordanian Islamism expert Hassan Abu Haniya, the report identified not only Jabhat al-Nusra but also the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Fatah al-Islam, Jund al-Sham and the Faruq Battalions as destinations for Jordanian fighters. Notably, Abu Haniya was quoted making reference to the Maqdisi-Zarqawi split, implying that Maqdisi opposed jihad in Syria, although Maqdisi himself—then still languishing in prison—had not said this.⁴⁶ Over the course of the next year it would become clear that Maqdisi did in fact support Jabhat al-Nusra.

The professional and ideological trajectory of Saad al-Hunayti is also quite important, as he would first join JAN and then move to Islamic State. Appearing on a talk show in October 2012, Hunayti mocked official statements about the threat of Salafists returning from Syria, but danced around the core issue of what the current’s actual position was on the jihad in Syria while strenuously denying any domestic armed activity and voicing general support for the Syrian uprising.⁴⁷ Even as late as January 2014, Hunayti, speaking to al-Jazeera, was only somewhat more explicit, praising a recent statement by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for his “reconciling tone with the jihadists,” and the “healing of wounds” for the sake of “jihad in Syria.”⁴⁸ Indeed, while still in Jordan, Hunayti remained taciturn.

Jordanians appear to have assumed an important role in Jabhat al-Nusra’s operations in the southern province of Dara, which sits between Damascus and

the main crossing into Jordan. In fact, one June 2013 article cited different sources in claiming that 500 to 5,000 Jordanians were active in Syria. While this range is so large as to be virtually meaningless, there was agreement among the sources cited that the key Jordanians in the south are Mustapha Abd al-Latif, known as Abu Anas al-Sahaba, and Iyad al-Tubasi, known as Abu Jalibib. Abu Anas, like Maqdisi, resides in Rasifa, a Palestinian-dominated suburb of Zarqa (in fact, he is reportedly Maqdisi's next-door neighbor), and is variously described as JAN's commander in Dara, its emir in west Dara, or, by *al-Hayat*, as "the military commander in the southern area."⁴⁹ As for Abu Jalibib, he stems from Zarqa, and is allegedly the brother-in-law of the late Zarqawi. Jalibib was reportedly dispatched by Baghdadi to Dara in the early phases of Islamic State's intervention in Syria, when it was still just Jabhat al-Nusra.

There is a great deal of confusion among Arabic sources as to which man is most senior, and it is not clear if this is due to inaccuracies or perhaps to evolving roles being reported out of sequence over time. However, one February 2014 paper by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace identifies Jalibib as JAN's commander for both Damascus and Dara, which some Arabic reporting during the 2012–2013 period seems to substantiate.⁵⁰

As an indication of the confusion surrounding the matter, one ultimately discredited but widely circulating report in mid-December 2012 claimed that JAN leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani was in fact a second pseudonym for Tubasi/Jalibib. Moreover, the report speculated that he had been killed, forcing the Jordanian Salafist Shura Council to replace him with Abu Anas. Tahawi refuted the report, claiming that he was "startled" since such actions would constitute "interference" in JAN's affairs.⁵¹

It appears that this speculation originated with *United Press International*, which quoted an unnamed Jordanian Salafist who claimed that a Jordanian "Mujahidin Shura Council" had appointed Abu Anas.⁵² Al-Jazeera repeated the claim, based on its own Amman-based reporting, but eventually issued a retraction.⁵³ However, the wording of Tahawi's denial and the apparent independent sourcing for the claim suggests that there may in fact have been a failed attempt by some Jordanians to take over Jabhat al-Nusra.

What makes Abu Anas' role in JAN notable is his recent ties to the Jordanian Salafi-Jihadist movement; whereas Jalibib had reportedly been in Iraq during the entire 2006–2011 period, Abu Anas was active in Jordan. Having been arrested in Syria—like many jihadists, after the Syrian government began to perceive those it has been sponsoring in Iraq as a threat to its own survival—Abu Anas was transferred to Jordan, released, and then rearrested after the Zarqa clashes.⁵⁴ In

fact, Abu Anas was standing behind Hunayti during the key Salafi-Jihadist press conference in April 2011.⁵⁵

Between Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra

IN APRIL 2013, ISLAMIC STATE SPOKESMAN ABU MUHAMMAD AL-ADNANI surprised the jihadist world by announcing Islamic State as “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (ISIS). This also apparently surprised JAN leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, as he promptly declared JAN to be an independent organization and pledged *baya* (allegiance) to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. While some media described the move as a “merger” between the two groups, Adnani made clear that ISIS had dispatched Jolani to Syria, and that the announcement simply served as confirmation of existing circumstances. Any remaining ambiguity disappeared in June when a letter from Zawahiri confirming Jolani in his authority was published. ISIS defied Zawahiri, and Zawahiri later disclaimed any al-Qaeda presence in Iraq.

This turn of events would have two key consequences for Jordan’s Salafi-Jihadist movement. One was to intensify government pressure on its leaders, since JAN now openly affiliated with al-Qaeda, thereby eliminating the “plausible deniability” of pro-JAN Salafists. While Salafist leaders were diplomatic in their public statements, the implications of their sympathy for Jabhat al-Nusra was now clear. But a second and perhaps even more profound consequence of the ISIS-JAN split was that it reopened the split between the Maqdisi and Zarqawi wings of the movement. While Zarqawists seem to have made up most of those going to Syria, the Maqdisi wing was supporting JAN as well. Immediately after the split they appear to have tried to avoid an open break, although this may have been in part due to the fact that in April 2013 Maqdisi was still in prison, Abu Qatada was in Britain, and others were carefully weighing their words. That soon changed.

Abu Qatada spoke out first. In July 2013, Britain extradited him to Jordan, and in October he appeared before the State Security Court. In court, Abu Qatada accused the judge of corruption; afterward, he praised Jolani: “It was an excellent interview [with al-Jazeera], and his speech was befitting his nickname, *al-Fatih*” (the Conqueror). When asked about the issue of ISIS’ declared caliphate, Abu Qatada was more measured than he would later become, but nonetheless expressed his

displeasure: “This matter requires a lengthy explanation, but I call the leaders of IS [*al-dawla*, or “the state”] and Jabhat al-Nusra to unify, and comply by hearing and obedience in regard to what Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri has demanded.”⁵⁶

In a missive the following month entitled, “Letter to the Jihadists of the Levant,” Abu Qatada was sharper in his criticism of ISIS. He argued that jihadists must “learn the lessons of the past,” a clear reference to Zarqawi, and reject “fatwas which call for fealty to this caliphate.” At this point, Abu Qatada did not yet attack Baghdadi by name.⁵⁷ Before long, however, Abu Qatada was even criticizing ISIS for its imposition of the *jizya*, or Islamic tax for minorities, on Christians, arguing in April 2014 that a caliphate would have the obligation to protect Christians and their property in exchange for the *jizya*, and this ISIS could not do. On the same occasion Abu Qatada also condemned ISIS for killing Abu Khalid al-Suri, a prominent member of Islamic Front, a coalition of rebel groups that is Salafist but not jihadist.⁵⁸

Abu Qatada launched his most lengthy missive against ISIS, “Cloak of the Caliph,” in July 2014. The 21-page letter blasted the group on a long list of issues, but made two core arguments as to its illegitimacy. First, Abu Qatada argued that Islamic precedence required disputed caliphates to submit to arbitration by qualified scholars, and that only they could voluntarily declare a caliphate. Baghdadi had expressly refused to take this step despite the urging of Syrian Salafists, including Jabhat al-Nusra. Second, Abu Qatada essentially belittled ISIS as ignorant, charging that in his conversations with key ISIS figures he had found them lacking on basic matters of Islam. Notably, he referenced Maqdisi multiple times, emphasizing that he had spoken with Maqdisi before setting pen to paper.⁵⁹

However, with Maqdisi in prison since December 2010, and Abu Qatada joining him in Jordanian custody in July 2013, there were strong indications by November 2013 that Jordanian Salafists were losing control. *Al-Hayat*, quoting mostly anonymous local sources, reported on November 21 that “a majority of Jordanian Salafists who left for Syria to fight were fighting for Islamic State.” One major figure who openly rejected Abu Qatada’s critique was Omar Mahdi Al Zaydan of Irbid, who issued a letter saying that Abu Qatada had attacked Baghdadi unjustifiably, since “Abu Qatada is a prisoner shaykh, and a prisoner cannot issue fatwas because his personal legal status is compromised, and his fatwa can bring about ruin.” Zaydan continued his analysis: “We all know that Shaykh Jolani was a soldier of Commander of the Faithful [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi. Shaykh Abu Bakr is the commander, and Shaykh Jolani the commanded. The difference between the two is clear: Baghdadi’s emirate is great, and Jolani’s emirate was simply to wage war.”⁶⁰

As reported by *Al-Hayat*, Maqdisi responded by reiterating that “Zawahiri is the leader, and how can a leader be demanded to give fealty (*baya*) to his soldier?” Commenting on Zaydan, Maqdisi wrote condescendingly, “he has become unbalanced beyond his capacity, to the point of distributing orders to the commander of jihad,” Zawahiri. Maqdisi continued:

I have heard that he has addressed the commander of the mujahidin, our brother, our dear Jihadist Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri, may God preserve him, ordering him and demanding from him an oath of loyalty to one of his soldiers, sticking his nose into what does not concern him, speaking on something in which he lacks the jurisprudence or the knowledge to speak, leading simply to wailing laughter.⁶¹

The article went on to quote the University of Jordan’s Muhammad Abu Rumman, who assessed Maqdisi and Abu Qatada as representing the “realist” wing of the movement that enjoys the support of several prominent clerics, including Saad al-Hunayti, Munif Samara and Jarah al-Rahahala. However, as Abu Rumman pointed out, the “extremist Zarqawi wing” also had “major personalities,” who despite personal obscurity were able to recruit more fighters “because so many belong to the Zarqawi wing.”⁶²

Within a week in November 2013, Maqdisi distributed a second letter through Abu Sayyaf in which he not only criticized Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and ISIS, but also Bakr bin Abd al-Aziz, a Bahraini ISIS Salafist based in Aleppo known as Abu Humam al-Ithri. Maqdisi insulted Ithri: “I call Abu Humam al-Ithri and others who are calling for fealty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the general imam of Muslims, to deliberate further before publishing fatwas which purport to oblige the Islamic nation in great matters which require the study of a great scholar.” Maqdisi went on to declare it “important that Ithri and his brothers not be the cause of a division in the eyes of the world, for it is the intent of the Sharia to unify and not divide.”⁶³

In light of Maqdisi’s condescending tone to Ithri, it is especially interesting that according to *al-Hayat*’s “Jordanian jihadist sources,” Ithri had become the “Islamic legal advisor” for Maqdisi’s “Tawhed” site, formally “Pulpit of Monotheism and Jihad.”⁶⁴ In other words, Ithri had supposedly taken over Maqdisi’s place in the global jihadist publishing space.

A review of “Tawhed” suggests a substantial amount of writing from Ithri, but nothing since the time of Maqdisi’s reproof. In fact, the website announced a

reorganization, “Reestablishing the Fatwa Forum,” on August 16, 2014. It noted that “in addition to the presence of Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi—may God preserve him—at the head of the fatwa forum, the council also includes” other “editors:” Abdullah al-Hassani, Sami al-Aridi, Abu al-Iz al-Najdi, al-Muatasimillah al-Iraqi and Abu Abdullah al-Madani.⁶⁵

The movement’s alignment with JAN reached a key juncture on February 4, 2014, when *al-Ghad* reported that the movement’s Shura Council had formally banned Jordanians from fighting with ISIS in Syria. One *al-Ghad* source emphasized that this came after four members had left for Syria the previous week with the express intention of joining Jabhat al-Nusra, effectively formalizing “an alignment toward Jabhat al-Nusra, due to the support of Maqdisi and Abu Qatada for them.”⁶⁶ Yet the movement would not openly endorse JAN, as even facilitating travel to JAN is a criminal offense in Jordan. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Abu Sayyaf repeatedly emphasized that individuals traveling to Syria to fight were doing so of their own accord. In early April, he downplayed the current’s role in the war, estimating that about 2,000 Jordanians had traveled to Syria to fight, of whom about ten percent were dead. Abu Sayyaf noted that increased security made it difficult for members to cross the border.⁶⁷

Unfortunately for Abu Sayyaf, that same week news broke of Hunayti crossing to Syria via Turkey, ostensibly to bring about reconciliation between ISIS and JAN. Hunayti, who had been released from prison on bail in August 2013, said that he was giving *baya* to Baghdadi “in preparation for mediation,” framing it as a necessity. Remarkably, Hunayti had already rejected the movement’s Shura Council decision to boycott ISIS, even though he was a member of it.⁶⁸

Then on June 20, 2014, Abu Sayyaf’s home province of Maan became the scene of the only openly pro-ISIS march in Jordan. Marching with ISIS flags, hundreds chanted for jihad.⁶⁹ The demonstration came only three weeks after ISIS had published a video, “Message to Our People in Maan,” that featured ISIS rhetoric about jihad and the un-Islamic nature of the Jordanian regime and its security services.⁷⁰ But the 16-minute production also featured two additional notable elements. The first was a veiled attack on Maqdisi that chastised “those who fled jihad” and oppose ISIS. The second was the explicit reference to an Iraqi woman—“our sister Sajida al-Rishawi, may God end her imprisonment”—who had participated in the 2005 Amman hotel bombings but survived when her bomb failed to detonate. This April 2014 reference was notable as Rishawi, who had not been in the Jordanian media since 2005, would reenter public consciousness in January 2015 during the Kassasbeh crisis.

The only reported incident of violence in Jordan between ISIS and JAN

occurred around this time; notably, it involved the famous Maqdisi-aligned Imam Ayman al-Balawi, who was allegedly the victim of ISIS violence. As noted, Balawi was arrested in April 2011, released, then rearrested in April 2013. According to *Erem News*, in August 2014 authorities arrested three men for physically assaulting three Salafist preachers, including Balawi.⁷¹ Since the men were attacked separately and left alive, the likely goal was intimidation.⁷²

The leadership's clear preference for JAN, the events in Maan, and anecdotal observations from eyewitnesses suggest Jordanian Salafists were losing their grip on the rank-and-file. *Al-Hayat* concluded in July that two factors favoring ISIS were morale and geography: ISIS's stunning victories in Iraq inspired young men to believe that they were joining the winning side, and increased security along the Jordanian border had the perverse effect of helping ISIS vis-a-vis JAN, since it forced Jordanians to travel to Syria via Turkey and ISIS controlled areas.⁷³ On August 5, the independent Jordanian daily *al-Ghad* reached the same conclusion. A member of the Maqdisi wing, speaking off the record, expressed dismay that "Zarqawists" seemed to be winning the battle for hearts-and-minds among Jordanian Salafi-Jihadists, while "reformists" were losing ground. The same article quoted Abu Rumman, the Jordanian expert, as saying that while precise numbers were impossible to pin down, the Zarqawists seemed to be winning, a trend he attributed to ISIS' more explicitly sectarian rhetoric as compared to Jabhat al-Nusra and other Syrian Salafists.⁷⁴

In October 2014, ISIS announced the defection of Hunayti and Jaafar al-Shami from Jabhat al-Nusra, along with "40 fighters" in Aleppo.⁷⁵ Hunayti himself had previewed this development on his Facebook page, posting that he was "now in the land of the Caliphate." The same month, the aforementioned Zaydan made it across the border to become a judge for ISIS at its eastern Syrian base of Raqqa. At the time, *Middle East Online* noted that Zaydan had become known as one of the few leaders of the Jordanian Salafi-Jihadist current supporting ISIS.⁷⁶ Media reports indicated that the imprisoned Tahawi, like Hunayti and Zaydan from Irbid, had also given *baya* to Baghdadi.⁷⁷ Since this ensured Tahawi continued imprisonment, his swing to ISIS was mainly significant as it coincided with growing tension between his supporters in the Irbid Palestinian camp and Maqdisi's, as reported by *al-Arab al-Youm* on August 18.⁷⁸

The formal defection of the most prominent pro-ISIS leaders within the Jordanian movement only consolidated its remaining leadership's alignment with Jabhat al-Nusra. Abu Sayyaf threw caution to the wind, and in April even invited some western journalists to attend the funeral celebration of a "martyr" who had died in the service of JAN.⁷⁹ In July, Jolani had appointed the Jordanian Sami

al-Aridi as the group's chief jurist to take the place of Maysira al-Jiburi, an Iraqi known as Abu Mariya al-Qahtani. As noted, Aridi was listed as a member of the editorial board for Maqdisi's website, a position he continued to hold.⁸⁰

Whatever lure ISIS's victories in Iraq and propaganda may hold, Maqdisi and Abu Qatada suffer from the growing perception that they have folded to government pressure. In December 2014, one Salafi-Jihadist community leader in Amman told me that this was especially the perception with Abu Qatada, and that because the current's rank-and-file is so strongly anti-government, merely the perception of bending to the government has driven youth toward Baghdadi. The perception was hardly new; as far back as November 2013 a journalist for *al-Quds al-Arabi* wrote that Abu Qatada appeared to be getting better treatment than other inmates due to his stance on ISIS.⁸¹ In fact, Maqdisi was released from prison in June 2014 and Abu Qatada on September 24, 2014. The two, however, would react differently to the crisis involving the international coalition's war on ISIS, with Maqdisi taking center stage.

Between Islamic State and Hashemite State

THE FLIP-SIDE OF THE MAQDISI WING'S INCREASED STRUGGLE WITH ISIS WAS ITS increased support for Jabhat al-Nusra. This posed a legal problem, since JAN remained an al-Qaeda affiliate, a fact that was publicly announced in April 2013. Salafist leaders attempted to straddle this dilemma by disavowing any operational ties; even then, however, they only occasionally stayed out of prison.

Shortly after JAN's al-Qaeda affiliation became public, Omar Assaf argued in *Amman Net* that the declaration encouraged the government to take a harder line domestically. He asked rhetorically, "Are the Jordanians of Jabhat al-Nusra the Seed Corn for Islamic State of Jordan?" Assaf argued that the government had not been credible in its previous efforts to stem the Salafists, but had instead viewed the Syrian war as a way to get rid of them. Assaf argued that Abu Sayyaf's declaration that a Jordanian had succeeded Jolani "had perturbed the government more than anything." JAN's response, indicating that Abu Anas al-Sahaba (Jolani's alleged successor) and Abu Jalibib were "field commanders" in the group, had a similar impact.⁸²

In September 2013, Maqdisi issued a short letter from prison through his

attorney, Musa Abdillat, that gave “counsel” to the Jordanian government. Maqdisi wrote that “these arrests and pro-forma prosecutions will have no impact on the Salafi current, and it is the obligation of the regime’s institutions to take responsibility for its actions.”⁸³ That same month, the imprisoned Tahawi issued a letter condemning the Jordanian legal system. The one non-Jordanian topic which Tahawi indirectly referenced was Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that summer; addressing the Salafist Nur Party in Egypt, he urged them not to “trade God’s law for the law of the world,” and to recognize that what had happened in Egypt was in fact a coup targeting Muslims.⁸⁴

Maqdisi completed his sentence for Taliban recruitment on June 16, 2014. His release from prison came at an opportune time given his ongoing struggle with ISIS. But Maqdisi also encountered a much tougher security situation from when he had last been free, as the Jordanian government had cracked down on foreign fighters. Throughout 2014, the press frequently reported on small groups of Jordanians being arrested and tried in the State Security Court for attempted travel to Syria.

Maqdisi’s release came just ahead of the international coalition’s war on ISIS over its repeated massacres of civilians in Iraq as well as its brutal execution of journalists and aid workers in Syria. But this posed a dilemma for Maqdisi, given his past record of unqualified support for any Muslim group fighting non-Muslim forces in the Arab world. Salafists held protests in Jordan against the coalition airstrikes in September and Abu Sayyaf criticized the attacks as “crusader” in the media, adding that “it would be better to direct these strikes at the Jews who target Gaza and its people.” This stance was not simply that of the Salafi-Jihadists; Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood Deputy Guide Zaki Bani Arshad essentially took the same position, arguing that “this is not our war nor do we have any interest in being involved in it for the benefit of others.”⁸⁵ Indeed, *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported on September 24 that Maqdisi had already told them that in case of “a crusader campaign,” he would stand with ISIS, despite disagreements with them.⁸⁶

The government arrested Maqdisi again on October 27 during efforts to secure the release of the American hostage Peter Kassig from ISIS. As a result, the move raised questions. A December 18 article in *The Guardian* described Maqdisi as playing a key role in the negotiations with ISIS. The article’s narrative gives the impression that Maqdisi was arrested in violation of a protocol agreement by which he would be able to contact ISIS members without being arrested for communicating with terrorists.⁸⁷

The arrest seems especially odd given not only its timing but Maqdisi’s well-established opposition to ISIS. But an alternative explanation lurks, one as simple

as Maqdisi violating the law. Under Jordanian law, it is a criminal offense to make statements which “harm the country’s relations with other states.”⁸⁸ The authorities interpret this as including statements attacking other states. Bani Arshad, the Muslim Brotherhood leader, is currently facing prosecution for criticizing the United Arab Emirates for its ban on his organization in that country.

Given the laws’ ambiguous and broad wording and Maqdisi’s views, he could probably be arrested for any statement he makes on international affairs. For example, on September 9 Maqdisi purportedly posted a statement to an ISIS-sympathetic social media page which spread to jihadist forms.⁸⁹ This could be judged as communicating with terrorists. Maqdisi was quoted on one pro-jihadist forum on September 24 as saying that the armed campaign against ISIS “must unite Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra” and that coalition partners were “apostate armies” participating in a “crusader war.” The forum also quoted a statement from Maqdisi’s own website—since taken down, if legitimate—that “today they bomb Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, and tomorrow they will bomb every faction which wants the face of God and victory for his religion and the implementation of his law.”⁹⁰

On September 30, Maqdisi’s website published “An Initiative and Call for Truce Among the Factions in the Levant.” The statement referred to the war as a “crusader campaign.”⁹¹ Maqdisi was among the signatories, as was Abu Qatada. Why the former was arrested and the latter was not is unclear; Maqdisi’s alleged posting to pro-ISIS websites may have been the trigger, or it may have been Abu Qatada’s stronger stance on ISIS, as some suggest.⁹² *Al-Rai al-Youm* quoted Maqdisi explaining that it was “because of my call for jihadist reconciliation.” The same source reports that Maqdisi denied having made the posts to pro-ISIS websites, but then refused to make a formal declaration to that effect.⁹³

Whether Maqdisi had made the post on the pro-ISIS site or not, his September 30 statement was enough to get him arrested. In fact, his opposition to airstrikes against ISIS, in which the Royal Jordanian Air Force was participating, was strong enough to temporarily reconcile him with Tahawi; in early December, he and Tahawi—both in prison—issued a joint statement calling on Abu Qatada to cease his attacks on ISIS.⁹⁴

Maqdisi was still in custody on December 24 when it was reported that the Jordanian fighter pilot Moaz al-Kassasbeh had been taken captive by ISIS after crashing over Syria. The Kassasbeh case has been widely reported; ISIS burned him alive in early January, but then later tried to use its Japanese hostage, Kenji Goto, to ransom Sajida al-Rishawi, the aforementioned failed Iraqi suicide bomber from the 2005 Amman hotel attacks. After ISIS executed Goto, it published the immolation of Kassasbeh, causing outrage across Jordan and calls for revenge.

Maqdisi's initially hidden role and dramatic appearance on Jordanian television on February 6 is the key matter here. It quickly became clear that Maqdisi had secretly been involved in talks for a substantial period, and had even written a letter to Baghdadi, not knowing Kassasbeh was already dead.⁹⁵ The noted expert on Islamist affairs Joas Wagemakers suggests that Maqdisi himself was responsible for raising the fate of Rishawi as a key issue.⁹⁶ It is hard to be sure; the June 2014 Maan video might be evidence of ISIS' interest in her fate, or it could be that Maqdisi pushed that angle because of the video. Irrespective, ISIS immolated Kassasbeh without negotiating over Rishawa, perhaps indicating that such a sensitive prisoner exchange was undoable.

Maqdisi made the most of his 16 minutes on *al-Roya*, Jordan's main independent channel, reprising his 2005 al-Jazeera performance attacking Zarqawi, but this time targeting Baghdadi.⁹⁷ Maqdisi cited early Islamic precedent to show that the exchange of prisoners was proper, and cited ISIS' deceit as evidence that they were not true jihadists. His main goal was to disassociate the current from ISIS, repeating several times that "the Salafi-Jihadist current" had no relation to the organization, a demonstrably false claim since much of it has supported ISIS. But given the nation's fury, it was Maqdisi's opportunity to take the high ground in defending Islamic civilization.

On February 10, Maqdisi's forum published an article, "The Lying Organization Whose Lies Reach the Horizons."⁹⁸ (The phrase *tanthim al-dawla*, "organization of the state," is often used in Arabic media for ISIS, and the words "lying" and "horizons" here rhyme in Arabic.) The article indicted ISIS for its deceit, blaming it for the death of Rishawi, whom the government executed shortly after it confirmed Kassasbeh's death. ISIS responded with a video of its own; having surreptitiously recorded Maqdisi's calls, they put together a satirical presentation in which the leader of "the so-called Salafi-Jihadist current in Jordan" starred as "an American agent." The recordings feature Maqdisi saying apologetically, "I was wrong in accusing you of extremism."⁹⁹

Jordan's Salafists After Kassasbeh

MAQDISI'S STARTLING TELEVISION APPEARANCE MARKS A POSSIBLE NEW BEGINNING for Jordan's Salafi-Jihadists. Released from prison, Maqdisi is back to his 2008 starting point, trying to rebuild and remold the Salafi-Jihadist movement. Then as now, Maqdisi faces criticism from hardcore jihadists that he has sold out to the

Hashemite dynasty. Most of all, his appearance on *al-Roya* was an amazing opportunity for a man who remains an unequivocal supporter of al-Qaeda. Indeed, in the days after Maqdisi's appearance, officials made clear to the press that he would not be allowed to speak to the media, feigning to have been surprised by his public performance. In truth, while *al-Roya* is part of Jordan's semi-independent media, there is no real possibility that they would have conducted such an interview without an official green light. The most likely explanation is that Jordanian officialdom made a mistake, and only afterward realized the dangers in allowing Maqdisi to assume the face of tolerance and moderation.

Jordan's Salafist Spring was killed by the Jihad in Syria. Through 2011, the Maqdisi wing—represented by Abu Sayyaf—showed every intention of using the Arab Spring to build an organization peacefully within the kingdom in order to be well-placed for any regime change along Egyptian lines. But Maqdisi's preference for "peaceful mission" over armed action always depended on circumstances where a martial approach was either likely to be fruitless due to the security environment, or in principle wrong due to targeting Muslims. The emergence of Jabhat al-Nusra changed that, and from 2012 onward Salafist leaders were increasingly direct in their support for the al-Qaeda affiliate.

While some commentators have described Salafists as on the rise in Jordan, their roughly 3,000-strong protest in March 2011 was a high point in mobilization; subsequent protests, especially after Zarqa, focused on freeing prisoners and drew hundreds, at best.¹⁰⁰ Never a mass movement, Salafi-Jihadists were increasingly either fighting in Syria, dead in Syria, or imprisoned in Jordan, with the remainder infighting over the JAN-ISIS split.

Islamic State's brutal killing of Kassasbeh has had a dramatically negative impact on its standing among the general Jordanian public. A poll by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, published on February 27, found that 95 percent of Jordanians now considered ISIS to be "terrorist," whereas in the same poll the previous August only 62 percent thought so.

This does not mean that things will necessarily be easy for the "two Salafi-Jihadist guides."¹⁰¹ Ibrahim al-Asas, a noted Salafist teacher in Amman, said that prior to Kassasbeh they had lost most of the youth to ISIS, and that despite some loss among Salafists emotionally impacted by their brutality, the hardcore was sticking with Islamic State. Asas, who refused to identify himself with a current of the movement but said he had long known Abu Qatada personally and spoke positively of him, said the youth were impacted by ISIS' victories, its attractive video propaganda and the existence of an "Islamic State." Regarding Abu Qatada, Asas said that they had studied Islamic law together as students and that he had

“matured” during his time abroad, adding that it showed Abu Qatada’s superior knowledge of Islam that he was critiquing ISIS early on, whereas “superficial people had to see their crimes on video to realize they were misguided.” Regarding Maqdisi, Asas rejected the suggestion that he had been compromised by the state, saying that Maqdisi was too principled, and that the state had made a calculation to use him against ISIS.¹⁰²

Traditionalist, pro-government Salafists on the Albani-Halabi line disappeared from the narrative after 2011 due to lack of evidence that they had any substantial influence on events. However, Osama Shahada, an Amman-based traditionalist Salafist, confided after the Kassasbeh crisis that violence from the *takfiris*—followers of Maqdisi and Zarqawi—would have been even greater had it not been for the traditionalists. Although he conceded that his line’s open following—“those wearing the dishdasha, the beard, and the rest”—is small, he argued in a recent interview that many more attend mosques controlled by traditional Salafists. There is no way to confirm whether or not he is right, but Shahada interestingly emphasized that Maqdisi seemed more concerned for “our sister Sajida,” the failed suicide bomber, than Kassasbeh himself.¹⁰³

The Maqdisi Salafists’ challenge after their split with ISIS and the Kassasbeh crisis is to put the pieces back together in a forbidding security environment. The popular vilification of Baghdadi’s ISIS presents an opportunity to reunify the movement, and even threaten the Jordanian state. If past is prologue, the 2005 Amman hotel attacks suggest the story does not end here—outrage at those attacks was almost as great as over Kassasbeh, yet the movement survived to play a major role in recent years. Going back to the old deal of allowing Salafi-Jihadists on the margin in exchange for a guarantee of peaceful behavior could lay the seeds for future conflict. So expect the Hashemite state and the Maqdisi Salafists to engage in a wary face-off in the years to come.

NOTES

1. For the most authoritative study of Maqdisi, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); for a broader historical review of Islamism in Jordan, spanning Salafism to the Muslim Brotherhood, see Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniya, *The Islamic Solution in Jordan: Islamists and the State With Democracy and Security in the Balance (al-hal al-islami fi al-*

- urdun: al-islamiun wa al-dawla, rihanat al-demuqratiya wa al-aman*) (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012), available at <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/09373.pdf>; for background, see also International Crisis Group Report, “Jordan’s 9/11: Dealing with Jihadi Islamism,” available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Jordan/Jordans%209-11%20Dealing%20With%20Jihadi%20Islamism>. Note: The ICG report misrepresents Maqdisi’s early work in Jordan in the 1992-1996 period as having been focused on domestic violence.
2. Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniya, *The Islamic Solution in Jordan: Islamists and the State With Democracy and Security in the Balance* (*al-hal al-islami fi al-urdun: al-islamiun wa al-dawla, rihanat al-demuqratiya wa al-aman*) (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012) p. 230-242. The source is vague about precisely when Albani arrived in Jordan.
 3. All Palestinians of West Bank origin automatically have Jordanian citizenship, whether they have ever set foot in Jordan or not. As a Salafi-Jihadist, Maqdisi is naturally indifferent to borders, and in his interviews and writings he acts as if the Jordanian government does not even exist, neither supporting it nor directly attacking it. It is clear, however, that he does not view the Jordanian government as legitimate. This rhetorical silence has had the advantage of helping him stay out of prison at least some of the time. Maqdisi’s birth name was Isam al-Otaybi, after his tribe, but he changed his first name to “Asim” and used “Barqawi” after his family’s hometown of Barqa. The appellation “Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi” is so widely used that most Jordanians would not recognize his real name, although he is well known.
 4. Maqdisi’s two key early books were *Millat Ibrahim* (*The Community of Abraham*) and *Al-Kawashif al-jiliya fi kufr al-dawla al-saudiya* (*Clear Indications of the Unbelief of the Saudi State*). For more information, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapters 1-3.
 5. For more on Maqdisi’s role in Jordan, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chapters 8-9.
 6. Muhammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Haniya, *The Islamic Solution in Jordan: Islamists and the State With Democracy and Security in the Balance* (*al-hal al-islami fi al-urdun: al-islamiun wa al-dawla, rihanat al-demuqratiya wa al-aman*) (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012) p. 296-308. Maqdisi’s 1996-1999 imprisonment related to an effort to organize attacks on Israel, referred to as the *bayat al-imam* case. He was freed, along with many others, in a general amnesty following King Abdullah II’s ascension to the throne. However, Maqdisi was arrested later that same year in connection with an alleged plot to attack a series of hotels—the “Millennium Plot.” He denied involvement and was ultimately cleared in court, but remained in prison through June 2005.
 7. A copy of Maqdisi’s “Aid and Counsel” letter, which is given an Islamic date corresponding with July-August 2004, is available at <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=dtwiam56>.

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103. Personal interview with the author in Amman.

The Patient Preacher: Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Long Game

By Gavi Barnhard

“DON'T STOP HISTORY! NOBODY WILL BE ABLE TO FIGHT THE divine decrees, nor delay the day when it rises. This world has changed and the world has evolved.”¹ Only one week after President Hosni Mubarak's resignation was announced in 2011, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi delivered those words during a powerful speech blessing the Egyptian revolution. Sitting before millions gathered in Tahrir Square for Friday prayers, the 84-year-old Qatari-based Egyptian cleric praised the Egyptian people's resilience and fortitude. “The youth who have triumphed in this revolution did not triumph over Mubarak only,” Qaradawi exclaimed. “They triumphed over Mubarak, they triumphed over injustice, they triumphed over falsehood. They triumphed over robbery and they triumphed over plundering. They triumphed over egoism and they initiated a new life by this revolution.” Indeed, this bespectacled cleric with the carefully cropped beard has long dichotomized the world as just and unjust. But as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qaradawi's categories and belief in the centrality of Sharia law as the bedrock of Egyptian justice count as more than clerical abstraction. At the time, his impassioned speech seemed to mark the return of Egypt's prodigal son.

Nearly four years later, however, Qaradawi's declaration of a world transformed

appears in tatters. The brief success of the Muslim Brotherhood, which peaked with the election of Muhammad Morsi to the Egyptian presidency in 2012, came crashing down with his subsequent ouster in July 2013. Worsening its crisis, the Brotherhood once again has been forced underground by the new military government's harsh crackdown and sweeping arrests. Outside of Egypt, the group's position has rapidly deteriorated as well, with the United Arab Emirates officially designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014.² Even Qatar, a longtime Brotherhood haven, has expelled several key leaders. Qaradawi himself has been prohibited from delivering public sermons in Qatar since the middle of September and, at the behest of Egyptian authorities, Interpol has issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of incitement and involvement in arson, vandalism and theft.³

And yet, despite these mounting obstacles, Qaradawi remains unbowed. He continues to condemn all attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood and stresses the inevitability of its success. In early December 2014, for example, Qaradawi issued a statement to the Egyptian people warning of the challenges ahead. "These days are crucial in Egypt's modern history, critical days that bring hardships and tribulations," he observed, before underscoring the importance of "clinging stubbornly to [the Truth] and having patience in the face of adversity."⁴

Qaradawi's resolve in the face of deteriorating circumstances should come as no surprise. In fact, it aligns perfectly with the narrative he has cultivated his entire life, from his precocious student days in the Nile Delta to his rise as a "global mufti" astride the international stage.⁵ Qaradawi views his life's work through the lens of Islamic history; he identifies with Islam's prophets who similarly faced adversity and hardship in their day. *Dawa*, the proselytization of Islam, demands patience and requires long-term struggle. Along the way, a *da'i*, or preacher, will inevitably face setbacks. Therefore, as a *da'i* practicing *dawa*, Qaradawi's response to the Brotherhood's recent misfortunes springs from his long-time emphasis on patient struggle in the face of adversity.

Qaradawi's Mission

SPANNING MORE THAN 2,000 PAGES AND FOUR SEPARATE VOLUMES, QARADAWI'S autobiography, *Ibn al-Qarya wa-l-Kuttab: Malamih Sira wa-Masira (Son of the Village and the Kuttab: Characteristics of the Trajectory)*, guides the reader through key events in Qaradawi's life, including many of the historic events that shaped

the Middle East over the past century. The memoir's four volumes, published over the course of ten years, cover Qaradawi's life through the mid-1990s. While it is difficult to confirm the veracity of much of his account, the importance of Qaradawi's memoir lies in how he perceived and wove together events.

As his memoir underscores, Qaradawi's interest in and involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood began early in his childhood. He vividly recalls his fascination with Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, from the moment of his first encounter in elementary school. In describing his deep veneration for Banna and his vision, Qaradawi writes, "If in the land of love they talk about love at first sight, in the land of *dawa* we can talk about love from the first word."⁶ He details the first lecture he heard from Banna, who expounded upon the Brotherhood's mission, tools and *dawa*. Banna described how the Brotherhood divides its mission into three stages, all revolving around the concept of *watan*, or homeland. Each stage requires the liberation of part of the Muslim world—first Egypt and Sudan, then the Arab region, and finally the entire Muslim world from Indonesia to Morocco.⁷ Qaradawi was deeply moved by Banna's explanation of the Brotherhood's mission; in recounting his experience with the movement's founder, he describes Banna as "brilliantly radiating, as if his words were revelation or live coals from the light of prophecy."⁸ These early impressions of the Muslim Brotherhood leader shaped Qaradawi's worldview as a Muslim cleric.

Qaradawi's focus on liberating the Muslim world continued to evolve as he rose within the Muslim Brotherhood. He began his activities with the organization while still in high school, quickly distinguishing himself as a masterful *da'i* in his village and in the surrounding towns. Qaradawi attributes to the Brotherhood his inspiration for getting involved in *dawa*, and his burgeoning sense of obligation toward the Ummah, or global Muslim community. In describing his approach to *dawa*, Qaradawi explains,

I transformed from being simply a religious preacher in a village and its environs to an Islamic proselytizer. My interest was no longer limited to protecting the religiosity of individual Muslims, which of course is necessary. We require a general Islamic awakening to awake minds, revive hearts and bring new life to people.⁹

Qaradawi's involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood broadened his horizons by connecting him with the larger Muslim world. This deeper connection to the Muslim Ummah became a defining characteristic of his *dawa* work and transformed him from a judicious student into a true activist.

While studying at the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo, Qaradawi further developed his understanding of his life's mission. He enrolled in the Arabic Language faculty in the early 1950s where he specialized in teaching. In his memoir, Qaradawi reflects on these early memories of al-Azhar, emphasizing his disappointment in the widespread lack of student activism. As the preeminent bastion of Sunni Islamic learning, he believed that the university should not confine itself to higher learning, but rather needed to engage the Muslim community at the *dawa* level as well. As such, he promoted internal reforms within the university: "I was interested in everything that would reform al-Azhar and raise the prestige of its students and promote the performance of their mission, which is the message of Islam, and remove the stumbling blocks from their path so that they can carry out their mission to the best of their abilities."¹⁰ In other words, Qaradawi was not content with the partitioning of Islamic learning from Islamic activism, but rather envisioned student activism grounded in Islamic learning that would contribute to the broader mission of spreading the message of Islam.

Before long, Muslim Brotherhood members convinced Qaradawi to write an open letter to the student body demanding reform. In the letter, Qaradawi discussed *dawa*, and reminded his fellow students that they have a responsibility to help guide the Ummah on the proper path of Islam. "We have to undertake our complete duty in this jihad, and light the torches of guidance in the night of doubt whose darkness has surrounded the Muslims," he intoned, fervently. "We wait for reward only from God who loses nothing, as we link the present to the glorious past while looking towards a radiant tomorrow and an enlightened future."¹¹ Already, Qaradawi viewed the world as steeped in lies, and as a Muslim, he felt compelled to unmask those falsehoods. Therefore, he considered anything but persistent efforts at *dawa* and active engagement with, and guidance of, the Muslim community as insufficient.

Qaradawi's focus on reclaiming the proper mantle of Islam by liberating the Muslim world from Western hegemony became his lifelong mission. He summarizes this idea, writing:

I began to aspire towards freeing the entire Nile Valley and the Arab and Islamic lands from all foreign powers. I sought to expel all imported ideas, organizations and laws, and putting in their place Islamic ideas, organizations and laws. I hope for the Muslim Ummah to advance and take its place in the retinue of science and technology and leave the prison of dreadful backwardness. I hope that, after being divided by the ignorant nationalism, imported ideologies, ruling egoisms and especially the colonial induced

strife with the slogan “divide and conquer,” the Ummah can unify. I hope that the Islamic caliphate returns to rule the Ummah under the banner of the Quran and the leadership of Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).¹²

Qaradawi believes that Islam and the Muslim world have been corrupted by outside influences and foreign powers; only in ridding itself of such fraudulent ideas can the Ummah reclaim its past glory. At the core of this purge, according to Qaradawi, is the reestablishment of the Islamic caliphate, allowing Islam to emerge from its “prison of dreadful backwardness” and “take its place in the retinue of science and technology.”

Patience in the Face of Adversity

PATIENCE IS THE KEY CONCEPT OPERATIONALIZING QARADAWI’S MISSION. NEITHER Qaradawi nor the Brotherhood view themselves as revolutionaries; rather, they believe in the gradual implementation of their vision. In this vein, they seek to first reform the individual, then the larger society, and eventually the entire Muslim world. This gradualist approach differentiates Qaradawi and the Brotherhood from other Islamist groups who believe in an immediate implementation of a caliphate and Islamic law as they understand it.

Throughout his memoir, Qaradawi explores this notion of patience in the face of adversity. For example, he vividly describes the tough conditions and oppressive heat he endured during one outing to a nearby village as a young preacher, carefully noting that such hardships are ephemeral and worth enduring as a youth.¹³ At various points, Qaradawi stresses that while a Muslim preacher will undoubtedly face difficulties in his mission, it is his duty to shoulder his burdens unflinchingly.

Qaradawi experienced the challenges of *dawa* on a much larger scale while still a young member of the Brotherhood. By 1948, the Brotherhood had developed into an organized movement with a strong membership base. However, some members of its secret apparatus, an internal paramilitary organization established by Banna, turned to violence and targeted British citizens and institutions across Egypt.¹⁴ In response, the prime minister of Egypt, Mahmoud al-Nukrashi Pasha, banned the Brotherhood and impound its assets. This set off a series of assassinations—less than three weeks later the prime minister himself was assassinated by a member of the Brotherhood and shortly thereafter Hasan al-Banna was killed.

A massive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood ensued, including waves of arrests targeting the movement. Although Qaradawi originally fled to the village of Salmawiyah, he too eventually surrendered to the authorities. In 1949, he was moved from a small holding cell in the Gharbiyah governorate to a permanent prison camp at al-Tor in the southern Sinai Peninsula.¹⁵

Interestingly, Qaradawi reflects positively on this experience in his memoir. He recalls that while the Muslim Brotherhood was officially dissolved with many members sent to the al-Tor detention center, the organization emerged from prison stronger and more determined than ever before. Qaradawi could hardly refuse noting the irony: “Al-Tor prison was a permanent camp for the Muslim Brotherhood in 1949. Travel, costs, expenses were all on the government.”¹⁶

For Qaradawi, prison proved reinvigorating and underscored the Brotherhood’s durability. In his memoir, he discusses how the Brotherhood’s communal identity allowed it to grow spiritually and organizationally. At the core of the group’s success, according to Qaradawi, was their ability to navigate tribulations through hardened and deliberate patience: “Indeed, the Brotherhood’s patience during their adversities, certainty about their *dawa*, cohesion amongst themselves, and the utilization of this adversity to increase their faith did not come haphazardly. Rather it was a result of a long term breeding of faith, well-established, deep-rooted pillars.”¹⁷ In other words, Qaradawi’s experience in prison served to confirm that the Brotherhood and its mission remain inviolable, and that unyielding commitment is essential. Paradoxically, the group managed to grow despite—and in part because of—its imprisonment.

Qaradawi similarly emphasizes patience in his analysis of the Brotherhood’s dissolution: “Indeed, the dissolving of the Muslim Brotherhood and taking down of their signs did not change the truth which is that the Brotherhood cannot be dissolved. Because the bond that ties them together is adherence to God’s strong rope which is more powerful than any force.”¹⁸ In his memoir, Qaradawi returns to the importance of patience in his assessment of another crackdown that targeted the Brotherhood and other Egyptian opposition movements in 1981. As he laments, “if a disaster happens, we ask God for patience.”¹⁹ Thus, Qaradawi’s worldview is shaped by his experiences with adversity; he strongly believes that patient “adherence to God’s strong rope” is fundamental not only to the Brotherhood’s own success, but for the entire Ummah as well.

This mantra of patience also colors Qaradawi’s reaction to criticism. In the fourth volume of his autobiography, Qaradawi responds briefly to several criticisms levied at the first three volumes of his tome, arguing:

A person must prepare oneself mentally for possibility of such criticisms—or accusations—as long as he believes that what he is saying is the Truth as he sees it. It is not incumbent on him to appease all the orientations, or all types of people, this is an unachievable goal, an unattainable wish. The believer must please his Lord even if the displeased are angered.²⁰

He warns his readers that *dawa* is a mission that not only invites adversity but demands it, and as such, will inevitably attract detractors and skeptics. Muslim preachers must remain steadfast in their convictions to stave off such critics.

Qaradawi's worldview is deeply intertwined with his Brotherhood experiences in Egypt and the hardships the organization endured. In order to recreate an authentic Islamic caliphate that would counter the ideas and laws of the West, Qaradawi counsels patience and commitment. Crucially, in highlighting the centrality of adversity and hardship to *dawa*, Qaradawi's worldview becomes unfalsifiable; instead of adapting in the face of adversity, it is the setbacks themselves that underscore the legitimacy of *dawa*.

Islamic History

BUT QARADAWI'S NARRATIVE DOES NOT END THERE. IN HIS MEMOIR, HE FURTHER cloaks his infallibility in a personalized rendering of Islamic history. Qaradawi believes that his life can serve as a model for future generations of Muslims who are looking for the best way to carry out their *dawa* missions. In the introduction to his memoir, Qaradawi argues that despite his hesitations in embarking on such a comprehensive project, he became convinced of the need to document his life, since it would offer "a great good for the readers, and especially the promising and emerging generations of the nation's youth...and the people can learn a lesson from it, and the youth can take it as an incentive to work and a reason to hope."²¹

Qaradawi extends this idea by retelling the stories of earlier prophets from the Islamic tradition. Throughout his memoir, he often compares his own experiences with those of the prophets, finding solace in their experiences. For example, Qaradawi describes his first stint in prison in 1949, and the activities of his fellow imprisoned Brotherhood members, as a diligent effort to preach Islam to other prisoners. Qaradawi cites the Quranic story of Joseph who, after being left to die by his brothers, was brought to Egypt and sold into slavery before ending up in

prison. He notes that Joseph took advantage of his imprisonment to practice *dawa*.²² In doing so, Qaradawi draws thinly veiled comparisons to himself, emphasizing that while both were imprisoned by oppressive regimes, they remained undeterred and managed to carry out important missionary work. Later on, in recounting his experience of being transferred to Tor prison by boat, he references the prophets Noah and Moses, connecting Noah's experience during the flood with God's revelation to Moses at Tor Mountain, the scene of Qaradawi's imprisonment.²³ These comparisons serve not only to boost Qaradawi's own profile, but reimagine his life and struggles through the prism of Islamic history, thus conferring a sense of purpose upon himself and his mission. In other words, just as the prophets throughout Islamic history overcame challenges, so too has Qaradawi prevailed over adversity.

Qaradawi continues the theme of prophets in recounting his subsequent arrests. Following the Free Officers Revolution of 1952 that toppled King Farouk in Egypt, the government's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood deteriorated further, ultimately resulting in President Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision to outlaw the group in 1954. That same year, Qaradawi was detained twice. Reflecting on his incarceration, Qaradawi initially highlighted the silver lining in his misfortune, noting that in "every adversity there is reward, in every decree of fate there is benevolence,"²⁴ but he continued by comparing his predicament to that of the Prophet Joseph. As Qaradawi hints, his experience would not have been unfamiliar to Joseph: "Just as in the case with Joseph's tribulation when he was sold to the minister of Egypt, he was faced with accusations and then imprisonment. God Almighty spared him so that he could undertake a mission to save Egypt and everything around it from a destructive famine."²⁵ Qaradawi's implicit suggestion that he, like the Prophet Joseph, was sent to prison as part of a larger mission to help save Egypt is not an arbitrary connection—it is a deliberate attempt at framing his life and, more generally, the struggle of the Muslim Brotherhood in the context of Islamic history.

In painting himself as the future savior of Egypt, Qaradawi bestows on his mission a sense of inevitability. In 1961, constrained by the Egyptian authorities, Qaradawi decided to seek opportunities outside of Egypt, ultimately leading al-Azhar to dispatch him to Doha, Qatar to direct a new institute of religious studies. Although he occasionally visited Egypt in the summers, Qaradawi feared imprisonment and so took a nine-year hiatus from the country, beginning in 1964. Qaradawi compares his eventual return to Egypt to that of Jacob and his sons traveling from Canaan to Egypt.²⁶ Although a seemingly innocuous comparison, here too Qaradawi is fashioning a deliberate narrative that seizes on the past greatness of Islamic history, tying it to the present day. As such, the comparison furthers his

self-conception as a great leader who is on a sanctified path to restore glory to Islam and the Muslim world.

In Search of a New Platform

FOR QARADAWI, DAWA IS A LIFELONG MISSION. “I AM THE SON OF DAWA, ITS BROTHER and its father. It is of me, and I am of it,” he proclaims, explaining its centrality.²⁷ Qaradawi dogmatically believes that he and the Brotherhood will be eternally relevant to the Muslim world provided they remain patient and stay the course. Qaradawi attributes his rise to clerical stardom to steadfast devotion, allowing him to brazenly wave his al-Azhar credentials and tout his weekly television program “Sharia and Life” on al-Jazeera. With Qatari patronage, he has traveled the world for over thirty years and established transnational Islamic organizations such as the International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS) and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR).

In particular, in the 1990s, Qaradawi began to actively engage Muslims abroad, frequently traveling to the United States and Western Europe. In embracing his role as a global Islamic authority, Qaradawi devoted significant effort and research to questions concerning the intersection of Islam and the West and, more specifically, the status of Muslims as minorities in the West. He even developed a legal framework to address the needs and concerns of the Muslim community in Europe: *Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat*, or Islamic Jurisprudence for (Muslim) minorities. In 1997, Qaradawi helped establish the ECFR, a council of important and influential Muslim *ulama* dedicated to researching and writing fatwas in support of Western Muslim minority communities. A critical concept that emerged from Qaradawi’s ECFR writing is the concept of *tadarruj*, or gradualism, paralleling his broader emphasis on patience. Qaradawi utilized this legal concept to argue that a gradual, deliberative process is superior to radical, drastic action in reforming society through Islam. Similarly, Qaradawi’s IUMS, founded in 2004, claims to be “an institution concerned with the call [*dawa*] to Islam by tongue, pen, and every contemporary legitimate medium, be it recorded, audio, or visual.”²⁸ Thus, despite the Muslim Brotherhood’s setbacks in Egypt, Qaradawi has established himself at the helm of an international *dawa* movement, thereby projecting his brand of Islam across the world.

Qaradawi sees parallels between his story and those of the prophets of Islam. He views his life as one phase in the long lineage of prophets and Muslim preach-

ers who were able to overcome the obstacles placed before them to realize their vision. For him, “the practice of *dawa* preachers and messengers and the path to victory in this world and heaven in the Hereafter is furnished with thorns, covered in blood, full of the corpses of martyrs.”²⁹ This deeply ingrained belief in the nature of *dawa* fuels Qaradawi’s vision and sustains the narrative of his eventual triumph over any enemy or challenger. In Qaradawi’s mind, the current pressures on the Brotherhood and the accusations against them are no different than the pressures and accusations faced by Quranic prophets and earlier generations of Brothers.

Even so, with the continuing deterioration and repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and around the region, there are growing questions about the future of the group. While Qaradawi and the Brotherhood once stood for carrying the banner of a unique and compelling vision, his message fails to mesh with post-Morsi Egypt. Moreover, Qaradawi has come under a great deal of personal pressure: during the ongoing crackdown on the Brotherhood, the government has even impounded his assets.

Most directly, the proliferation of viable groups in the Sunni Muslim world has placed Qaradawi’s relevance in doubt. On the one hand, there are a growing number of jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which are offering tangible results and a stronger narrative of success. Rather than a gradualist vision for patiently forming an Islamic society, these groups offer immediate results, and in the case of ISIS, present an already established caliphate that implements Islamic law. On the other hand, there is a reinvigorated constituency in the Muslim world that has shunned revolutionary movements and placed their confidence back in state institutions. These states offer to restore the rule of law and ensure an era of stability that Islamist political movements cannot match. The growing success of these two alternative models represents an entirely new challenge to Qaradawi. Unlike colonialism and capitalism, these new models are homegrown and have found traction in the Sunni world.

In response, Qaradawi has turned to new political vehicles. Utilizing international organizations such as the IUMS, he continues to engage the Muslim world in an attempt to project power and reestablish the credibility and righteousness of his mission. For example, in July 2014, Qaradawi and other members of IUMS issued a letter condemning ISIS and repudiating its claims to an Islamic caliphate. The letter carefully stresses that the signees dream of “an Islamic caliphate on the path of prophecy and hope from the depths of [their] hearts that it will arise as soon as possible.”³⁰ However, Qaradawi’s letter goes on to diligently show how ISIS’s declaration of a caliphate contravenes the legal requirements prescribed by

Sharia, stating that a “faction’s declaration—whichever it may be—of a caliphate is legally void and does not have any legal implications.”³¹ This letter represents Qaradawi’s concerted effort to position himself as the legitimate and preeminent religious authority in the Sunni Muslim world. Clearly, the stark contrast between the recent successes of ISIS and the failures of the Muslim Brotherhood is forcing Qaradawi to justify his leadership.

This is evident in Qaradawi’s response to the U.S.-led coalition campaign against ISIS. Soon after President Obama announced the formation of the international coalition to fight the group in September 2014, Qaradawi vocalized his strong opposition on Twitter, posting, “I oppose ISIS completely in ideology and methodology, but I can never accept that the ones to fight them be America, which is not moved by Islamic values, but rather by their own interests even if they shed blood.”³² Qaradawi does not want his opposition to ISIS to be understood as tacit support for the U.S.-led coalition. He is determined to define himself in a way that underscores his unyielding, longstanding commitment to the Brotherhood ideology.

Yet Qaradawi faces challenges even from within the Muslim Brotherhood. As the Brotherhood’s position in Egypt continues to deteriorate, there are signs of internal discord and tensions between the old vanguard and the group’s younger cadres.³³ Disillusioned with the slow, gradual *dawa* promoted by Qaradawi and his generation, some Brotherhood factions have begun calling for violence, invoking jihad. One recently published letter on the Brotherhood’s official website urges Brothers to “summon our strength and evoke the meaning of jihad, and prepare ourselves, our wives, our sons and daughters and whoever follows our path for relentless jihad where we ask for martyrdom.” Such inflammatory rhetoric is increasingly apparent in the programming of pro-Brotherhood outlets like Turkey-based Rabaa TV; in some cases, these outlets have advocated directly for violence, jettisoning the group’s longstanding commitment to peaceful gradualism.³⁴

Despite this multi-front challenge to his long-cultivated message of patience and perseverance, Qaradawi’s resolve has not wavered. In his letter condemning ISIS, he highlighted his dogmatic view of patience and the long-term nature of his vision. True to type, Qaradawi assessed that “[m]ajor projects must be subject to long reflection, serious preparation and consolidated powers.”³⁵ For Qaradawi and his generation of Muslim Brothers, the harrowing defeats of the last nineteen months seem only temporary. Not only have these setbacks failed to compel them to change their tactics or ideology, but they have in fact reaffirmed their basic choices. Whereas other Islamist leaders might respond to the sorts of defeats suffered by the Brotherhood by reassessing and possibly recalibrating their

strategies, Qaradawi continues to preach patience and ideological resolve in the face of adversity.

NOTES

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
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13. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
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16. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

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21. *Ibn al-Qarya wa-l-Kuttab*, Vol. 1, p. 8.
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23. *Ibid.*, p. 357.
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The Prospects for Reform in Islam

By Raza Rumi

THE RISE OF GLOBAL ISLAMISM IN THE FORM OF AL-QAEDA AND THE Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) will pose a major challenge to the security of both Western and Muslim-majority nations for years to come. The threat is particularly acute in Muslim countries because of Islamism's capacity to claim that it represents Islam in its most pure, truest form. Importantly, the Islamist movement's power and appeal also derives from its ability to claim that it is advancing both justice and freedom—political ends that the majority of Muslims naturally want for themselves. Many Islamists are able to justify their struggle and their violence by presenting their agenda as the only legitimate pathway for social and political reform. Muslim societies thus face an ideological quagmire; they desperately need a reform agenda movement that is consistent with their deepest faith traditions, but they have yet to successfully formulate an alternative to Islamism that can sustain a pluralistic, participatory politics.

In recent years, the search for an alternative to Islamism has been thwarted by the widening sectarian conflict within Islam, which has increased tensions and driven violence across the Muslim world. In light of this emergency, the need to reform Islamic jurisprudence and social thought has become more urgent than ever. Islamism's menace to Muslims, however, has been compounded by the weakened state of critical thinking within Islamic religious and political traditions. In developing a reformist alternative to Islamism, Muslims do in fact have

a substantial body of both historical as well as contemporary thinking that they can draw upon to help improve their political and social structures and create more just, inclusive societies.

The Crisis Today

ISLAMISM'S VITALITY AND APPEAL DERIVES IN PART FROM THE MODERN REVIVAL of two broad tendencies that run throughout the history of Islamic thought and practice. These include, first of all, the literalist approach to Islamic scripture that is propagated by modern Salafism; and, secondly, the revitalization of centuries-old sectarian tensions—especially between Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. Today, the resurgence of literalist interpretations of Sharia and the worsening of sectarian cleavages within Islam has spawned a perpetual cycle of violence that directly endangers the lives of ordinary Muslims everywhere.

The general view propagated by Islamists of all varieties is that Sharia law is “divinely ordained” and cannot be questioned. Sharia, therefore, must be understood literally, and Islamists are driven by their belief that the Sharia represents a comprehensive political and belief system. Islamists view Sharia as the sole legitimate source of politics and government; consequently, they believe that Sharia must be enforced around the world by a powerful and expansive Islamic state. In achieving this end, Islamists have pursued transitional political goals through a variety of means, including proselytization and armed struggle. The immediate focus of their struggle is displacing Western-oriented elites and military forces in Muslim societies and, in effect, overthrowing what they view as oppressive enemy regimes occupying Muslim societies. They believe that by thus merging “mosque and state” their movement will pave the way for an Islamic state and, eventually, lead to the worldwide enforcement of Sharia.

The origins of modern day Islamic extremism may be traced to nineteenth century movements in the Arab world and South Asia that aimed to revive Islam as a political and social force. At the time, Islamism rose in response to apparent Muslim weakness relative to the British Empire and to the penetration of Western secular values into Muslim societies. Those associated with these revivalist movements preached what became an increasingly radical interpretation of the Islamic holy texts in order to advance their political objectives of pan-Islamic unity and the eventual adoption of Sharia law.¹

What these nineteenth century revivers and their heirs failed to recognize

is that most of the legal codes and strictures that comprises the Sharia were developed during the ninth and tenth centuries of the great Abbasid Empire (750 AD-1258 AD), and thus two centuries after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. This body of traditional jurisprudence comprises the legal opinions of jurists who interpreted the Quran and the traditions of the prophets. As with all other man-made legal and political systems, these principles and values and interpretations should not be viewed as static but as dynamic and evolutionary depending on their contexts.² However, the literalist approach to the Sharia essentially froze its interpretation in time, with catastrophic results for Muslim jurisprudence and for Muslims themselves.³ As the scholar Ziauddin Sardar points out, the dominance of literalism made it so that believers became “passive receivers rather than active seekers of truth. In reality, the Sharia is nothing more than a set of principles, a framework of values, that provide Muslim societies with guidance.”⁴

This freezing of interpretation has falsely elevated Sharia to the status of divine text. Over centuries, this led to the legitimacy of—and demand for—a literalism that suspended human agency and sidestepped the requirements of a changing world.⁵ Concurrently, Islam also intermingled with state power as Muslim kingdoms sought to legitimize their rule with edicts from traditionalist clerics. For example, a hallmark of the legal codes is the concept of “apostasy,” which historically served to prevent rebellion against the imperial state. Modern Islamists, whether organized as states in the cases of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan under the Taliban, or as militias in the case of Boko Haram in West Africa, have exploited this antiquated aspect of traditional jurisprudence to enforce their own radical political agendas.

Throughout Islamic history, free Muslim thinkers raised their voices against the strict codification of Islamic thought and practice. But importantly, these alternative views faced stiff resistance and were frequently quashed. For example, the Islamic scholar and theologian Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD) fiercely criticized the Mu’tazilite practice of subjecting Islamic theology to rationalism. Over time, the role of Muslim philosophers was significantly undercut. In 1017-18 and 1029, Abbasid Caliph al-Qadir (947-1031 AD) issued widely cited decrees that banned the Mu’tazilite.⁶ In order to snuff out dissent, the entire group was persecuted and their texts destroyed. Even today, centuries later, the works of Ibn al-Rawandi, Ibn Rushd, and al-Biruni—progressive and scientific Muslim thinkers in their times—are banned from the official curricula in Saudi Arabia and most Gulf states.⁷ Instead, only officially approved scholars and schools of jurisprudence are considered valid;

their medieval writings and opinions constitute the core of twenty-first century Islamic studies curricula.

Of the various Islamic schools of thought, Salafism—and its more contemporary manifestation, Wahhabism—typifies the fossilized Sharia literalism that treats man-made laws as divine. The term Salafism is derived from *al-salaf al-salih* (the pious ancestors) and it invokes the mode of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Its primary focus is on what constitutes appropriate religious and social behavior. This behavior is deduced from the Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad compiled in the Hadith). All other variants of belief and practice are deemed *bida*, or undesirable innovation.

Salafists view scripture as God's last word; therefore, Muslims must implement it unflinchingly in this world. By contrast, other sects within Islam view scripture as a message from God requiring interpretation and understanding prior to their implementation in practice. Salafist scholars condemn local custom and the more mystical Muslim practices of such sects as the Sufis, since they purportedly undermine the Islamic identities of Muslims. This condemnation, known as *takfir*, is part of the doctrine of Salafi radicalism.⁸

In the eighteenth century, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab managed to turn Salafi doctrines into a political framework. Crucially, his pact with Muhammad Ibn Saud, the emir of Dar'iyah in northeastern Arabia, provided Salafist Wahhabism with the champion it needed for the establishment of a nineteenth century Salafist theocracy. By the twentieth century, vast discoveries of oil lubricated the Saudi commitment to spreading Wahhabism around the world, from West Africa to Southeast Asia. Today, Salafist literalism and the ideological puritanism espoused by Wahhabism have been embraced by many Islamists, including al-Qaeda and ISIS.⁹

The second major historical trend that has plagued the Muslim world by stifling political reform and driving violence has been Sunni and Shia sectarianism. The resurgence of sectarianism has gone hand-in-hand with the dominance of Sharia literalism. As is well-known, one target of Salafist *takfiri* ideology has been the Shia sect, which denotes the earliest schism in the religious tradition. Modern sectarianism has also been fueled by geopolitical rivalry. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran for years have exploited sectarian division in their competition for leadership of the Islamic world. This sectarian contest plays out daily in the international headlines, but it is rooted in the political history of Islam.

Within a century of his death, Mohammed and his followers had built an empire that stretched from Spanish Europe to Central Asia. But a debate over succession split the early Muslims. The dominant group elected Abu Bakr, a companion

of Mohammed, as the first caliph and sidelined the claims of another group that had proposed Ali ibn Abi Talib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. The term Shia relates to *shi'atu Ali*, or the followers of Ali.

The caliphate migrated out of the Arabian Peninsula and across the modern Middle East, first to Damascus under the Umayyad dynasty, and later to Baghdad under the Abbasid dynasty. For centuries, Sunni rule mostly dominated the Muslim world until the great Safavid dynasty in Persia adopted Shia Islam as their religion of state. The Safavids battled the Ottoman caliphs for supremacy, broadly setting the geographic and political fault lines of today's Middle East: Shias are in the majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain; meanwhile, Sunnis predominate in more than forty countries from Morocco to Indonesia.¹⁰

Salafists and Wahhabis judge the practices of Shia Muslims and their belief system as apostate. This has been reinforced by the ethnic divide between the Arab (Sunni) world and the Persian (Shiite) lands. Moreover, while sectarian dehumanizing rhetoric is centuries old, new technologies and social-media have ratcheted the scope and scale of the Salafist critique. Sunni Islamists have invoked harsh, historic denunciations such as *rafidha*, rejecters of the faith, and *majus*, Zoroastrians or crypto-Persians, to describe Shias. Meanwhile, Shia leaders from Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, to Iranian officials routinely describe their Sunni opponents as *takfiris* (code for al-Qaeda terrorists) and Wahhabis. In 2015, fundamentalists no longer have to infiltrate mainstream mosques to attract recruits surreptitiously; instead, with the click of a blog post, they can disseminate their call to jihad. Today, tens of thousands of organized sectarian militants capable of triggering large-scale conflict exist across the Middle East.

Despite the efforts of many Sunni and Shia clerics, such as Mohammad Abduh in Egypt, Mohammad Iqbal in British India (modern-day Pakistan) and Ali Shariati in Iran, to reduce tensions through dialogue and understanding, many experts express concern that Islam's major divide will lead to an escalation of violence. In the past, Sunni al-Qaeda and Shia Hezbollah may not have defined their movements in sectarian terms; instead, they traditionally have favored anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-American frameworks to describe their jihad and its pan-Islamic purpose. However, over the past decade both groups have shifted from a focus on the West and Israel to attacking other Muslims, such as al-Qaeda's killing of Shia civilians in Iraq and Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war.

Today, as a descendant of al-Qaeda, ISIS is looking to unite the Muslim world and change the geographic boundaries of the Middle East before it turns its guns on the United States and Europe. ISIS believes that it must first weed out apostates

and “fake” Muslims, a definition that covers anyone standing against them, not only Shias. Ordinary Muslims may not agree with ISIS’ methods and its interpretation of the caliphate, but the notion of a caliphate—the historical political entity governed by Islamic law and tradition—is powerful even among more secular-minded Muslims, especially the Sunnis, as it invokes the historical and cultural memory of early, “pure” Islam.¹¹ The social and political ideals of Medina and Mecca continue to resonate in the religio-cultural memories of Muslims.

Toward a Critical-Progressive Jurisprudence

THE GREATEST VICTIMS OF THE VIOLENCE, SOCIAL UPHEAVAL, AND BACKWARDNESS caused by Sharia literalism and sectarian division have been Muslims. If they are to escape their fate, it is imperative that the Muslim world cultivates reformers at ease with modernity and its institutions.¹² Across the centuries, such reformers and free thinkers—like the Mu’tazilites—have periodically surfaced, even though their voices have frequently been ignored and marginalized.¹³

In the South Asian context, perhaps the greatest champion of a modernist approach to jurisprudence was the Indian poet and thinker Mohammed Iqbal.¹⁴ According to Iqbal, the traditional aversion to legal innovation in Islam has been due to conservative fears of social fragmentation made worse by Islamic rationalism. This fear has caused Muslim conservatives to resort to an increasingly systematic and puritanical understanding of Sharia. By rejecting the use of reason to interpret Sharia according to changing contexts, Iqbal argued that the “unthinking masses” were left by Muslim elites in the “hands of intellectual mediocrities” and that this compelled them to adhere “blindly” to the most dominant schools of jurisprudence.¹⁵

Iqbal argued that Muslims needed to be freed from the grip of primitive theologians and jurists. “The whole community,” he wrote, “needs a complete overhauling of its present mentality in order that it may again become capable of feeling the urge of fresh desires and ideals.”¹⁶ According to Iqbal, the Quran was meant “to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his relation with God and the universe” and to lay out general legal principles and rules for human conduct (in particular, with respect to family life).¹⁷ Since a prophet’s teachings relate to the “habits, ways, and peculiarities of the people to whom he is specifically sent,” the

best approach to politics is to select groups of people as a central nucleus for instituting a consensus-based “universal Sharia.”¹⁸ In other words, Islam’s laws and practices must reflect its universality and remain in harmony with the times by carrying forward the principle of evolutionary thought within the Quran. As a result, for Iqbal, “[t]he teaching of the Quran that life is a process of progressive creation necessitates that each generation, guided but unhampered by the work of its predecessors, should be permitted to solve its own problems.”¹⁹

Iqbal’s teachings were based on the Islamic principle of *ijma*, or consensus, which constitutes a major source of Quranic jurisprudence. Iqbal argues that historically this principle of consensus never took on institutional form as it would have undermined the imperial authority of the caliphs. With the emergence of nationalistic Muslim republics and the establishment of legislative institutions in Islamic countries, Iqbal argued that the time had come for the revival of *ijma* as a principle for modern Muslim politics.

Moreover, in Iqbal’s worldview, the Quran affirms both the undeniably eternal and the vibrantly temporal; within the “structure of Islam,” *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, is the way of change.²⁰ *Ijtihad* can be undertaken “with a view to form an independent judgment on a legal question” that is grounded in both the Quran and the Hadith.²¹ In the beginning, the spread of Islam and the establishment of Muslim political order necessitated a “systematic legal thought” and “early doctors of law,” manifested through various schools of Islamic jurisprudence. By the early twentieth century, however, Iqbal wondered whether within Islamic law there were prospects for a “fresh interpretation of its principles” since it is not inherently “stationary and incapable of development.”²²

Iqbal’s ideas have had a major impact across the Islamic world; his work is cited wherever there is a movement for reforming legal edicts. It is a pity that Pakistan, which has often claimed and celebrated him, is currently under the stranglehold of radical clerics and state-sponsored jihadism. His ideas to date remain the ideal for seeking Islamic reformation in a democratic context and are an inspiration for modernist reformers in South Asia.

In addition to Iqbal, the influential Iranian scholar Ali Shariati also emphasized that Islam needed an enlightenment movement to guide people and bring new dynamism to the faith. Shariati’s view was that an “Islamic Protestantism” was required for the religion’s advancement and progress in its legal thought. Islamic Protestantism would enable the religion to shed the degenerating factors that had stultified its thinking.²³ Shariati held that the religious messages offered by formal and traditional religious institutions were outdated. He maintained that the “relationship between [the clergy] and the people should be like the relationship between

teacher and pupil—not between leader and follower, not between icon and imitator; the people are not monkeys who merely imitate.”²⁴ His ideas inspired the Iranian revolution but the theocrats appropriated his ideas for their own purposes. Shariati’s essential message of liberating Islam from clerics and outdated forms of thought through reason was quite ironically bypassed and subverted.

The Egyptian nineteenth century reformer Muhammad Abduh also argued that Muslims had to challenge the interpretations of divine texts provided by medieval clerics and that reason had to be applied to re-interpret earlier edicts. Abduh argued that Islam shunned the slavish imitation of tradition and showed that independent thought was an essential precondition for the evolution of Muslim society and adherence to true Islamic principles. As Albert Hourani, a scholar of Arab liberal thought summarized, “Abduh was convinced that the Muslim nations could not become strong and prosperous again until they acquired from Europe the sciences which were the product of its activity of mind, and they could do this without abandoning Islam, for Islam taught the acceptance of all the products of reason.”²⁵ Similar to liberation theologians in the Christian world, Abduh stressed that Islam rightly understood could free human beings from man-made enslavement and ensure equal rights for all, if only the monopoly on clerical exegesis were eliminated. Unsurprisingly, Abduh was branded an infidel by the traditionalists.

Over the last two decades, globalization has contributed to the establishment and increased activity of transnational Muslim networks that support reform of the Sharia. These networks have substantially advanced more inclusive, pluralistic and vibrant civil societies that reject false essentialisms and the inherited identities of the past. Thanks in part to these networks, it is becoming more difficult for the forces of radicalism to marginalize and suppress pious and free-thinking modern Muslims who are seeking reform for the good of their societies.

Indeed, while the champions of Islamist literalism and sectarianism have become dominant in many societies, new opportunities have begun to emerge for Muslims who are seeking modern reform of Sharia. It is widely believed that political struggles in the Muslim world have divided Muslim scholars into two camps: modern secularists and backward Islamists. This is a false dichotomy, since as the Malay scholar Adis Duderija notes, a third block has emerged in recent times that advances critical-progressive Muslim thought and which rejects both the uncritical emulation of the West and Islamist fundamentalism.²⁶ This stream of thought focuses on re-interpreting normative Quranic teachings in line with a global outlook and in a manner that advances the wellbeing of peoples in accordance with their particular context.²⁷

Specifically, Duderija argues that critical-progressive scholar-activists contest “both (1) ‘fundamentalist’ Muslim hegemonic discourses on issues related to modernity, human rights, gender, justice, and democracy, and (2) mainstream Western socio-political and legal theories, and certain secular Enlightenment assumptions.”²⁸ Their focus instead is on empowering the individual, including Muslim women, and on maximizing the engagement and participation of the individual in Muslim religious and political life.

Scholars and activists belonging to this broad-based tendency in contemporary Islam are developing new concepts and paradigms in both domestic and international politics. The adherents of critical-progressive Muslim thought are based in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority nations. These thinkers and activists strive to remain faithful to Islam by freeing modern Muslims from the language, ideas, theoretical concepts and sources of the late-medieval Muslim traditions. For example, in his new book, *Reasoning with God—Reclaiming Shari’ah in the Modern Age*, UCLA Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that Sharia is more like an evolving common law than a set of defined precepts and commandments. Fadl maintains that the early Islamic jurists, such as Imam al-Shafi’i (820 AD), changed their rulings for different contexts:

Contemporary fundamentalist and essentialistic orientations imagine Islamic law to be highly deterministic and casuistic, but this is in sharp contrast to the epistemology and institution of the Islamic legal tradition that supported the existence of multiple equally orthodox and authoritative legal schools of thought, all of which are valid representations of the divine will.²⁹

A number of other critical-progressive thinkers have argued for a similar approach to Islamic tradition. These scholars range from Amina Wadud and Omid Safi in the United States to Farid Esack in South Africa, Hasan Hanafi in Egypt, Ali Ashgar Engineer in India, Enes Karic in Bosnia, F. A. Noor in Malaysia, and the late Nurcholish Majid in Indonesia.³⁰

Many of these thinkers acknowledge that the early Muslim modernists ultimately failed to find mainstream acceptance. They observe that since early Islamic modernism did not advance a systematic methodology for interpreting Sharia, it has proven it unsuccessful in displacing the prevalent pre-modern ontology of traditional Islam. Instead, early modernist Muslim thought became a scattered attempt of cultural revival motivated by the hardships of the colonial era and its socio-political, economic, and cultural aftershocks. The new generation of criti-

cal-progressive reformers seeks to avoid this. They consider the contributions of medieval-era scholars in an attempt to advance understanding between Islamic and Western values, thus putting forward a more systematic and integrated framework for understanding modernity and for advancing urgently needed reform.

Feminist Voices

THE CRITICAL-PROGRESSIVE TENDENCY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT IS CHARACTERIZED by its dedication to social justice, gender equality, religious non-discrimination, and a belief in the inherent dignity of every human being as a carrier of God's creation or image. These principles comprise the worldview of the Quran. Another distinguishing characteristic for critical-progressives is spirituality and the nurturing of interpersonal relationships based on Sufi moral philosophy, known as Muslim humanism. This tendency also makes use of modern social thought to comprehend how contexts have changed and how Sharia can be updated in line with Islamic principles. One prominent voice of this tradition is the director of Duke University's Islamic Studies Center, Omid Safi, who holds that critical-progressive analysis should take into account the politico-economic and social dynamics shaping the North-South divide in the world.³¹ As a whole, critical-progressive theorists reject such binaries as tradition vs. modernity, secularism vs. religion, and the West vs. Islam. For them, historical "progress" is not viewed as linear; these scholars may seek to learn from analyzing Western experiences, but they don't insist on the application of foreign models to Muslim societies. Instead, their focus is on the realization of possible religious and political change within a particular cultural context.

While this approach to reform is fresh and promising, it has yet to translate into workable models of governance and institution building in Muslim societies. It has, however, made important intellectual contributions to addressing the contemporary challenges in the Muslim world and provided a means toward escaping ideological quagmire.

Muslim women struggle everyday against the patriarchal edicts and norms constructed by clerics ages ago and that Islamists continue to seek to enforce. However, new thinkers oppose this Islamism. Amina Wadud is an example of a Muslim scholar who has subtly advocated for Islamic equality and justice.³² In her first book *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Wadud addresses the tensions in certain Quranic passages pertaining to justice

and its myriad interpretations. Wadud has put forward a comprehensive Quranic concept of gender equality that ranges from family and society to the entire Muslim Ummah. In her view, patriarchy is fundamentally un-Islamic.

Wadud inquired whether the Quran itself endorsed gender inequality; utilizing the hermeneutics of *tawhid* (the unity of God), she established that it did not. For her, God is above human beings, who were born as equals in the form of men and women. Thus, one person viewing themselves as superior to another, as in patriarchy, is like equating oneself with God while defying the principle of *tawhid*.³³ Wadud highlights the Quranic conception of *khilafa* (trustee), whereby God created *insaan* (human) without any gender discrimination. Every human being should be considered a trustee on Earth.

Wadud also contends that the higher concepts revealed within the Quran supersede historical interpretations.³⁴ For example, she cites the verse (4:3) allowing a man to marry up to four wives as an example. For Wadud, this verse has to be situated in the particular context in which it was revealed, that is, of seventh century Arabia when polygamy was commonplace. She argues that the Quran teaches that taking additional wives is directly contingent upon the non-discriminatory and fair treatment of all wives. Since this is not possible, she argues that the Quranic ideal remains monogamy and hence gender equality among spouses.

Perhaps the most poignant example of Wadud's critical interpretation applies to the Quranic verse that seemingly approves wife beating (4:34). Wadud and other scholars utilize a linguistic analysis to identify multiple classical Arabic meanings that are no longer in use today. For example, the term *daraba* has been taken as an endorsement of beating/striking, but it could also mean "to leave" in the sense of striking out (on a journey, etc.).³⁵ Through this, Wadud has expounded a Quranic view of gender equality.

In her 2005 book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud stressed the importance of seeing the Quran not simply as a fixed text but "as an utterance or text in process." In her view, one "important aspect of this challenge confronts the possibility of refuting the text, to talk back, to even say 'no.'"³⁶ Wadud added that some divine revelations pertaining to certain practices common in the seventh century are bounded by time. One such example is slavery, which was "condoned and regulated but became unacceptable in modern times, was declared as such and has since been eliminated."³⁷ In sum, Wadud argues that while Islamic texts provide the key spiritual and intellectual framework, their literal application is limiting and needs to be contextualized.³⁸

Riffat Hasan, a Pakistani scholar based in the United States, has also been arguing for the use of rationality in addressing women's rights in Islamic discourse.³⁹

As she puts it, “Not only does the Quran emphasize that righteousness is identical in the case of men and women, but it affirms, clearly and consistently, women’s equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they share equally with men.”⁴⁰ In this way, Hasan states that the Quran goes beyond egalitarianism as it displays special consideration for women and disadvantaged groups in society.⁴¹

In contemporary times, despite the pressure of anti-women laws which have been instituted under the garb of “Islamization” in several Muslim countries, educated women are gradually realizing that religion is being used as a tool of oppression instead of as a path toward greater rights and freedoms. Hassan contends that “God, who speaks through the Quran, is characterized by justice, and it is stated clearly in the Quran that God can never be guilty of ‘*zulm*’ (unfairness, tyranny, oppression, or wrongdoing).”⁴² Thus, the Quran cannot be treated as the source of human injustice, and the discrimination to which Muslim women have been subjected cannot be viewed as God-ordained. The goal of the Quran is to usher in peace which can only exist within a just environment.

In Hassan’s view, “feminist theology” is needed within the framework of the Islamic belief system “to liberate not only Muslim women, but also Muslim men, from unjust social structures and systems of thought which make a peer relationship between men and women impossible.”⁴³ Hassan joins those arguing that discriminatory laws enacted in the name of Islam “cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better religious arguments.”⁴⁴ A recent example of such a modernist interpretation is Morocco, where women’s activism has led to a comprehensive revision of Islamic laws relating to family matters. A new Sharia more compatible with the imperatives of the twenty-first century has been designed and established.⁴⁵

Challenging Jihadism

THE MODERN PAKISTANI SCHOLAR JAVED AHMAD GHAMIDI HAS OPINED THAT THE avenue for *ijtihad* is open.⁴⁶ It is the duty of religious scholars to undertake *ijtihad* and explore new meanings of Quranic verses according to changing times. This is in line with Iqbal’s view that the revision of old opinions has opened new vistas of progress throughout history. The principles established by earlier jurists based on the Quran and the Hadith need to be revisited by modern jurists rewriting Muslim laws based on religious principles in line with the modern world.

The more pertinent ideas of Ghamidi relate to jihad.⁴⁷ He argues that individuals, or groups of individuals, have not been given permission to declare war. Only a legitimate state with organized political power and authority can declare war. While living in Mecca, even Muhammad and his companions were not permitted to wage war. But after migration to Medina, they organized a political system that permitted warfare in self-defense. The *fitna*, or disruptive behavior, mentioned in the Quran is understood to be any violent effort that disturbs the social harmony and dissuades or pressures Muslims away from religion. Some even call it the “persecution” of Muslims.

In Ghamidi’s view, jihad actually means to put all your effort and resources toward achieving a particular goal. Similarly, to wage war for Islam, fighting non-believers, oppression, and injustice is allowed only under certain conditions. The prophets and their companions could only wage war for the faith; after them, no Muslim has been eligible to pursue this because they are not God’s messengers. Ghamidi also maintains that the Quran does not order capital punishment for apostasy. The death penalty is only applicable in the case of murder, or when social harmony is disturbed. Moreover, for Ghamidi, non-believers who perform good deeds and believe in God will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment. Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are permitted, and Muslim states may interact with non-Muslim states in accordance with their shared interests.

There are many others calling for the rejection of narrow jihadist interpretations, including the compelling Pakistani reformist scholar Tahir ul Qadri, who authored a fatwa against terrorism and suicide bombings.⁴⁸ Qadri stresses that the indiscriminate killing of Muslims is unlawful and that Islam does not sanction acts of terrorism against non-Muslims. His work uses traditional sources and has helped advance the scope of Sharia as a living interpretation of Islamic edicts derived from the scripture. In short, the fatwa bans suicide bombing “without any excuses, any pretexts, or exceptions.”⁴⁹ As ISIS started to brutally seize territory, more than 120 Muslim scholars from around the globe issued an open letter rebutting ISIS’ interpretation of Islam.⁵⁰ However, this viewpoint has limited popular traction in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world, mainly due to ISIS’ propaganda claim that it represents the original Islam and is opposed to Western diktat.

Is Reformation Possible?

IN A RECENT ESSAY, THE TURKISH WRITER MUSTAFA AKYOL NOTED THE EXAMPLE of English philosopher John Locke, whose ideas brought liberalism to Christianity. Locke did not attack religion and derived his case for political and religious freedom from “both reason and the Bible.”⁵¹ Akyol argues for a “Lockean leap,” citing the late seventh century school of theologians called the Murjites, or postponers, who applied reason. They interpreted the faith in times of deep division amidst violence perpetrated by an extremist group called the Kharijites, or dissenters, who viewed other Muslims as apostates fit for death. Murjites held that no “Muslim had the right to judge others on matters of faith; only God had that ultimate authority. Thus, they reasoned, all doctrinal disputes should be postponed to the afterlife, to be resolved by God.”⁵²

The same religious humility guided by dedication to the eternal and by reason is urgently needed to address the contemporary crisis in the Muslim world. Many mainstream theologians have indeed shown how this is possible. The works of such scholars as Muhammad Tahir-ul Qadri in Pakistan, Fethullah Gulen in Turkey and Habib Ali al-Jifri in Yemen require wider dissemination, especially in the Arab world and Africa where violent Islamists are carrying out their agendas.⁵³ In Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, the voice of Salman al-Awdah, who is preaching non-violence despite his Salafi credentials, needs to resonate and merge with other reformist movements. Al-Awdah has taken a public position that a theocracy is not “Islamic” and that a “democracy proves to be better than autocracy.”⁵⁴

Perhaps one key obstacle for a full-scale reformation is that the Muslim world today lacks a unified, central religious authority capable of undertaking such a large-scale effort. This is truer for the dominant Sunni variant of Islam. Shiite Islam and its many sub-sects have something more approximate to centralized authority. Meanwhile, addressing the crisis within Sunni Islam will depend foremost on the advance of civil society and getting beyond the ideological quagmire that Muslim religious and political thought faces.

Al-Qaeda, ISIS and their affiliates have killed more Muslims than non-Muslims. This is an important message that still needs to be reinforced within the Muslim world. Moreover, a critical approach would show how popular animosity toward the West actually exacerbates the crisis by fueling Islamism’s appeal and simultaneously stifling alternative thinking about reform. In this, the invocation of reason and rationality as a basis of Islamic revival may have a promising future.

However, this new thinking cannot achieve mainstream liftoff until a critical mass of Muslims address the ideological quagmire they face and reject, re-interpret, and modernize traditional decrees and edicts. Today, there are small but important efforts to challenge and develop alternatives to Islamism from within Muslim societies.⁵⁵ It is incumbent on thinking Muslims to bend the course of Muslim history in a more positive and peaceful direction.

NOTES

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10. The Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide," available at [http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/#/](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/).

11. Charles Lister, "Profiling the Islamic State," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper*, November 13, 2014, available at http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Reports/2014/11/profiling%20islamic%20state%20lister/en_web_lister.pdf; Stanford University, "Mapping Militant Organizations: The Islamic State," Available at <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1#ideology>.
12. Unlike other Abrahamic faiths, Islam does not envision, let alone explicitly sanction, the institution of the clergy. There is no central authority defining what it means to be Muslim. Therefore, as the Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman argues, the Sunna and the Quran are "essentially an ever-expanding process." Moreover, the expansion of the Islamic faith across the globe has necessitated greater acceptance of plurality and diversity within Muslim thought and practice. Indeed, the earliest interpretations of Islam came about in political and cultural contexts that have little in common with today's world; therefore, these interpretations require revision and reformulation in light of contemporary circumstances. The challenge, as Sardar puts it, is to rediscover the "distinguished history of critical thinking in Islam." This critical approach means questioning orthodoxy and demanding evidence. Islam does not divide Muslims into groups or categorize them; instead, it embraces diverse social and political groups. Today's critical thinkers should continue to raise questions about all dominant interpretations of the religion as they search for answers to the challenges faced by Muslims across the world. This critique is not purely Islam-centric, but also applies to Western political thought and its conception of the Muslim social world. It attempts to contextualize current problems in their historical and cultural backdrop to understand their origins and complexities. Such an approach brings with it major political and social opportunities, as the legacy of rational Muslim thinkers has become of paramount importance in dealing with the sectarian fault lines that destabilize the Muslim world today. Re-focusing on the historical stream of thought that takes a critical eye to traditional interpretations can change our outlook toward Islam and also transform the narrative associated with the religion. (For Rahm, see Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1995), p. 15, available at http://ebooks.rahnuma.org/religion/Fazlur_Rehman/Fazlur_Rehman-Islamic-Methodology-in-History.pdf; for Sardar, see Ziauddin Sardar, "Critical Muslim," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, July 2013, available at <http://ziauddinsardar.com/2013/07/critical-muslim/>; Ziauddin Sardar, "Islamic history is full of free thinkers," *The Independent*, January 21, 2015, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/islamic-history-is-full-of-free-thinkers—but-recent-attempts-to-suppress-critical-thought-are-verging-on-the-absurd9993777.html>.)
13. The collapse of the Abbasid dynasty and its capital of Baghdad—then the intellectual and social crown jewel of Muslim civilization—produced fears of social break-up. In turn, conservatives have emphasized the classical traditions and dismissed new ideas.

14. Ironically, Iqbal was declared the national poet of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.
15. Mohammad Iqbal, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam," (1930), p. 108, available at <http://wccftech.com/kursed/The%20Reconstruction%20of%20Religious%20Thought%20in%20Islam.pdf>.
16. Hanif Lakadawala, "Muslim Intellectual Stagnation," *Islamic Research Foundation International*, available at http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_651_700/muslim_intellectual_stagnation.htm; Mohammad Iqbal, "Separate Muslim Nationhood in India," *Muslim Political Thought: a Reconstruction*, ed. Fateh Mohammad Malik. (Islamabad: Alharma, 2002).
17. Mohammad Iqbal, "Separate Muslim Nationhood in India" in *Muslim Political Thought: a Reconstruction*, ed. Fateh Mohammad Malik. (Islamabad: Alharma, 2002), p. 165-166.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 171-172.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
20. Mohammad Iqbal, "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam," (1930), p. 106, available at <http://wccftech.com/kursed/The%20Reconstruction%20of%20Religious%20Thought%20in%20Islam.pdf>.
21. *Ibid.*, p.178.
22. *Ibid.*, p.168.
23. Ali Shariati, "Where shall we begin?" available at http://www.iranchamber.com/personalities/ashariati/works/where_shall_we_begin.php#sthash.gZjnScAb.dpuf.
24. Transcript of a speech given by Dr. Seyyed Hashem Aghajari on June 19, 2002 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of Ali Shariati <http://ilrs.org/faith/aghajari-text.html>.
25. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 151.
26. Adis Duderija, "Critical-Progressive Muslim Thought: Reflections on Its Political Ramifications," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 11, no.3 (September 20, 2013), p. 69-79, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2328581.
27. Traditionally, the Islamic religious discourse has sought to collapse the Western distinction between the "religious" (private) and "secular" (public) domains. Muslims have historically and hermeneutically considered the early era of Islam as sacred, akin to a "prophetic revelatory event." The Salafi School illustrates this trend, incorporating the medieval epistemology that is commonly found in writings on Muslim jurisprudence, including *Dar al-Islam* (Abode of Islam), *Dar al-Kufr* (Abode of Disbelief), and *Dar al-Harb* (Abode of War).
28. Adis Duderija, "Critical-Progressive Muslim Thought: Reflections on Its Political Ramifications," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 11, no.3 (September 20, 2013), p. 69-79, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2328581.

29. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shari'ah in the Modern Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. xxxix.
30. Ibid.
31. *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi. (London: Oneworld, 2003).
32. Trisha Sertori, "Dr. Amina Wadud: For a Progressive Islam," *The Jakarta Post*, November 19 2009, available at <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/11/19/dr-amina-wadud-for-a-progressive-islam.html>.
33. Margot Badran, "Re/placing Islamic Feminism," *Sciences Po*, 2010, available at http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr/ceri/files/ci_feminism_iran_mb.pdf.
34. Amina Wadud, *Quran and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 10.
35. Ibid., p. 76.
36. Amina Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad* (London: Oneworld, 2006), p. 191.
37. Ibid., p. 192.
38. Ibid., p. 197.
39. Liv Tonnessen, "Islamic Feminism" (Chr. Michelsen Institute, University of Bergen, 2014), available at <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5289-islamic-feminism-a-public-lecture-by.pdf>.
40. Åsne Halskau, "Between Tradition and Modernity: A Radical Muslim View on the Interpretation of Gender Roles in Islam" in *Women and Religion in the Middle East and Mediterranean*, ed. I.M. Okkenhaug and I. Mæhle. (Oslo: Oslo Academic Press, March 2003), p. 105.
41. Ibid.
42. Riffat Hassan, "Religious Conservatism," *Islamic Research Foundation International*, available at http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_101_150/religious_conservatism.htm.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ziauddin Sardar, "Reform is Islam's best kept secret," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2005, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/01/religion.uk1>.
46. Mumtaz Ahmad et. al., "Who Speaks for Islam?" NBS Research Report #22, 2010, p.4, available at http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Docs/Pubs/Religious_Figures_Afghanistan.pdf.
47. Javed Ghamidi, "Jihad o Qatal," August, 2009
<http://www.javedahmadghamidi.com/ishraq/view/Jihad-O-Qataal4>.
48. The Fatwa is available at <http://www.minhajbooks.com/english/bookid/376/Fatwa:-Suicide-Bombing-and-Terrorism-by-Shaykh-ul-Islam-Dr-Muhammad-Tahir-ul-Qadri.html>.
49. Ibid.
50. The letter is available at <http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com>.
51. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Locke's Political Philosophy," July 29, 2010, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke-political/>.

52. Mustafa Akyol, "A Letter Concerning Muslim Toleration," *New York Times*, February 17, 2015, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/18/opinion/mustafa-akyol-a-letter-concerning-muslim-toleration.html>.
53. Ed Husain, "Countering al Qaeda's Message," *New York Times*, October 8, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/opinion/countering-al-qaedas-message.html>.
54. Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Salman al-Awdah: In the Shadow of Revolutions," *Jadaliyya*, April 27, 2013, available at http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11412/salman-al-awdah_in-the-shadow-of-revolutions.
55. For instance, groups like the Pakistan-based youth network Khudi are promoting messages that advocate for tolerance and challenge radicalism. In London, the Muslim organization Radical Middle Way holds public "question time" events with clerics from Egypt's prestigious al-Azhar seminary, who cite scripture to support democracy in an Islamic context and undermine the view that suicide bombers are martyrs.

The Rise and Decline of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

By Aaron Y. Zelin¹

OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS, GLOBAL ATTENTION HAS SHIFTED TO Syria and Iraq with the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra and the return of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). However, nearly one thousand miles to the west, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) has continued its work of facilitating a future Islamic state since the spectacular attack on the American consulate in Benghazi on September 11, 2012.

Initially, ASL launched a highly sophisticated program of *dawa* (outreach) which included the provisioning of social services both inside and outside of Libya. This has provided it with an avenue for local support. But since Libyan General Khalifa Haftar announced a major offensive against Islamist armed groups in eastern Libya in May 2014 (codenamed Operation Dignity), ASL has focused primarily on military action. ASL's fortunes have dropped dramatically in the process, further exacerbated by the death of its leader, Muhammad al-Zahawi, confirmed in January 2015, and ISIS' intensification of its efforts to create a Libyan base independent of ASL since November 2014. Set in this context, this piece will examine the ebb and flow in ASL's fortunes.

In many ways, ASL followed the model of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), viewing its outreach and social services campaign as an important part of establishing and building not only an Islamic society, but an eventual Islamic state governed by its interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law). In contrast to the Libyan

government, which is often corrupt, incompetent, or extractive, ASL worked to convince the local population of its own competence and benevolence. Critically, this helped it win greater public support.

In addition to ASL's reach across Libya, from Benghazi, Tripoli and Ajdabiya to Sirte, Darna and the Gulf of Sidra, among other smaller locales, it has also operated abroad. Most notably, it has dispatched operatives to Syria, Sudan and Gaza to assist in humanitarian relief efforts. This has added a whole new layer to the meaning of global jihad and how various groups might try to engage populations outside their local areas of operation.

ASL has enjoyed a number of identities as an organization: On the one hand, it has been a charity, a security service, a health service and a religious education provider; on the other hand, it is also a militia, a terrorist organization and a training base for foreign jihadists. In recognition of this complexity, this analysis looks at the full spectrum of the group and teases out ASL's *dawa* campaign locally and globally; its hopes and future plans based off of its *dawa* literature on *aqida* (creed) and *manhaj* (methodology); its training of foreign fighters for the Syrian conflict as well as for the conflict with General Haftar; and, the rise of ISIS as a competitor. In sum, this essay seeks to provide a comprehensive view of ASL in its fourth year of existence.

The Dawa First Strategy

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE ARAB UPRISINGS, MOST SPECIFICALLY IN COUNTRIES like Egypt, Libya and Tunisia where regimes were fully overthrown, the public sphere opened. These countries also represented a fresh start and laboratory for a new jihadi campaign in the wake of al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) failures at controlling territory and instituting governance last decade.

For example, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri thought that this new environment provided an opportunity "for *dawa* and informing...Only God knows for how long they [local governments and the West] will continue, so the people of Islam and Jihad should benefit from them and exploit them."² In the same audio message, he further emphasized the superiority of Sharia over all other legal systems and laws. Zawahiri also endorsed the liberation of Islamic lands, opposed normalizing relations with Israel and underscored the importance of "cleansing the lands" of financial and social corruption.

In 2004, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the foremost respected Sunni jihadi ideo-

logue alive today, wrote *Waqafat ma' Thamrat al-Jihad (Stances on the Fruit of Jihad)* in an attempt to steer the jihadi movement away from the abuses of his former student and AQI leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the book, Maqdisi examines the differences between what he describes as *qital al-nikayya* (fighting to hurt or damage the enemy) and *qital al-tamkin* (fighting to consolidate one's power). Maqdisi argues that the former provides only short-term tactical victories whereas the latter provides a framework for consolidating an Islamic state. Implicit is Maqdisi's emphasis on the importance of planning, organization, education and *dawa*.³

The formation of ASL along with its sister organizations in Tunisia (AST) and Egypt (ASE) were seen as logical conclusions and implementations of Zawahiri's and Maqdisi's ideas.⁴ In short, these groups selected a *dawa*-first strategy instead of a jihad-first strategy. As a result, one of the main avenues through which ASL advanced its ideas was its social services programs. This cultivation of followers in a broad fashion—in contrast to the more vanguard-oriented organizations that have been involved in jihadism in a local, regional, or global capacity over the past 30 years—was seen as a new way to consolidate a future Islamic state.

At first, this approach appeared to forge a new and successful way forward for the jihadi movement, with an unprecedented number of individuals joining ASL and AST. Over the past two years, however, this *dawa*-first approach has backfired. Within a month of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup d'état in Egypt in early July 2013, all of the key members of ASE had either been arrested or had been forced to link-up with Jama'at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis' growing insurgency in northern Sinai. Still others had fled to Syria to join the jihad against the Bashar al-Assad regime. Less than two months later, at the end of August 2013, the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization and proceeded to dismantle it via widespread arrests. As a result, some Tunisians left for Libya and joined up with ASL while others went to Syria and joined ISIS.

As for ASL, once General Haftar launched his war against them, it too mostly stopped conducting regular *dawa*. The *dawa* events it did sponsor were publicized after the fact and related to providing meat and food to the poor and needy during Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha in the summer and fall of 2014. Instead, much of what has been published by ASL since then has been related to the fighting with General Haftar's forces. Additionally, while still boasting of members in other cities, ASL has confined the vast majority of its military operations to Benghazi. And while ASL has not disintegrated like ASE or AST, its capacities have been severely degraded, providing ISIS with an opening in the fall of 2014.

At the height of ASL's campaign, it oversaw an extensive network of services inside and outside of Libya. In fact, it was involved in activities ranging from

anti-drug campaigns, blood drives and food drives (including the slaughtering of animals on holidays for the poor) to Quranic competitions for children, housing projects for the poor, school cleanings, garbage removals and bridge repairs. ASL provided such tangible services to the community as opening a medical clinic for women and children, an Islamic Center for Women, an Emergency Room and a religious school named Mirkaz al-Imam al-Bukhari Li-l-'Ulum al-Sharia. ASL also maintained security at the major al-Jala' hospital in Benghazi.

What made these efforts much more impressive was that ASL was not just acting independently, but was getting support and co-sponsorship from other local organizations. The blood drives were coordinated with the Benghazi Central Blood Center (CBC), for which the CBC even presented ASL with an award on July 25, 2013. ASL also coordinated lectures with the Social Security Fund's Benghazi Branch and cleaned roads in cooperation with the electrical company and Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai. Moreover, the most successful program that ASL undertook was a vigorous anti-drug campaign together with the Rehab Clinic at the Psychiatric Hospital of Benghazi, the Ahli Club (soccer), Libya Company (Telecom and Technology) and the Technical Company. While in Sirte, ASL hosted a ten-day Quranic competition during Ramadan in association with the Office of Awqaf of Sirte, Radio Tawhid of Sirte, the Cleaning Services Company and the University of Sirte. Also during Ramadan, ASL assisted in a food drive that gained sponsorship from the Libya Company, Primera Gallery, al-Iman Foundation, Tajama' al-Qawarshah al-Khayri wa-l-Da'wai and the Faruq Center.⁵

Beyond its local efforts, ASL launched a robust campaign abroad too, targeting Syria, Sudan and Gaza. ASL dubbed these overseas *dawa* efforts "The Convoy Campaign of Goodness To Our People in 'X-location.'" These efforts began in November 2012 when ASL sent aid packages to Syria and Gaza, including its *dawa* literature. The most sophisticated operation, however, came in response to the major flooding that hit Sudan in August 2013. An ASL team landed in Khartoum with five tons of medicine, twelve tons of grains and legumes and eight tons of children's milk in tow. The second delivery contained twenty-four tons of clothing and 1.5 tons of floor carpets for mosques. All of these items and packages were stamped or plastered with ASL's logo. The level of aid in itself was outstanding, but the fact that it came from a global jihadi organization that had procured and delivered it safely to Sudan's capital testifies to the group's organizational capabilities as well as its possible ties to the Sudanese government.

The same types of questions apply to ASL's operations in Syria, and its potential ties to the Turkish state. In Syria, the campaign was called "Uplifting the Ummah, freedom from forced rule, Western dominance, and uplifted by the goodness, pride

and dignity under the law of *Rahman* (one of the holiest of the 99 names of God within Islam).” In late January 2014, ASL sent three tranches of aid, comprising slaughtered beef, flour and electric generators, to the rural Latakia towns of Salma and Kasab, among others. The effort in Syria illustrated a high level of planning and organization, since ASL had to gain access to local resources and grasp the human topography of the area. Lastly, also in late January 2014, ASL responded to an Israeli airstrike in Gaza.⁶ The campaign was marketed as “We are over here in Libya and our eyes are on Jerusalem.” ASL’s contacts inside Gaza went door-to-door in the al-Nafaq neighborhood distributing cash-filled envelopes with ASL’s logo to those “whose houses were damaged by the shelling of the Zionists.” The speed of the campaign suggests the possibility of an ASL network in Gaza.⁷

While impressive, these overseas campaigns represent the height of ASL’s influence and power. Since the fighting with General Haftar has commenced, ASL has shown no signs of continuing its international campaign. Instead, it has shifted increasingly into self-preservation mode. Prior to discussing the war with General Haftar, however, it is important to highlight the ideological backbone of ASL, especially since its key points are part of the literature that ASL had distributed during its local and international *dawa*.

Ideological Outlook

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PAMPHLETS THAT ASL PASSED OUT DURING ITS *dawa* efforts educated individuals on its doctrine and agenda.⁸ ASL’s core ideology has particular global jihadi underpinnings. First, there is immense emphasis on the *tawhid* (pure monotheism) of God, as “there is no other God, and there is nothing that can be revered like Him.” The source of “interference or deduction” is the Quran, the “word of God Almighty,” and the Sunna (actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), which “sets out and explains the Quran.”

Second, as the pamphlet makes clear, if a Muslim does not follow the literal authority of God, then he is branded or “excommunicated” as a *kafir* (unbeliever). Anyone who “calls for anything other than Islam,” such as “democracy” or “secularism,” manifests infidelity, or *kufr*, and is deemed “nugatory.” The permissibility of *takfir* (excommunication) appears to stem from the institutional necessity to impose obedience through a set of actions and beliefs extracted and interpreted literally from the Quran and the Sunna.

Third, the pamphlet maintains that the theological mechanism to purge the

Ummah (Islamic community) of *kufur* and to implement *tawhid* is military jihad. Jihad does not require a religious verdict set down by an imam because fighting the *kufar* (infidels) is “more obligatory in the world than adhering to the [Islamic] faith.” Thus, waging jihad is considered a fundamental prerequisite to being considered a genuine Muslim. If a Muslim wages jihad against the declared *kufar*, then ASL will not “accuse [that Muslim] of being a sinner.”

Moreover, the “blood of Muslims is not haram,” or forbidden, because there is no higher duty than jihad. The prioritization of military strength and discipline is the *sine qua non* of uniting the Ummah into one Muslim entity. Political parties, even Islamic ones, represent a pluralistic, democratic process, and therefore serve to “divide up the Ummah.” Ultimately, ASL aims to establish an authoritative, theological state based on Sharia to supplant the current laws and constitution. ASL’s agenda appears to be local; namely, to fight rival militias in a war to control Libya and to reform it into an Islamic state. However, the beliefs and theological justifications for violent action suggest a complete rejection of the current world order and constant conflict.

Another of ASL’s pamphlets explains its issues with democracy in detail.⁹ Besides its focus on *tawhid* and the necessity of jihad, ASL has a deep aversion to democracy. The pamphlet’s main argument is that “democracy” constitutes the antithesis to *shura* (council), or Islamic governance based on Sharia. There are three fundamental differences that make democracy and Islam incompatible: democracy is based on the “rule of the people” while *shura* is based on the “rule of God”; democracy enforces man-made laws forbidden in Islam while *shura* uses judicial *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to make individual evaluations of cases in strict accordance with Islamic teachings; and, democratic systems are ruled by people while *shura* is ruled by God. The purpose of the pamphlet is to delegitimize those Arab leaders who claim to be pious Muslims but govern and acquire political power through, or under the guise of, democracy. More importantly, by placing democracy and Islam in irreconcilable positions, ASL undercuts Islamic democratic parties, such as the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood’s Justice and Construction Party, which seek to apply Islamic principles to public policy within a democratic framework.

For ASL, not only is “democracy” fundamentally incompatible with Islam, but it is also framed in its literature as an authoritarian system. As the pamphlet makes clear, ASL directly associates the offshoots of liberal values found in many democratic societies, such as “lusts,” “defamation” and “wine, clown-like behavior, songs, debaucherous behavior, adultery [and] cinemas” with the imposition of *kufur* institutions such as the Charter of the United Nations, the laws of the General

Assembly and the “laws of [democratically-elected] parties.” Thus, the logic follows: if one does not engage in acts of lust and defamation, then one is deemed “extreme, terroristic and not tending towards world peace and coexistence.” By imposing specific non-Islamic values on society and excluding Sharia-sanctioned law, “democracy” directly seeks to eradicate Islam. Moreover, elected assemblies and parliaments are built by “majority rule,” a concept that “bears no relation to the Quran and the Hadith,” and thus seeks to eradicate God-sanctioned rule. Lastly, ASL tars democracy with the failure of the Arab uprisings to bring about better governance, especially in Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Yemen. The lesson learned from those uprisings is that democracy is full of “provisions and deceitful illusions.” Essentially, the pre-Arab uprising dictators and civil unrest that followed are the products of “democracy.”

A third pamphlet that ASL has distributed among its supporters and would-be recruits is on how to handle interactions with police officers, should they be stopped in the street.¹⁰ This pamphlet provides talking points relating to the current Libyan system in order to sow doubts among the police and encourage defections. ASL talking points include invoking God as one and the only arbitrator and source of governing authority, while the role of humans is emphasized as simply fighting “whatever governs that does not come from God.” God, the ASL pamphlet argues, “will not rely on [humans] for governing,” but simply to eradicate “evil” or anything that does not adhere to a literal interpretation of Islamic texts. By prosecuting criminals under Libyan civil code, policemen are actually “forcing people into *kufri*” because those people become subject to *taghut* (tyrants). The concepts of “policemen” and the “army” are not rejected, but only if the authorities “legislate” with Sharia.

A final ideological statement worth highlighting pertains to ASL’s global outlook. While ASL has focused mainly on local issues, it does have a global dimension and is very much within the ideological milieu of global jihadism. ASL’s statement in response to the United States’ seizure of Abu Anas al-Libi, a Libyan wanted for his part in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, is emblematic of its global outlook.¹¹ Ultimately, ASL argues that the United States is seeking to destroy Islam and impose its own culture, values and laws on Muslims and their lands. The U.S., called *al-kufar*, does this in three ways. First, it is “preventing the Muslims from establishing an [Islamic] state.” Examples of this are coalition campaigns against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Islamists in northern Mali.

Second, the statement charges that the “war against and pursuit of jihad and the mujahideen,” or “war against terrorism,” is “at its essence a war against Islam.” When intervening in other countries’ affairs, the U.S. often targets “whoever they

wish unsupervised and unaccountable” (an allusion to al-Libi, but more importantly the killing of Osama bin Laden without Pakistani consultation) while “violating holy sites and [Muslim] lands” (an allusion to Operation Desert Shield, Iraqi Freedom). Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the U.S. as the “decision-maker and leader of the world” is in reality attempting to impose its “unlawful assertions of ‘superiority’ over creation.” ASL attributes Libya’s chaos to the U.S. intervention and subsequent attempt to impose the “tyranny of democracy,” which is fully preventing the rule of Sharia. This aggression, arrogance and lack of respect for Muslims derives from the United States’ *kafir* values of “murder and displacement” —a clear reference to America’s history of slavery, troubled race relations and conflicts with Native Americans.

Third, ASL argues that “terrorism” is used by the U.S. as a label for those who do not adhere to their “democratic” agenda. In response, ASL calls for a mass campaign to “inform every Muslim of the goals of these belligerent states and their allies.” The logic is that before being able and willing to wage jihad, the fighter must be indoctrinated with the belief that he is defending his religion and way of life. ASL urges Muslims to accept the scholar Ahmad Shaker’s decree that “any cooperation with the British [or in the current case, the Americans], no matter how small, is tantamount to unbridled apostasy...” Thus, for reasons already stated, Muslims must be in a constant state of war with the United States. In the context of Libya, ASL believes the country is suffering from “humiliation and disgrace” because it abandoned “governing with Islamic Sharia.” By adopting a Western-style parliamentary system and not a Sharia-based one, the Libyan government is essentially “fighting Islam.” Like the post-Saddam and post-Salih governments in Iraq and Yemen, respectively, post-Qaddafi Libya is attempting to adhere to Western standards of governance.

Hisbah and the War with Haftar

INDEED, WHILE DAWA HAS BEEN ASL’S MAIN FOCUS, IT HAS ALSO TAKEN PART IN *hisbah* (enjoining right and forbidding wrong; usually connoting vigilante activities) and jihad.¹² With regard to *hisbah*, ASL’s Zahawi admitted that his group has been involved in the demolition of Sufi shrines and places of worship.¹³ Furthermore, ASL stormed the European School in Benghazi and confiscated books on the human body it deemed “pornographic,” and thus contrary to Islam.¹⁴ Intimidated, teachers at the school blacked out those sections depicting the human

body. In one video, members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte whipped some alleged transgressors of Sharia tens of times.¹⁵ Moreover, there have been numerous unsolved assassinations of security officials, government officials and civil society activists, many of which are suspected to be the work of ASL.

ASL's most well-known act of jihad is its attack on the United States consulate in Benghazi. Although there was no formal claim of responsibility, the ambiguous language used in the initial statement by ASL's spokesman, Hani al-Mansuri, suggests that some ASL members participated in the assault. As Mansuri carefully put it, "Katibat Ansar al-Sharia [in Benghazi] as a military did not participate formally/officially and not by direct orders."¹⁶ It is likely that some of ASL's local allies in other militias were involved, too.

On a more regional scale, similar to the Iraq jihad, Libya has become a training hub for those seeking jihad in Syria. In fact, most of those who train in Libyan camps—suspected in Misrata, Benghazi, the desert area near Hon and in the Green Mountains in the east—come from the countries surrounding Libya.¹⁷

There is increasing proof that ASL is training individuals to fight in Syria. On August 6, 2013, two videos leaked online of Tunisians who had been detained by locals in the Derna region and interrogated.¹⁸ Based on the information in the videos, the footage is likely from the late spring or early summer of 2012. It seems ASL was already actively training fighters for Syria, an ominous fact considering what transpired in Benghazi on September 11, 2012. Furthermore, members of AST less interested in *dawa* are likely preparing and training in Libya in preparation for a potential insurgency or terrorism in Tunisia.¹⁹ For example, one Tunisian who had trained in Libya was responsible for an unsuccessful suicide bombing at a beach resort in Sousse, a city southeast of Tunis, in October 2013.²⁰

While *hisbah* and foreign fighter training has continued in the shadows over the past few years, ASL's war with General Haftar has taken on a more public face, both in its messaging and online content dimensions. Since General Haftar announced Operation Dignity on May 17, the nature of ASL's public presentation has been more of a jihad-first than a *dawa*-first approach.

In late May 2014, at the outset of the conflict, Zahawi held an off the record press briefing in which he denounced General Haftar and labeled his offensive a crusade against Islam. Zahawi's comments identified the United States, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt as backers of General Haftar, allowing Zahawi to allude to past outside interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia and warn the United States against joining the battle. Zahawi struck a defiant tone, asserting that ASL was winning: "We thank God that we were able to defeat Haftar and we challenge him to attempt entering Benghazi again. We warn him

that if he continues this war against us, Muslims from across the world will come to fight, as is the case in Syria right now. The war would continue and Ansar al-Sharia would decide when it ends.”²¹

Ever since, ASL’s propaganda has cast the residents of Benghazi as victims of aggression. For example, in a video dated May 31, 2014, one interviewee bemoans the destruction of his house and property, which had been shelled by General Haftar’s forces.²² One month later, on July 29, ASL released a video telling the story of how General Haftar’s army bombed the people of Benghazi while ASL stood in valiant defense of the city.²³ On August 7, ASL released footage of yet more destruction, with buildings burning and neighborhoods destroyed; on December 1, ASL publicized a series of pictures of burnt out apartments and homes in the Sabri neighborhood of Benghazi.²⁴ The cumulative intent of these moves, of course, was to shape the war of public opinion against General Haftar.

Beyond fully mobilizing and militarizing ASL in Benghazi, the war united a number of Islamist factions under the banner of Majlis Shura Thuwar Benghazi (MSTB, the Benghazi Revolutionaries Consultative Council). On June 20, 2014, ASL, Raf Allah al-Sahati Brigade, February 17th Martyrs Brigade, Libya Shield 1, and Jaysh al-Mujahidin announced their alliance.²⁵ MSTB designated ASL’s Zahawi as its leader, with Wisam bin Hamid of Libya Shield 1 as the military leader and Jalal Makhzum of Raf Allah al-Sahati Brigade serving as the military commander. To this day, MSTB remains a potent force, with its leaders releasing joint videos, as on October 5, when bin Hamid stated, “[w]e advise [Haftar’s army] to return from what they are doing and that they repent to Allah the mighty before it is too late.” Zahawi added, gleefully: “I congratulate our people in Benghazi on this great victory, and we wish to remain until we complete the phase we are in, and this is to control Benghazi, and God willing it will be safer for its sons and its people.”²⁶ Since December 12, ASL has expanded its operations beyond Benghazi to Derna, in part due to its commitments with another newly-created umbrella organization. Indeed, ASL joined the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi under the banner of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin Derna (MSMD, the Derna Mujahidin Consultative Council).²⁷

Unlike in Benghazi, ASL does not have leading positions in this alliance, highlighting its weaker position in Derna. Instead, the head of the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade, Salim Dirby, leads MSMD with ASL’s Sufyan bin Qumu positioned as a military commander alongside Yusuf bin Tahir of Jaysh al-Islami al-Libi. While in Benghazi the Majlis is fighting General Haftar, the umbrella in Derna in addition to fighting Haftar is also in direct competition with Majlis Shura Shabab al-Islam (MSSI), which pledged *baya* (fealty) to ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

While Libya has become a key jihadi battleground, it has not exacted the same gravitational pull on foreign fighters as the conflict in Syria. However, Libyan training camps are now producing some fighters, initially intended for Syria, who are instead joining up with ASL or the Islamic State in Libya (ISL). The majority of foreign fighters in Libya are from the surrounding countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan and Morocco, but they also include some fighters from Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

Zahawi's Death and the Rise of Islamic State in Libya

SIMILAR TO OTHER CONFLICT ZONES, MOST NOTABLY SYRIA, IT SEEMS THAT THE upstart wilayat (provinces) that ISIS has “annexed” in Libya have recently drawn supporters from ASL.²⁸ In part, this is due to the perception that ISIS is winning, has momentum, and is the “cool” jihadi group. Another likely blow to ASL is the death of Zahawi, which was confirmed in January 2015, even if he had been wounded and out of sight since late October 2014.²⁹

The quick rise of MSSSI illustrates the changing nature of jihadism in Libya, but generally across the Arab world there has been a split between factions aligned with al-Qaeda and those closer to ISIS. MSSSI publicly announced its existence on April 4, 2014, when masked members of the group took to the streets of Derna wearing military uniforms, driving pickup trucks and brandishing rocket-propelled grenade launchers, machine guns and anti-aircraft cannons. They loudly proclaimed the imposition of Sharia.³⁰ Until it formally announced allegiance to ISIS, MSSSI was involved in such activities as security patrols and guarding the al-Huraysh hospital in Derna. They also publicized those who would “repent” to their cause, confiscated drugs and alcohol, and executed individuals.

In the lead up to ISIS formally “annexing” territory and turning MSSSI into Wilayat al-Barqah, MSSSI released a statement on June 22, 2014 in support of ISIS and Baghdadi.³¹ The statement was followed by a formal declaration of allegiance on October 3 that ceded MSSSI's territory in Derna to the caliphate.³² In honor of the occasion, MSSSI organized a forum at al-Sahaba mosque called *khilafah ala manhaj al-nabawiyah* (the Caliphate upon the methodology of the Prophet), a slogan used by ISIS over the past few years. A month and a half later, Baghdadi released an audio message declaring the creation of new “provinces” in various

Arab countries, including Libya. This conferred new legitimacy upon MSSI, which would operate within three Libyan provinces: Wilayat al-Barqah in the east, Wilayat Fizzan in the south, and Wilayat al-Tarabulus in the west. Highlighting the change, ISIS took control of MSSI's media operations.³³

Since then, ISL has slowly expanded its writ across different parts of Libya, executing and beheading members of General Haftar's forces along the way. Since the beginning of 2015, ISL has been involved in fighting in Benghazi, Sirte and Derna. It may also have executed two secular Tunisian journalists and killed twenty-one Egyptian Christian hostages in areas around Sirte as well as conducted a terrorist attack against the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli. While in Sirte and Derna, it has stepped up its *hisbah* patrols in local markets to ensure that they are not selling rotten or spoiled foods, confiscated hookahs (and closed stores selling tobacco since they view it as against Islam) and ordered stores to suspend sales during daily prayers. It has also conducted some *dawa* activities, the largest on November 25, 2014 under the motto of "The Caliphate upon the *Manhaj* [methodology] of the Prophet." Additionally, it is also providing aid to the poor and needy and giving gifts and sweets to children in Benghazi in order to curry favor. In a move similar to Syria, ISL is now attempting to impose regulations on pharmacies and locals in the health industry. Of course, this shouldn't be interpreted as Islamic State taking full control of Libya, or even any of these cities, but it does highlight its growing presence and prestige.

These developments appear to be eroding ASL's legitimacy as well as its closely guarded and painstakingly manicured reputation. In response, in late January 2015 ASL began trotting out its new Islamic police force and Sharia court in Benghazi. Quite possibly, ASL feels compelled to compete openly with ISL, especially as it loses members to ISL. This could lead to eventual violence between the two groups similar to what occurred between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria. As of now, there has not been any internecine jihadi fighting. In fact, there are rumors that ASL could pledge allegiance to ISL soon, especially in light of ASL's Sharia official Abu 'Abd Allah al-Libi pledging *baya* to Baghdadi.³⁴

Conclusion

AS A RESULT OF ZAHAWI'S DEATH AND THE GROWTH OF THE ISLAMIC STATE IN Libya, there are many outstanding questions for ASL. It remains an important military force in Benghazi and Derna, but will ASL sustain its independence or

slowly merge with these other militant outfits? Will the growth of ISL lead to internecine fighting, as has occurred between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria? Furthermore, can ASL sustain operations in cities beyond its Benghazi base? It is too early to tell, but if the current trajectory continues, ISL might swallow up ASL recruits outside of Benghazi and even make inroads within the city itself. Jihadi organizations, including ASL, have always been nimble and adaptable; as we have seen with Jabhat al-Nusra, they have been able to survive the challenge from ISIS. For now, however, ASL faces an uncertain future and the prospect of cooptation by ISL or decline.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Adam Heffez, Patrick Hoover and Rashid Dar for helping with parts of this research.
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