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Saudi Arabia's "Islamic Alliance": Major Challenge for Al-Baghdadi's Islamic State, or Potential Opportunity?

By Nibras Kazimi

THE JIHADISTS OF THE ISLAMIC STATE HAVE HAD A LOT TO SAY ABOUT the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They do so because they see themselves locked in a rivalry with it. At the heart of the rivalry is the question of who gets to pose as the defender of "Sunnidom" in the face of Iranian expansionism in the Middle East, a perception both rivals share and agitate over. The Islamic State argued that the House of Saud has lost the legitimacy and efficacy necessary to mount such a civilizational defense. They cited the static nature of Saudi inaction, one that did not correspond to the alarmist rhetoric emanating from Riyadh concerning Shi'a transgressions against Sunnis. The jihadists may believe that this disconnect between rhetoric and action is accelerating the disaffection of Saudi citizens with their rulers. They may hope

that this disaffection would welcome the expansion of the Islamic State into the Saudi heartland—a goal that is critical to the long-term survival of their state, or so they may believe.

However, Saudi Arabia's regional policy is no longer static. A year ago, the Saudi state launched a military operation in Yemen against rebels it deemed beholden to Iran. The jihadists responded with disdain and mockery. They assumed that it was a fluke occurrence and that the war would expose Saudi feebleness and irresolution. Yet in December 2015, the Saudi state went further and declared the formation of an Islamic military alliance to combat terrorism. The implication was that Saudi Arabia is willing to take the battle to the jihadists in Syria and elsewhere. The move was also widely interpreted by Middle Eastern observers in media and intelligence circles as one that seeks to counterbalance Iranian activism across the Middle East. One Saudi-focused analyst wondered whether it constitutes the formation of an Islamic equivalent to NATO.[1] This latter perception has seeped into the public debate across the region, raising expectations of a "new order."

The jihadists were not prepared to consider the possibility of such an unprecedented paradigm shift in Saudi behavior when they first analyzed the Yemen campaign. Their anti-Saudi narrative was tailored to address and belittle Saudi inaction, and now it must play catch up to Saudi action. They must also address the ideological ramifications of the kingdom positioning itself as a "warrior state," harking back to a centuries-old identity that it used to manifest prior to its founding in 1932. The rhetorical arsenal that the jihadists had developed and deployed in previous years is ideologically insufficient to counter a rival warrior state, especially if it is Saudi Arabia. Now they will have to contend with the possibility that Saudi Arabia's new expansionist policies may be well-received by its citizens, whom the jihadists were hoping to recruit and incorporate into their own expansionist state. The jihadists must now argue that Saudi action is illegitimate. That is a harder argument to make compared with one centered on Saudi torpor since the Saudis are doing precisely what jihadists for years have criticized the Saudis for not doing. It will be harder should Saudi action lead to a radical rearrangement in the balance of power in the Middle East. As such, ideology follows action, and the jihadists were caught by surprise, at least for now. But the Islamic State could possibly find its footing if or when the Saudi-led Islamic Alliance fumbles on the terrain of battle or even if it fails to launch at all and falls short of meeting the expectations it has raised. Saudi Arabia may have felt compelled to take such a gamble, given what the jihadists were saying about its inactivity and other internal socioeconomic and cultural challenges at play. But it is a dangerous gamble nonetheless. If the Islamic Alliance ends up perceived by Saudi citizens to be

a failure, then that perception may accelerate the loss of the regime's cache of legitimacy. The jihadists may then spot an opportunity to gain ground within the kingdom, directing more of their personnel, resources, and propagandist attention toward that goal.

The Islamic State's Saudi Policy as Reflected in Al'Baghdadi's Speeches

ISLAMIC STATE LEADER ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI HAS DELIVERED THREE "POLICY" speeches since the declaration of the caliphate in September 2014. The Islamic State's media organs released the first speech as an audio file in November 2014, followed by two more in May and December 2015. Saudi Arabia figures prominently—one can even argue, predominantly—in these speeches. Clearly, the Islamic State's foreign policy, to the extent that it is a state, is fixated on the country to its south. Al-Baghdadi does not seem to envisage revolution in Saudi Arabia; what he promises is an outright invasion, or rather, in his mind, a "liberation" involving the expansion of his state to incorporate proto-revolutionary population centers within Saudi Arabia that would welcome his fighters. The Islamic State had heralded the establishment of three wilayats (provinces) in Saudi Arabia (Hijaz, Najd and al-Bahrain), which may seem to indicate a policy of fomenting revolution or at least securing territorial control from within. But al-Baghdadi's first two speeches suggest a preference for a policy of expansion of his state southwards at some time in the future. At present, the Islamic State de facto shares a border with Saudi Arabia running along its Wilayat al-Anbar and what was previously, at least in its eyes, the former Iraqi-Saudi border. The Islamic State has tried to expose this reality by releasing videos of its militants attacking Saudi and Iraqi police forts on either side of the border.[2]

However, there was a transition in al-Baghdadi's Saudi policy across the span of his three speeches. The speeches began as instructive to his sympathizers within Saudi Arabia. They soon changed into a reactive tone—reacting to the dramatic changes in Saudi Arabia's own foreign policy.

In his first speech as caliph in November 2014,[3] al-Baghdadi prescribes a "to-do list" for his supporters inside the kingdom. Essentially, al-Baghdadi calls for a violent campaign inside Saudi Arabia to distract the Saudi government away

from attacking the Islamic State. He calls for targeting Saudi Shi'as as well as members of the Saudi royal family. At that point, al-Baghdadi was evidently concerned by the airstrikes that Saudi Air Force pilots, along with their peers from other Persian Gulf states, had been conducting against Islamic State targets in Syria in concert with the international coalition. He claimed that his strategy of drawing the Americans into a ground war was progressing well. His evident goal was to deny American forces the legitimizing cover provided by the participation of Muslim forces, such as the Saudi pilots, in their coalition. Al-Baghdadi promised his supporters in Saudi Arabia that the "vanguard of the Islamic State" would soon arrive inside the kingdom. His second foreign policy focus concerned Yemen's Houthi rebels, promising that the Islamic State's soldiers will fight them there. Al-Baghdadi's overarching message was that his caliphate was the only force actively and successfully confronting Shi'a Iran's expansionist policies in the Middle East, while the traditional Sunni powers, namely Saudi Arabia, were asleep at the wheel.

By his second speech,[4] al-Baghdadi was compelled to address a momentous change in Saudi's foreign policy, specifically as it relates to Yemen. His deportment, although reactive, was one of taunting rather than alarm. Al-Baghdadi addresses the Saudi military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, what the Saudis call the "Storm of Decisiveness" launched in March 2015, by suggesting that the House of Saud does not have the stomach for war. This showy military adventure, he argues, will come to nothing. He also indicates that he believes that the Saudis launched their campaign to steal a march on the Islamic State's own narrative and actions:

> For it is only a "storm of delusion" after the fires of the [Shi'as] had lapped at their thrones and their encroachment has reached our people in the Arabian Peninsula, which will lead lay Muslims to find refuge in the Islamic State because it is their defender, and this terrifies the [House of Saud] and the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula and shakes their bastions and that is the secret of their alleged "storm" and, God willing, it shall be the [cause of their] demise. For the [House of Saud] and the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula are not people of warfare, and they do not have the patience for it, and they are people of luxury and frivolity, and people of drunkenness and dancing and banquets, who have acquiesced to the protection afforded to them by the Jews and Crusaders...

Leading up to this taunt, al-Baghdadi questions why the House of Saud has spent so much money on its military but failed to defend other Muslim communities in the past. He lists past and contemporary conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, the Caucuses, Africa, Palestine, and Afghanistan (referred to as "Khurasan"). Al-Baghdadi analyzes the turn in Saudi policy by arguing that the Saudi royals, after having long served their "masters the Jews and the Crusaders," now find themselves cast away by the latter. Instead, Shi'as and the Kurds have become the reliable lackeys of Western powers in the Middle East. Thus, al-Baghdadi's reading of the Saudi decision to fight in Yemen is that it is a futile "gasp of death" in a bid to make themselves relevant again to their "masters." He goes on to question why they would fight only in Yemen and not in Syria, where the Alawites were persecuting and murdering Sunnis. Al-Baghdadi would revisit this rhetoric in his third speech, after it became clear to him that the Saudi shift demonstrated in Yemen was not a one-off event, but rather the beginning of a dramatic Saudi foreign policy re-alignment. Al-Baghdadi had to react to the prospect of the Saudis not only having the stomach to fight after all, but also a willingness to come after his state in Syria and possibly Iraq.

Al-Baghdadi targeted his third speech[5] at Saudi Arabia's announcement of an Islamic Alliance to combat terrorism. The announcement was made in Riyadh on December 14, 2015, by Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Muhammed bin Salman. Al-Baghdadi revisits his point about the reluctance of Western powers to come fight the Islamic State directly. While previously they relied on local actors such as the Shi'as and the Kurds to do so, the new Islamic Alliance was the culmination of their approach.[6] Al-Baghdadi says:

> Here we have the [Christians] Crusaders and the nations of unbelief and the sects that follow them, and those who are backed by the Jews, not daring to come on the ground to fight the small band of mujaheddin, and each pushes his partner to go first to embroil him, for their hearts are filled with terror [from confronting] the mujaheddin, because by the grace of Allah they had been chastened in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they know they do not have the energy [to confront] the mujaheddin. They do not come because they verily know what awaits them by way of predicaments and laments, in [Syria] and Iraq and Libya and Afghanistan and Sinai and Africa and Yemen and Somalia. They know what awaits them in Dabiq and al-Ghouta by way of defeat and exhaustion and destruction, and they know that it is the final battle. And after that,

Allah willing, we shall raid them rather than them raiding us, and Islam will reign over the world again, until the end of times. That is why they delay coming [at us] in any way they can, and they work hard to mobilize more of their acolytes and agents, from the awakening [groups] and the apostates and atheist Kurds, and the hordes of [Shi'a] cattle, for America and its allies still dream of putting an end to the caliphate through their agents and acolytes, and every time one of their coalitions fails or one of [their] tails is cut, they rush to create another, until they declared recently [the formation of] the [Saudi] alliance that is fraudulently called "Islamic," which has declared that its goal is to fight the caliphate. If it were an Islamic alliance then it would declare its support and relief to the oppressed and dispossessed people of [Syria], and would declare war on the [Alawites] and their masters the Russians. If it were Islamic then it would declare its enmity and war on the polytheist [Shi'a] and the atheist Kurds in Iraq, who have killed and dispossessed the Sunnis and ravaged their lands. If it were an Islamic alliance then atheist China would not have supported it and asked to join it.[7] If it were an Islamic alliance then it would have dissociated from its masters the Jews and the Crusaders, and would have set its goal to fight the Jews and liberate Palestine.[8]

The tone of al-Baghdadi in his third speech is markedly different. He no longer taunts the Saudi royals as docile and decadent. His tone is somber and cautious, even alarmist. He goes on to call upon the Muslims of the world and implores them to "realize that the Islamic State, since its foundation ten years ago,[9] has been the spearhead in the war between the realm of belief and the realm of disbelief." He adds that the unity of all these myriad forces arrayed against the Islamic State confirms that it stands in the right. Rather than asking his supporters in Saudi Arabia to wage a campaign of distraction and to await the vanguard of his fighters from the north as he had done more than a year earlier, he now asks them to rise up against the House of Saud. Al-Baghdadi turns pensive and repeats the earlier allusion about the 10 years that have passed since the Islamic State's founding to suggest that the jihadists had endured tribulations before when the Islamic State enterprise was considered all but finished. Al-Baghdadi's shift in tone indicates that at least he and his advisers are taking the new Saudi initiative seriously.

Notwithstanding the obvious reasons he should do so—the prospect of well-trained and well-armed Muslim militaries attacking his territory—the "caliph"

may be worried about the ideological implications of this initiative and whether it must compel the Islamic State to reconsider its messaging to the Saudi populace. For a number of years, the Islamic State had homed in on a particular set of narratives for a Saudi audience, but the current changes in the behavior of Saudi Arabia's leadership may render those narratives outdated and ineffective.

The "Old" Narrative: The "Oh Land of Revelation, Patience" Media Bundle

BEFORE EMBARKING ON AN EXPLORATION OF AL-BAGHDADI'S QUALMS CONCERNING the ideological implications of the Islamic Alliance, we should take a close look at the Islamic State's most ambitious media campaign against the Saudi state.

A few days before the caliph's speech, the official media organs of the Islamic State, in coordination with its unofficial media amplifiers (such as al-Battar, al-Sumoud, etc.), released 26 videos and dozens of essays, poems, and posters onto multiple internet platforms. The Islamic State bundled the whole lot in a CD-ROM titled, "Oh land of revelation, patience."[10] The content was a compendium of all the talking points that the Islamic State had employed and developed when addressing an audience in Saudi Arabia. The main feature of the official videos was to highlight the Saudi face of the Islamic State, with short speeches by Saudis fighting for the Islamic State in places such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt.

The videos and essays contain little new in the Islamic State's talking points about Saudi Arabia. Most of the themes had been raised throughout the eight decades since the establishment of the kingdom. They harkened back to the Ikhwan men ata' Allah movement of the late 1920s, through the seminal stations of Juheiman al-'Uteibi's 1979 Meccan Revolt and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's influential book, *Al-kawashif al-jaliyya fi kuffr al-dawla al-saudiyya* ("The illuminating evidence of the unbelief of the Saudi state," first edition 1989). They included much of the anti-Saudi jihadist narratives generated since. The ideological trajectory of Abu Musaab al-Zarwaqi on Saudi matters as a result of al-Maqdisi's influence is well established, through which al-Maqdisi can be traced back to al-'Uteibi.[11] Just as al-Maqdisi went further than al-'Uteibi in his willingness to

castigate the House of Saud as unbelievers and consequently shifted the debate, al-Zarqawi's break with al-Maqdisi's influence shows how al-Zarqawi's heirs—who went on to establish the Islamic State of Iraq in October 2006—placed more emphasis on two of al-Zarqawi's general non-Saudi specific innovations. They include the fight against the Shi'as and undermining the authority of more learned religious scholars (an innovation al-Zarqawi used against al-Maqdisi at first) as they sharpened their rhetorical attack against Saudi Arabia. The ideologues of the Islamic State were inspired to apply those two innovations to the Saudi context to warn of the Shi'a danger within Saudi Arabia in addition to their attempt to undermine the traditional Wahhabi establishment in the kingdom.

The general anti-Saudi themes dwelt upon in the media bundle are: neglecting the practice of *al-wala' wel bara'* ("loyalty and renunciation"); accepting man-made legislation and authority such as the United Nations charter; enacting regulations that contradict the shariah; allowing business transactions such as usury and interest in the banking sector; hosting religious dialogue conferences and conferences on anti-terrorism that aimed at the mujaheddin; allowing polytheists —specifically the Shi'as—to perform their rites openly in the Arabian Peninsula, even in the Holy Sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina; being agents of the Crusaders; employing pliant religious clerics to legitimize their tyranny; and fighting other Muslims and incarcerating jihadists as part of the international coalition. All these themes have been amply discussed in the field of jihadist studies. The only novel theme highlighted in the media bundle was the issue of female prisoners being held by the Saudi authorities, but the emphasis there seems to do more with tribal honor rather than with ideology.[12] Interestingly, only one of the videos dwells on the changing socio-economic and cultural dynamics within the kingdom. However, the Islamic State's reluctance to address such issues could be attributed to its unwillingness to hold up its own record of governance, given its constraints under a war economy, which may not reflect well in comparison with the House of Saud's economic policies.

The Islamic State had been projecting itself as the true inheritor of the first Saudi realm (1744–1818) and the initial Wahhabi mission in Najd. It culled religious arguments made during the second Saudi realm (1824–1891) to underline its legitimacy. They were doing so specifically for a Saudi audience[13] and have been doing it for some time. There are several references made in the "Oh land of revelation, patience" bundle suggesting that had Muhammad ibn 'Abdul-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud been alive today, they would have fought against their scions who are presently the inheritors of the third Saudi realm (1902–present). There are also numerous references and allusions to Ibn Abdul-Wahhab's essay,

the 10 *nawaqith* ("nullifications") of Islam to demonstrate that by the criteria established by the founding sheikh of Wahhabism, the current Saudi state had fallen into unbelief. Islamic State propagandists handed out as pamphlets in Raqqa in June 2015 about the 10 *nawaqith*.[14] This rhetorical device is partly useful in deflecting the accusations of *khawarij* and *ridda* that the Saudi media and the religious establishment had used against the Islamic State, with the implication that traditionalist Ottoman-era bodies had used the same labels against the Wahhabi mission through its many stations.

There is some disagreement between Western scholars who had studied earlier waves of Saudi jihadists as to the prioritization of their goals and the effectiveness of their narratives. Joas Wagemakers makes a salient case in showing how and why al-Maqdisi's approach was influential on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) throughout its violent campaign on Saudi soil (2003–2007). He did so to counter Thomas Hegghammer's neat classification of Saudi jihadists into classical and global categories. Hegghammer used those classifications to explain why the latter model, as represented by the QAP (and inferred from its operational output against Western targets inside Saudi Arabia), failed to gain wider traction within the spectrum of Saudi jihadists.[15] The debate between Wagemakers and Hegghammer is relevant to our discussion as to why the Islamic State is still using nearly identical narratives to those of the QAP when they had clearly seen that these narratives had failed to ignite wide support inside Saudi Arabia.

Does the Islamic State believe that what was missing in QAP's media strategy was an emphasis on issues such as the threat of regional and internal Shi'ism? If so, then the Islamic State's media strategists would have to contend with the reality that al-Baghdadi's call in November 2014 for an accelerated campaign against Saudi and Persian Gulf Shi'as had failed to result in the scope of the security disruption he sought. The attacks to date have fallen short of the chaos, and hence the distraction, envisioned. Furthermore, this approach would necessarily compete with the Saudi state's willingness to take military action against Shi'a encroachment, as demonstrated in Bahrain and in Yemen, in addition to the dramatic step of executing the dissident Saudi Shi'a cleric Nimr al-Nimr. Although the media bundle highlighted al-Nimr's image several times to give power to its anti-Saudi narrative, it was rendered null as a rallying cry by the Saudi state's execution al-Nimr for sedition two weeks after the bundle's release.

One rationale for the Islamic State rehashing the past themes could be that they view it as a matter of timing: jihadist strategists may have determined that the political atmospherics in Saudi Arabia would be ripe for these themes now as opposed to the past. The Islamic State is flush with Saudi recruits who have joined

its cause in the last two years. Its strategists may have determined that times have changed through the accounts they heard from the new recruits of the situation back home. The Islamic State may have bet that this time around, the anti-Saudi narrative may succeed in compelling more Saudis to turn against their rulers and its allied religious establishment. If this were indeed the line of thinking, then the media bundle would act as a comprehensive and concise tool to reaffirm the old narrative for new times. It was a virtual free arms market of propaganda that any would-be jihadists could inflict on Saudi Arabia. This opens the debate about whether the inclination for action among young Saudis had changed because the nature of the jihad had changed with its re-emergence in the wars in Iraq and Syria. Given the lack of data, It is hard to gauge how young Saudis perceive these nearby wars, as opposed to the far wars on the periphery of the Islamic world (Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia, for example) or even the global jihad against the West. Nor is it easy to determine whether we are dealing with a confluence of the classical and global strands. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's policy of impeding independent research into such national security avenues, although unhelpful, is understandable given the plethora of Western media critiques that attribute global Islamic radicalization to the Saudis' long-standing media and educational policies. What we are left with is the attempt to assess how the strategists of the Islamic State understand these internal dynamics given the anecdotal evidence they gather from new Saudi recruits. The emphasis of the Islamic State on Saudi Arabia as an imminent front for its projected expansion throughout the Middle East would suggest that the group believes the receptivity to its narrative theme is high at this time.

Why is al-Baghdadi Concerned by the "Islamic Alliance"?

AL-BAGHDADI'S RESPONSE TO THE ISLAMIC ALLIANCE COULD HAVE CENTERED ON his earlier point about the Yemen campaign, that the House of Saud will not have the stomach to follow through. Al-Baghdadi could have mocked the new alliance by citing the flurry of press reports suggesting that many of the militaries listed by Prince Muhammad ibn Salman were unaware that they were part of the alliance at the time of its announcement. Al-Baghdadi could have launched an ad

hominem attack on the prince himself and his perceived recklessness, inexperi-
ence, and arrogance, again by citing press reports to that effect. Al-Baghdadi could
have used the occasion of his third speech to reaffirm the themes espoused by the
"Oh land of revelation, patience" media bundle to give succor and bite to the over-
all campaign. But he didn't. His tone was somber and reflects genuine concern.
Given that the "on-the-ground" effects or scope of action of the Islamic Alliance
had not materialized by the time of his speech, one can deduce that al-Baghdadi's
principal concern emanated from the ideological implications of Saudi Arabia
leading this alliance and how that may affect his state's anti-Saudi strategy and
narrative.

The timing and content of the media bundle and al-Baghdadi's speech may
reflect a re-alignment of the Islamic State's narrative and plans against Saudi
Arabia. An analysis of the videos and essays of the media bundle suggests that
work on it began in mid- to late November and was completed and ready for re-
lease in mid-December 2015. The Islamic Alliance was announced on December
14. Al-Baghdadi's speech was released on December 26.

There are only three references made to the Islamic Alliance in the media bun-
dle, and all were made as part of the graphics component, rather than in essays or
speeches. The Aleppo wilayet's "official" video begins with a graphic highlighting
the support for the alliance given by the General Secretariat of the Council of
Senior Clerics, the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia and then by the
Organization of Islamic Cooperation. However, the graphic appears independ-
ently of what the narrator is saying, suggesting that it was added toward the end
of the production process. The second reference in the bundle made to the Islamic
Alliance was by the "unofficial" Asawirti Media arm of the Islamic State, again in
the form of graphics. The wording of the graphics is interesting as it previews
some of how al-Baghdadi was to address the alliance later in his third speech. The
"unofficial" video states that "after the failure of the Crusader alliance in con-
fronting the Islamic State, they have come up with a new satanic trick." It adds
that "America commands and the [House of Saud] complies, obediently and sub-
missively" and that it was all "theater." Asawirti Media then projects still images
of Twitter messages made in support of the alliance by pro-regime clerics: Nasir
al-Qetami, 'Ayidh al-Qarni, Muhammad al-Hudheif, and the Council of Senior
Clerics. The "unofficial" al-Thabat Media video keeps it brief and simple: the video
links the emergence of the Islamic Alliance to an earlier speech made over two
years ago by Amos Gilad, the director of the Political-Military Affairs Bureau at
Israel's Defense Ministry, during which he speaks about how a Sunni military axis
is a positive development for the stability of Israel.[16]

The evidence suggests that the Islamic Alliance was announced at the tail-end of the production of the media bundle. By not addressing or highlighting the themes of the media bundle, al-Baghdadi's speech suggests that the emphasis, at least in his mind, had partly shifted from the themes of the old narrative to a new ideological battlefield as a direct result of a paradigm shift in Saudi behavior. Word may have gotten back to him, from his networks within Saudi Arabia that the regime's new actions were popular. One can only surmise that al-Baghdadi may have concluded that the Islamic Alliance may have elicited support and excitement from the same demographics and ideological groups that al-Baghdadi was hoping to recruit.

An alternative reading of al-Baghdadi's tone may conclude that since the Islamic State is making a more profound claim to the caliphate of Muhammad, and hence adopting a grand, quasi-imperial project, its nitpicking of claims to represent a truer version of Wahhabism would seem provincial by comparison. In this light, it would make little sense for al-Baghdadi to constrict his grand vision as addressed to the Muslim world at large by arguing over the pedantic domestic politics of Saudi Arabia. That task would be left to his propagandists as they tailor a Saudi-specific message, one that incorporates such themes as a comparison to the first Saudi-Wahhabi realm.

Likewise, this alternative interpretation of al-Baghdadi's third speech posits that the announcement of the Islamic Alliance allows him to frame the competition between the Islamic State and its enemies in grander terms. It is one between multiple state actors and his mujaheddin, rather than a competition with the Saudi state alone. The media coup afforded in presenting itself as a foil to one of the world's petro-powers would be of great value to the Islamic State. But there is even greater value in the suggestion that it would take the alliance of multiple Sunni powers plus the efforts of the United States, European powers, Russia, and Iran, to rollback al-Baghdadi's recently established state enterprise.

However, al-Baghdadi knows, as does his target audience, that the alliance is a Saudi affair. Its failure or success would reflect directly on the internal Saudi political and ideological landscape. It is unclear whether al-Baghdadi deems his envisioned expansion into that landscape as a crucial phase for making his enterprise permanent, one that is existential in its bearing for the long-term plans of the Islamic State. Nor is it clear whether the Islamic Alliance threatens these plans. But it would be reasonable to infer the pivotal importance of Saudi Arabia in terms of jihadist strategy by reflecting on what jihadists have been writing and saying about the kingdom and its rulers. We also have the precedent by which al-Zarqawi chose to rebrand his Iraq-based organization as part of the Al-Qaeda

franchise in 2004. Al-Baghdadi's predecessor needed Al-Qaeda's Saudi networks of funders and recruiters to endure and expand. The strategists of the Islamic State could be thinking along these same lines. Their state would need to expand into Saudi Arabia and establish itself there to survive the current international and regional onslaught against it. They may have concluded that Saudi Arabia is ripe for such a revolutionary expansion, or at least it would have seemed so before December 2015.

Here one needs to ask the question: Why would the Islamic Alliance be popular inside Saudi Arabia, and why would that popularity be a threat to the Islamic State? We cannot answer that question until we hear more about the topic, either from al-Baghdadi or from the Saudi state, their media, and the traditional religious establishment. However, we can preemptively posit and categorize fields of inquiry that would help us contextualize the unfolding events and narratives. Two main categories, image and ideology, immediately come to mind that could overshadow the goal of attaining legitimacy—a goal the Islamic State and the Saudis share. The salient point about these two categories is that the anti-Saudi jihadists, in all their various strands, have not prepared a comprehensive theme to address the new paradigm of Saudi military assertiveness beyond its borders. The jihadists had become complacent with the image of an inactive Saudi leadership. Their arguments hinged on the general themes underlining the illegitimacy of the House of Saud, and hence it is not within its writ to impede jihad. The prospect of the third realm of the Saudi state undertaking warfare again, as it had done in its early days, has caught them off-guard and blindsided them. That is probably why al-Baghdadi is concerned.

The House of Saud had shelved the image of the warrior state or the warrior imam since the founding of their kingdom in 1932. Save for limited numbers of Saudi contingents fighting in the Arab-Israeli conflicts and military aid for the Yemeni Imamate regime, the rulers of Saudi Arabia have long forgone direct military adventurism beyond their border. But the Saudis launched a police operation in Bahrain to put down the popular demonstrations there in 2011. Then they mounted an air campaign with a limited boots-on-the-ground component in Yemen in March 2015 shortly after King Salman assumed the throne. The shift has quickly morphed into the image of Saudi Arabia leading Muslim militaries in a war against terrorism, a war hailed by the Council of Senior Clerics as "one of the principal responsibilities demanded by the religion of Islam, one that requires that all of the Muslim world should coalesce around and cooperate towards at this time."[17] That image is being fanned by the media campaign surrounding the Northern Thunder military maneuvers (begun on February 28, 2016) involving

multiple contingents from many of the countries that comprise the Islamic Alliance. Such maneuvers have occurred in the past to similar fanfare. But this time they are occurring within miles of the border that Saudi Arabia shares with the Islamic State and close to Iraq's Shi'a militias.[18] What's more, they seem geared for an offensive rather than a defensive role beyond those borders. All of this makes it a new development altogether. Consequently, this latest show of Saudi resolve puts a wrinkle in the Islamic State's effort to present itself as the truer successor of the first Saudi realm and the original Wahhabi mission, centered as it was on expansionism and military vigor.

The image competition between the third Saudi realm and al-Baghdadi's caliphate is premised on historical analogies to the first and second Saudi realms and the beginning phase of the third. The unpreparedness of the Islamic State to counter the new paradigm of activist and expansionist Saudi policies is especially surprising given that a historical precedent does exist in the case of the Ikhwan movement. If we posit that there is continuity between many of the themes espoused by contemporary anti-Saudi jihadists and the Ikhwan men ta' Allah movement of the 1920s, then it is surprising that the particular theme of "suspended expansion," which was one of the foremost admonitions directed by the dissident Ikhwan against Ibn Saud, was not dwelt upon by successive generations of anti-Saudi ideologues. At the time of the Riyadh conference of 1927, the issue was settled when the Wahhabi clerics ruled that the decision to go to war rests solely with the imam, Ibn Saud.[19] However, the matter did not end there: the Ikhwan ignored the ruling and attacked an Iraqi border post, which precipitated the need for Ibn Saud to wage war against the dissidents. In as much as the "Oh land of revelation, patience," for example, revisits the Ikhwan affair, it is in passing and brief with the historical analogy being drawn from the event revolving around the participation of the British Royal Air Force in bombing the rebels.[20] The salient issue of why the Ikhwan rebelled—and whether it related to the suspended expansion of the Wahhabi mission—is addressed neither by the Islamic State's anti-Saudi polemicists nor by their predecessors.[21] One possible reason is that little of what the Ikhwan actually said or thought was relayed through written sources to future generations. Most of what had been written about the affair was authored by court historians and functionaries working for the House of Saud or others who were involved in fighting the Ikhwan. From this biased vantage point, the qualms of the Ikhwan over suspending expansion were chalked up to tribal disputes over the interference of newly drawn borders with tribal grazing rights. That was especially galling since the beneficiaries were Shi'a tribesmen from southern Iraq. Another reason the Ikhwan were not taken as a *cause célèbre* by the jihadists could be that

the Ikhwan were eventually defeated; excessively citing a historical precedent that ended in abject defeat is not useful for an anti-Saudi message predicting imminent triumph.

Even more problematic for the Islamic State's policy of gaining support inside the kingdom is the prospect of the alignment of an invigorated loyalist religious establishment with the royal family. This could combine with Saudi liberals rallying around Saudi nationalism. Both are anathema to the jihadists. For decades, the traditional religious establishment had to fend off criticism directed at the House of Saud over its inaction when the Muslim world faced so many tribulations. The establishment had to spin Saudi state initiatives such as the tacit support of the Afghan mujaheddin and the expansion of the Salafist da'awa across the world as good enough given the circumstances and balances of world powers and Islam's place among them. Those critiques came to the fore when Saudi Arabia was seemingly unable to defend itself in the face of Saddam Hussein's expansion southwards into Kuwait and had to invite American and coalition forces to roll him back. As the plight of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria became acute, the Americans were unwilling to meet the expectations of their Saudi allies to do more against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in particular. So the criticism of Saudi inaction must have seemed even more biting to the clerical class. However, the image of Saudi Arabia leading an Islamic Alliance relieves those pressures and enables the religious establishment to justify its support of the Saudi king as a warrior imam who will address the wrongs Sunnis endure in Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere.[22] Moreover, waging war through the Saudi military rather than an amorphous pan-Islamic jihad enables Saudi Arabia's increasingly vocal liberals to rally around the Saudi flag, thus neutralizing for now one of the societal groups that had been critical of the royals on other issues.

The Islamic Alliance and the image it confers also allows the Saudi state to fight the jihadists on sounder ideological ground. It is one thing for the clerical class to denounce al-Baghdadi and his fighters as *khawarij* or apostates or *bughat* or *fi'eh dhalleh*, and then wait for the West to fight them (with an awkward situation arising whereby an American Secretary of State brands the jihadists as "apostates"[23]). It is quite another when the prospect arises that a Muslim army will go to war directly with the jihadists on those same excommunicative grounds. The ideological possibilities that the loyalist clergy in Saudi may employ range from medieval arguments concerning the emergence of two or more imams simultaneously in the Muslim world, with legitimacy being conferred on he who can overpower (through *tamkin* or *taghleeb*) the other contenders to claim leadership of the Islamic community, to arguments made in the last two centuries concerning the maintenance

of order and the combatting of sedition by an activist imam for the greater good of the Islamic community. Many of the ideological arguments that are likely to be made on either side would necessarily borrow directly or indirectly from the Khedival campaigns against the first and second Saudi realms, albeit with the roles reversed. Furthermore, the debates over who has precedence and consequently legitimacy, whether it is the Taliban's Mullah Umar or the caliphs of the Islamic State (both Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and his successor Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), will be expanded to include the House of the Saud in this new paradigm. We will have to see how the ideological battle unfolds to correlate with an actual battle on the ground.[24]

The Islamic State must now play ideological defense. The old playbook, amply fleshed out in the "Oh land of revelation, patience" media bundle, will not be sufficient. But Al-Baghdadi may soon spot rhetorical and ideological opportunities if the capacity of what the Islamic Alliance can achieve falls short of the expectations it has raised.

Implications for Policy

THE SPECTER OF RAISED EXPECTATIONS WAS NOT CONFINED TO SAUDI ARABIA. Consider former Iraqi Minister of Finance Rafi' al-'Isawi, a Sunni whose political clash with Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sparked the peaceful protests in the Sunni provinces. Al-Maliki subsequently quelled them, leading to the ISIS takeover of Fallouja in late December 2013. Al-'Isawi expects that the new Islamic Alliance will re-craft the Middle East. He said the following in a recent interview[25] to Sky News Arabia:

> The Islamic Coalition contains all Arabs but Iraq, and all Muslims but Iran…If this Coalition spent all its efforts towards change in Syria and Iraq, in Syria with total change, and in Iraq with fundamental reform, and it didn't work, then what will it do? I cannot speak on their behalf but I think that it will recreate the region based on my own hypothesis, if the international community does not create a new Middle East, the Arab Islamic Coalition will create a new Middle East that is coming, according to its own visions, its own reforms, according [to the goal of] restoring legitimacy to the countries, restoring legitimacy in Yemen, reforming the political process

in Iraq, restoring legitimacy to the Syrian people, stopping the use
of militias to export the project of the Vali al-Faqih…

The leader of the Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani of the Nusra Front, did not address the Islamic Alliance while giving a recent speech in which he rejected the internationally brokered cease-fire in his country. But what was telling, in contrast to al-Baghdadi's position, is that he did not reject the Islamic Alliance out of hand. He spoke cryptically of the Syrian front as it relates to Saudi Arabia: "If the matter settles [in favor] of the [Shi'as and the Alawites] in [Syria] then the battle will necessarily be moved [by them], in less than a decade, to the [Arabian Peninsula]." Al-Jolani added: "Because the matter settled [favorably] in Iraq for the [Shi'as] and the Sunnis were left to face their fates alone, then the [Shi'a] were emboldened to look further than Iraq towards [Syria] and Yemen; so who can guarantee [the safety] of the [Arabian Peninsula] after that?" The jihad in Syria, according to him, has gone beyond the confrontation with the Assad regime, and is now the center of the effort to roll-back the "[Shi'a] project in its entirety."[26] Al-Jolani, too, is seemingly watching a shifting Saudi policy toward Syria but does not indicate that he is against it even though his parent organization is vehemently anti-Saudi.[27]

Al-'Isawi explicitly sets the benchmark by which the success of the Islamic Alliance is to be measured as its ability to refashion the post-American order of the Middle East. Al-Jolani implicitly sets the benchmark at its ability to counter Iran's objectives in Syria: securing the survival of its client regime there. Both speakers reflect their own understanding of the current dynamics of the Middle East, which is not necessarily accurate or even congruent with Saudi thinking. Nevertheless, as Saudi Arabia has taken it upon itself to confront regional Iranian designs, its leadership of the Islamic Alliance would inevitably be measured by its success in furthering its stated regional objectives by both friend and foe alike. Is Saudi Arabia now in a rhetorical trap of its own making?

The analytical commentary surrounding the Islamic Alliance has focused on the capacity of Saudi Arabia's military forces to wage war on multiple fronts, the ability of the Saudi state to pay for an expanded war, and the actual objectives of the Saudi initiative. There seems to be consensus emanating from U.S. intelligence circles, as well as whisperings from within Saudi Arabia, that the Saudi military or the state's coffers may not be up to the task of an expanded campaign in Syria or elsewhere.[28] The focus on capacity has implied conclusions about Saudi Arabia's ultimate objectives in announcing the alliance. Those implications arise due to the opaque nature of Saudi decision making, leaving analysts to parse

through the statements made by the Deputy Crown Prince, or the Saudi foreign minister, or watching the Northern Thunder maneuvers to determine how far the Saudi state is willing to go. In announcing the alliance at his first news conference, Prince Muhammad ibn Salman described it as an "unbinding" coordinative effort among the anti-terrorism policies of the Muslim-majority member states of the alliance (34 countries at the time of the announcement) and with the international community. He also said that the overall campaign would have military, media, security, and ideological components. Even though the declaration heralded a "military" alliance, the prince ruled out military mobilization. He added that this effort may expand into Syria and Iraq but only "in coordination with [local] sovereignty and the international community." The deputy crown suggested that there would be no differentiation between Sunni and Shi'a terrorist groups.[29] The prince's news conference lasted for a mere six minutes, during which he took 15 questions. Consequently, the analytical consensus has arrived at the notion that Saudi Arabia is aiming at minimalist intervention and minimalist objectives: teams of Special Forces from the member states of the Islamic Alliance that would prop-up moderate Syrian rebel groups to maintain the status quo in preparation for a negotiated settlement with the regime. At most, Saudi thinking may be aiming at an expanded U.S. military engagement in Syria in coordination with the Islamic Alliance. It may fall short of the objective of combating the regime, but at least it may act as a counterbalance to Russian and Iranian meddling in the country, or so the analysts say. Yet what may begin as a minimalist approach may expand, due to mission creep, into a wider embroilment.

The prevailing analysis disregards or underestimates the imagery and ideology that underpin the Islamic Alliance, and their importance for the House of Saud in selling a new narrative to its subjects. The Saudis have raised expectations, and the expectations will constitute significant internal push and external pull factors for future Saudi decision-making. Even though the Saudis have not stated any clear and well-defined objectives for the Islamic Alliance (or perhaps *because* they have not), these expectations have taken on geostrategic implications of their own. The Deputy Crown Prince described a modest effort in his press conference, but prevailing sentiments inside Saudi Arabia and across the region projected high expectations onto the term "Islamic military alliance." The Northern Thunder maneuvers, launched shortly after the announcement, were interpreted as part of this alliance.[30] The Saudi state has said little to dispel these expectations, which suggests that it finds them useful, at least for now.

However, when expectations are not met, either fully or in a timely manner, then the new Saudi gambit may backfire. It could arm the likes of al-Baghdadi

with a cache of new talking-points directed at a disillusioned Saudi public. The consequences and effects of a lingering impasse in a Syrian terrain where neither side would win—similar to the quagmire that Saudi Arabia currently faces in Yemen—may cast a shadow on the efficacy of the Saudi state. In this respect, the Islamic State and others can use historical precedents and analogies, which often color media and ideological narratives, to argue that the third Saudi realm has run its course. The monarchy, it can argue, has neither the legitimacy nor the military might to protect Muslims. However, if the Islamic Alliance quickly rolls back the Islamic State from several strongholds in Syria, then the Saudis can use imagery and ideology to deal a significant blow to the narratives, old and new, emanating from al-Baghdadi and his ilk. In such a situation, the old anti-Saudi narrative is unhelpful for al-Baghdadi unless it convinces a significant number of Saudi soldiers not to fight on behalf of their imam. Al-Baghdadi hopes these soldiers will defect to his side to fight under the banner of a caliph-imam if his troops confront the Islamic Alliance. If that does not happen, then the Saudi state could easily leverage current events through the agency of historical analogies to flesh out an ideological narrative that the Islamic State is unprepared for and may prove difficult to counter given the stark battlefield realities.[31] This is probably what al-Baghdadi had concluded about the new challenge the Islamic Alliance presents. How the alliance performs and what al-Baghdadi and his media organs will have to say about it could consequently turn out to be one of the most relevant and impactful areas of research into jihadist ideology in the years to come as it relates to the Islamic State.

NOTES

1. Fahad Nazer, "Is Saudi Arabia building an Islamic 'NATO,'" *Al-Monitor*, December 20, 2015, from http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/saudi-nato-islamic-terrorism-isis-assad-sunni-shiite.html.
2. Border attacks occurred in January 2015 (at the al-Suwief border post in Jadidet 'Ar'ar area on the Saudi side) and December 2015 (at the Mahfour Megenneh border post in the Taba'at area of Rutba on the Iraqi side). The Saudis had previously built a multi-billion dollar security "wall along the Iraqi-Saudi border. For its part, the Islamic State has pivoted the town of Rutba in Anbar Province, its closest population center to the Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian border triangle, as an important logistical hub. It has also assigned one of its most "iconic" commanders, Shakir

Woheyyib, as emir of Rutba. Woheyyib had previously been featured in Islamic State videos in the company of young Saudi fighters.

3. Al-Baghdadi audio speech, Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, November 13, 2014. *Wa lo karaha al-kafiroun* (Even if the disbelievers despise such), from https://soundcloud.com/ahmed-mahmoud-336/qkqugjmohbnu.

4. Al-Baghdadi audio speech, Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, May 14, 2015. *Infirou khifafen wa thiqala* (March Forth Whether Light or Heavy), from https://archive.org/details/muhd_Avi.

5. Al-Baghdadi audio speech, Al-Furqan Institute for Media Production, December 26, 2015, *fa tarabussu inna ma'akum mutarrabisson* (And wait, for we are also waiting), from http://bit.ly/1Spjp5E.

6. The jihadists may understand that the idea of the Islamic Alliance was first suggested by President Barack Obama in an interview with Thomas Friedman. The interview was widely circulated in Arabic translation and discussed in the Middle East, in part because the U.S. president stated that the biggest challenge to the security of Sunni Arab states was internal (disaffected populations) rather than external (Iran). As relates to military intervention in Syria, Obama said: "The conversations I want to have with the Gulf countries is, first and foremost, how do they build more effective defense capabilities. I think when you look at what happens in Syria, for example, there's been a great desire for the United States to get in there and do something. But the question is: Why is it that we can't have Arabs fighting [against] the terrible human rights abuses that have been perpetrated, or fighting against what Assad has done?" See Thomas Friedman, "Iran and the Obama Doctrine," *The New York Times*, April 5, 2015, from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html?_r=0.

7. China's willingness to cooperate with the Islamic Alliance was reported on December 19, 2015, following a meeting between its foreign minister and his Saudi counterpart, *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, 'Al-ssen tu'ekkid da'amaha li tashkeel al-tahaluf al-islami li muhharebet al-irhab,' from http://www.alriyadh.com/1111379. China passed legislation on December 27, 2015 that allows its People's Liberation Army to get involved in anti-terrorism operations overseas, see Ben Blanchard, "China passes controversial counter-terrorism law," *Reuters*, December 28, 2015, from http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-security-idUSKBN0UA07220151228.

8. The lament over negligence in fighting Israel was made previously by a leading Saudi cleric ("Abdullah bin Suleiman bin Mani," a member of the Council of Senior Clerics) in his rebuke of Saudi students who had forsaken their scholarships and travelled to join the Islamic State, from *Al-Eqtissadiyya Newspaper*, October 11, 2014, from http://www.aleqt.com/2014/10/11/article_894975.html.

9. Al-Baghdadi's reference to the span of a decade since the Islamic State's founding underlines how the jihadists understand the passing of time and infers their strategy; they believe there is

continuity in the experiences of the caliphate. For a demonstration as to why al-Baghdadi understood the founding of the Islamic State in Iraq as the starting point of the caliphate's timeline, see Nibras Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted: Zarqawi's Ideological Heirs, Their Choice for a Caliph, and the Collapse of Their Self-Styled Islamic State of Iraq," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, Vol. 7, July 2008.

10. The Media Office of the Homs Wilayat of the Islamic State had released an earlier video under the same title in August 2015, which was directed towards to a Saudi audience and that begins with a specific anti-Shi'a message. The video features several Saudi fighters from the tribe of Quraysh. For an overview and summary of many of the "official" videos featured in the newer "Oh land of revelation, patience" media bundle, see M. Khayat, "ISIS Campaign Targets Saudi Arabia, Calls For Attacks Against Saudi Monarchy, Shi'ites, And Polytheists," *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) Report*, January 5, 2016, from http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/8926.htm.

11. Nibras Kazimi, "A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, Vol. 2, Sept. 2005, n. 15, p. 70.

12. One essay in the media bundle lists the names of 23 female prisoners and enumerates a total of 31, see Abdullah al-Najdi, "Jaziret alarab wel ihtilal alsalooli," Al-Battar Media, December 12, 2015.

13. Cole Bunzel, "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Duel of the Islamic States," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report*, February 2016, from http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_265_Bunzel_Islamic_States_Final.pdf. Saudi cleric 'Adil b. Salim al-Kalbani, the former imam of the Mecca sanctuary, implicitly accepted this comparison in an interview with MBC TV, January 22, 2016, and admitted that the Islamic State infers its actions from the Salafist tradition and its corpus, see http://bit.ly/1UWHAhJ.

    When it was first formed, the Islamic State in Iraq modeled itself on Muhammad's proto-state in Medina (see Kazimi, "The Caliphate Attempted"), but that analogy was directed towards a wider Muslim audience rather than a Saudi-specific one. The Islamic State's "publishing house" al-Himmeh continues its republication of Muhammad b. 'Abdel-Wahhab's books, most recently on February 6, 2016 al-Himmeh republished his biography of Muhammad, seehttps://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/muhcca3ammad-ibn-e28098abd-al-wahacc84b-22a-short-biography-of-the-prophet-second-edition22.pdf. Ibn Abdul-Wahhab makes the implicit case that the first Saudi realm was following Muhammad's model in Medina.

14. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "The Islamic State Hands Out the 'Ten *Nawaqith al-Islam* by Muhammad b. Abdul-Wahhab' in Raqqa," June 8, 2015, from http://www.syriahr.com/?p=115027.

15. Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, passim, and again in "'Classical' and 'Global' Jihadism in

Saudi Arabia," in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, Stephane Lacroix (ed.), *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change,* Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 207–228 (Kindle edition). On the anti-Saudi themes influencing QAP and consequently employed by them, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 120–143 (Kindle edition). The reverential references made in the "Oh land of revelation, patience" media bundle to the former leaders of QAP such as Abdel-'Aziz al-Miqrin and others suggests that the Islamic State sees a measure of continuity between its current efforts and the campaign led by QAP in 2003–7.

16. The speech was presented in Washington DC on October 9, 2013 at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, from

    https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/2013-schiff-memorial-lecture.

17. *Saudi News Agency*, "Hay'et kibar al-ulema' tunawih bi 'ilan tashkeel al-tahaluf al-islami al-'askari li muharrebet al-irhab," December 15, 2015, from http://was.sa/1429285.

18. Saudi analyst Nawaf Obaid suggests that the Northern Thunder maneuvers are targeted against Iraqi Shi'a militias; see "Why Saudis may take on Iraq's Shiite militias," *Al-Monitor*, February 29, 2016, from http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/obama-isis-qaeda-failure-shiite-militias-iraq.html.

19. John S. Habib, *Alikhwan alsaudiyoon fi 'aqdayn*, translated by Sabri Muhammad Hassan and Abdullah al-Majid, Dar al-Mareekh, Riyadh, 1998, pp. 206–222 (Originally published in English as *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910–1930*, Brill, 1978); from

    http://ia601408.us.archive.org/20/items/isfaisfa/isfa.pdf.

20. Brief mentions of the Ikhwan movement were made in the Wilayet al-Khayr video; Abdullah al-Najdi's essay "Jaziret al-arab wa al-ihhtilal al-salooli," Al-Battar Media; Suheil al-Hijazi's essay "Aal saud: qarnun min hadm al-islam," Al-Wafa' Media; and Al-Battar Media's 'Kitabun yehdi' video.

21. In his *al-kawashif al-jaliyya*, al-Maqdisi addresses the precedent of the Ikhwan in a footnote to say that the Ikhwan were correct in contradicting the ulema over the ruling, since the imam can only suspend jihad as part of a "temporary" contract of peace with the enemy, but what Ibn Saud did in adhering to "permanent" international treaties was not within his prerogative as imam. Al-Maqdisi also adds that the "fake, deceitful history books of the House of Saud" had not recorded the Ikhwan events accurately, and that anyone who wants to know more about them should ask the few remaining survivors. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Issam al-Barqawi), *al-kawashif al-jaliyya fi kufr al-dawla al-saudiyya*, (2nd edition, 2000), p. 190, n. 103, from http://ahlulislam.com/books/alkawashif.pdf. Pro-Saudi regime ulema would have countered the Ikhwan on this point and maintained that the imam can contract peace that is *mutlaq* ("open ended," without a time limit) in nature—as opposed to *mu'abed*

("permanent")—as Muhammad had done with the Jews of Khaiber, and later with some clans at the conquest of Mecca. Loyalist ulema have employed the same point to counter al-Maqdisi's issue with the United Nations charter, for example see Muhammad b. 'Umar Bazmoul, *Mudheket al-radd 'ala kutubin mashbouha: thaniyen, al-radd 'ala kitab al-kawashif al-jaliyya fi takfir al-dawla al-saudiyya*, undated, pp. 45–47, from https://uqu.edu.sa/files2/tiny_mce/plugins/filemanager/files/4052784/alrdalaalkwashef.pdf.

22. The initial hesitation and confusion among pro-regime Saudi clerics over whether to term "Operation Decisive Storm" in Yemen a jihad or not, and on what grounds (*bughat, fi'eh dhalleh, khawarij*, etc.), has raised an interesting question that may shadow a projected campaign in Syria. That initial hesitation was probably a result of Saudi Arabia's inaction regarding Syria, especially its prohibition of young Saudis from getting involved individually in the fighting there. The clerics could not declare the Yemeni theater a jihad whilst a similar situation goes unaddressed in Syria. Consequently, and retroactively, Saudi clerics may come to describe the ideological underpinnings of the Yemen war in clear terms after the Islamic Alliance's scope of action in Syria becomes clearer too. For a sense of the early clerical positions on the war in Yemen, see "Fatawi al-jihad": du'aat al-saudiyya yujmi'oun 'ala tashree' "'assifet al-hazm'," *Al-Khaleej Online*, April 2, 2015, from http://bit.ly/25yCiMW.
The Council of Senior Clerics declared the war a jihad in its commentary over the "martyrdom" of a Saudi corporal early in the campaign, 'Hay'et kibar al-'ulema: 'assifet al-hazm jihadun fi sabeel Allah', *al-Youm al-Sabi'*, April 3, 2015, from http://bit.ly/2355bOO. An interesting comparison can be made to earlier fatwas from Saudi clerics over fighting the Houthis during the internal Yemeni strife of 2011–2012, a selection of which can be found at http://aloloom.net/vb/showthread.php?t=10480.

23. Adam Tailor, "John Kerry keeps calling the Islamic State 'apostates.' Maybe he should stop." *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/02/03/john-kerry-keeps-calling-the-islamic-state-apostates-maybe-he-should-stop/.

24. Highlighting the fact that the Islamic State is unprepared to address the issue of an Islamic army leading the charge against it is its re-release (as a second edition through its al-Himmeh publishing house) on February 10, 2016 of year-old treatise titled *Al-adilla al-jaliyya fi kufr men nassera al-hamla al-ssalibiyya 'ala al-khilafa al-islamiyya* ("The clear evidence of the unbelief of whoever supports the Crusader campaign against the Islamic Caliphate"), from https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/the-islamic-state-e2809cthe-clear-evidence-of-the-infidelity-in-helping-the-crusader-campaign-upon-the-islamic-caliphate-second-edition22.pdf. The treatise envisions the West leading the anti-Islamic State campaign, but does not the address a new paradigm such as the "Islamic Alliance."

25. Sky News Arabia interview, Feb 17, 2016, *Bisaraha* show with Zaineh al-Yazigi (from minute 26:23), from http://bit.ly/1UFceMU.

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26. Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani audio speech, *Hadha ma wa'adana allahu wa rasulih* ("This is what Allah and His messenger had promised us"), February 26, 2016, from https://ia801502.us.archive.org/19/items/Wa3d_Allah_3/asd.mp3. Al-Jolani's tone raises the prospect of a possible détente between al-Nusra Front and the Islamic Alliance should the latter begin military operations in Syria. Such a détente was reportedly observed in Yemen between an al-Qaeda affiliate and "Decisive Storm" forces, see *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC),* "Yemen conflict: Al-Qaeda joins coalition battle for Taiz," February 22, 2016, from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35630194.

27. Interestingly, QAP chose to ignore the Islamic Alliance even though it had the opportunity to address the new Saudi initiative in one of its recent messages. Former Osama bin Laden aide and Guantanamo Bay Prison detainee Sheikh Ibrahim al-Qowsi ("Khubayb al-Sudani") gave a speech in two parts on the occasion of the execution of dozens of jihadist prisoners by the Saudi authorities on January 2, 2016, an act he deemed "unforgivable." The executions occurred after the Islamic Alliance had been announced. Even though Al-Qowsi addresses and denigrates the Saudi-led "Decisive Storm" operation in Yemen, he says nothing about the announcement of the Islamic Alliance, see *Risala ila ahluna fi bilad al-haramein* ("A message to our people in the land of the two Holy Sanctuaries"), part one (February 8, 2016) from http://jihadology.net/2016/02/08/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-arabian-peninsulas-shaykh-ibrahim-al-qu%E1%B9%A3i-khubayb-al-sudani-message-to-our-people-in-bilad-al-%E1%B8%A5aramayn-part-1/, and part two (February 10, 2016), from http://ia801504.us.archive.org/18/items/Messagepe-2/Messagepe-2.mp4. An interesting side note to al-Qowsi's diatribe pertains to his repeated references to Saudi military and financial aid to the Lebanese Army, which he deems beholden to Hezbollah. The Islamic State's "Oh land of revelation, patience" media bundle, although comprehensive in projecting anti-Saudi themes, does not address this matter. Whether in response to al-Qowsi's admonition or due to the many other factors that signal Saudi dissatisfaction with Lebanese politics, it is interesting that Saudi Arabia announced that it would suspend its aid to the Lebanese Army on February 19, a few days after the release of his speech.

28. For the relevant US congressional testimonies made by the heads of Defense Intelligence Agency and the Director of National Intelligence, see "Intel chiefs: Saudi, UAE ground troops unlikely to help against ISIS," *The Hill*, February 9, 2016, from http://thehill.com/policy/defense/268758-intel-chiefs-saudi-uae-offers-of-ground-troops-against-isis-welcome-unlikely. Internal Saudi concerns over the scope and capacity of the Islamic Alliance were reported in Hugh Naylor, "Concerns in Saudi Arabia over signs of more military involvement in Syria," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2016, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/concerns-in-saudi-arabia-over-signs-of-moremilitaryinvolvementinsyria/2016/02/21/76ef6008d58811e5b1952e29a4e13425_story.html.

29. The Foreign Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah b. Zayid, whose country is closely allied with Saudi Arabia in the Yemen campaign, incurred a diplomatic rebuke from Iraq after stating that Iranian backed Shi'a militias in Iraq and Syria (he cited the Badr Organization, and Kata'ib Abul Fadhl al-Abbas, among others) should be treated as terrorist groups in the same category of the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, and that all such terrorist groups should be "annihilated." He made this statement at a news conference held on February 26, 2016 alongside his Russian counterpart, from https://youtu.be/xleh2DttAW4. In a similar vein, the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council designated Lebanese Hezbollah and all its affiliates as "terrorist entities" in early March, from Asa Fitch and Dana Ballout, "Gulf Cooperation Council Labels Hezbollah a Terrorist Group; Move may exacerbate growing Sunni-Shiite confrontation," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 2, 2016, from http://www.wsj.com/articles/gulf-cooperation-council-labels-hezbollah-a-terrorist-group-1456926654.

30. The commander of the UAE military contingent participating in the maneuvers, Staff Col. Abdul-Salam al-Shehhi, said that the Northern Thunder exercises are "an opportunity to share expertise and implement plans between the countries of the Islamic Alliance," February 25, 2016, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lciYwJC17cE.

31. Prominent Saudi columnist Jamal al-Khashogchi foresees that the liberation of Mosul will occur within days of the liberation of Raqqa, if the latter effort is accomplished by a Syrian national army that is backed by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Islamic forces under the auspices of the Islamic Alliance. Western allies could help by neutralizing the Syrian regime, the Kurds, the Russian and the Iranians who may seek to expand while this army takes on the Islamic State. He says that Islamic State claimed to rise in defense of Islam and its rulings against tyranny and sectarianism, but if faced with a victorius army acting as part of an "Islamic Alliance," and carrying the flag of "No God But Allah," then the Islamic State will be easily crushed. Jamal al-Khashogchi, "Jaish al-mujaheddin alladhi sa yaqdhi 'ala "daesh" ("The Army of the Mujahiddeen That Will Eradicate [ISIS]"), *Al-Hayat Newspaper*, March 5, 2016, from http://bit.ly/1nmFZTC.

Revolutionary Salafism: The Case of the Ahrar Movement

By Mokhtar Awad

EAFENING CHANTS OF "WITH OUR LIFE AND BLOOD WE DEFEND you, O Prophet of God!" rang out in front of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo on September 11, 2012. A hodgepodge of protesters had assembled at the behest of Islamists, furious over the infamous anti-Islam YouTube video *Innocence of Muslims*. Salafists and soccer hooligans called Ultras filled the street.[1] The black banner of Jihad seemed to be everywhere. As nightfall neared, some in the crowd were unsatisfied with letting the day pass without incident. The U.S. flag flying at half-mast to commemorate 9/11 was too attractive a target to pass over. Dozens of young men scaled the Embassy's exterior wall, took down the flag, and burned it. Pictures of the incident were understandably confusing. One teen wearing shorts and flip-flops looked on as he rested on the wall. Next to him, another youth wore a Guy Fawkes mask, like others on top of the wall, and held a lit flare. In the middle of the mob atop the wall stood one of the few bearded men waiving the black banner now used by the Islamic State group.

The presence of Ultras and Salafists in front of the Embassy that day was no

accident. Indeed, many of the Ultras were at the protest looking for another riot just as they've been involved in most of the protests since the January 2011 revolution. These excitable young men, some drugged up, others just plain angry, clashed often with the Egyptian Police. They had a distinct way of chanting during protests. It reflected the graffiti they spray painted that insulted the police, such as All Cops Are Bastards or ACAB. This was an art they fine-tuned back when they cheered for their favorite teams in soccer stadiums. They were organized and absolutely dedicated to their unit of Ultras, a rare combination in a country like Egypt.

With the revolution, the soccer hooligans turned political. They were simply against the state and anyone in uniform as many of them had started to get killed or detained as a result of numerous clashes. But just like most other Muslim youth in Egypt, some of them were susceptible to the populist and simplistic Islamist call. Some supported the charismatic Salafi presidential candidate Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, who wanted to become President to implement Sharia. The Ultras were targeted by Islamists who saw in them an opportunity to reach youth and have muscle on the street, where much of Egypt's post-revolutionary politics was being decided.

As a result, some of the Ultras, specifically those supporting Cairo's Zamalek club called the White Knights, were Islamized. They were perfect recruits for a new strand of Islamism that emerged in revolutionary Egypt, so-called Revolutionary Salafism.[2] It stressed popular mobilization, eschewed the organized Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood, and rejected traditional Salafi scholars who opposed popular revolution. In this period, scholar Samuel Tadros writes in his seminal mapping of modern Egyptian Islamism, "Revolutionary Salafism's appeal grew as a Salafism released from the shackles of scholarship, a Salafism for the masses, a Salafism mixed with a heavy dose of social justice, populism, and anti-Americanism."[3]

The Presidential candidate Sheikh Abu Ismail had become the messiah for this new movement. Abu Ismail was hardly an intellectual or a theologian. A lawyer by trade, he buttressed his religious credentials by taking up televangelism and was popular only because his late father was a famous Azhari cleric and Islamist MP. Abu Ismail had both charisma and a simple populist platform to turn Egypt Islamic. This was enough to win him the support of young Salafists and other Egyptians sold on Sharia. Abu Ismail's posters were everywhere in Egypt. Media figures begrudgingly started to take him seriously. The young Salafists were ecstatic. An Islamic Egypt was in reach, and if it meant holding their nose and engaging in democracy this once, it was well worth it. But Abu Ismail was disqualified from the race. His late mother had become a U.S. citizen, making him ineligible under new

amendments in the Egyptian constitution that barred dual nationals or their children from the office. Islamists had ironically supported the amendments thinking they would more likely apply to a westernized secularist. Abu Ismail violently denied the claim, stating that it was all conveniently made up to disqualify him. For his supporters, it was as blatant as an American conspiracy could get.

After the demoralizing disqualification of Sheikh Abu Ismail, a group of enterprising young Salafis in mid-2012 began to dabble with the idea of spreading their brand of Revolutionary Salafism using the Ultras model of organization and street protest. The group called itself the Ahrar, or Freemen, Movement. They were the most committed group of Revolutionary Salafists yet, rejecting any form of democracy and openly opposing the then-ruling Muslim Brotherhood for not implementing Sharia. The Embassy protest, where some of them were present, was a successful test run for their first unofficial street deployment. Later authorities would accuse one of its leaders of helping instigate that riot and attempting to breach the embassy.[4] Ahrar would go on to participate in numerous protests through the following year, many turning violent, and engage in acts of political intimidation such as surrounding embassies and government buildings.

The group's core ideology, found on its website and in its manifesto, *Freemen's Battle,* revolves around rejecting Western hegemony, what they call "The American Caliphate," an intentional turn of phrase to describe the so-called "New World Order" from an Islamist perspective. Defeating the "near enemy," which is a mere puppet, is not sufficient. Another core tenet is that Ahrar is "the movement of the bare minimum," which also shuns "elite" vanguards. This means that the way to attract the largest number of followers is for the group's ideology to be intentionally vague and thus able to appeal to ordinary people who may be turned off by the typical image of rigid Islamist groups. They in fact state that they find the term "Islamist" appalling. This helps attract people who share the common belief that implementing Sharia is a noble endeavor, which, in reality, would arguably be a majority of Muslims. Finally, they believe that "borders are dust," as modern national borders and the Westphalian system are imposed by the West to divide the Muslim nation.

Ahrar proposes a total popular revolution that Muslims must engage in to dismantle the Western order and its client states. Then Muslims would live in "freedom," and Sharia would be established in society. What will come later, what shape the unified Islamic nation will take, its Caliph, and all matters related to state are intentionally left vague as they are divisive issues that can be resolved later. This "real" Muslim revolution ultimately will require "revolutionary" or "popular" violence to face the tyranny of the regimes. The movement contends that only when Islamists

truly harness the power of the Muslim masses, as opposed to simply focusing on coups or rallying the support of elites such as Hizb ut-Tahrir's attempts, can they achieve *sustainable* victory against the un-Islamic world order America stands behind, the movement contends. This is why other groups have failed and will fail. This includes the Islamic State group, which they view as an elitist warrior vanguard that futilely attempts top-to-bottom change.

These "revolutionary" views may be dismissed as musings of disenchanted Islamist youth. But if the history of Islamism has taught us one thing, it is not to dismiss their theoreticians easily, as absurd as they may seem to the rational mind. Nor is it wise to dismiss the powerful influence Islamism's core ideas hold over men chasing after the myth of an Islamic utopia. As a result of the 2011 revolution, the military coup of July 2013, and subsequent massacres, Egyptian Islamism is going through a transformational existential phase no less significant than the moment that gave birth to the ideology in the first place and later its Jihadi mutations. For this reason, new ideas and interpretations of Islamism like that of Ahrar and others that may emerge will provide useful context as scholars and policymakers navigate the next decades in Islamism's mutations.

Ahrar's History

AHRAR WAS OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED IN OCTOBER 2012 WITH A RALLY AT THE STEPS of Cairo's Saladin Citadel. The group brought at least a hundred young supporters, mostly wearing black t-shirts and walking in typical Ultras formation. Rekindling the memory of Saladin's conquests against Crusaders and Islam's hegemony was the sought-after motif for the event. Any passerby would've assumed they were just like the other soccer hooligans. But if they had listened closely, they would've heard how familiar chants of "Ultras is a way of life" had been replaced with "Sharia is a way of life" and "Ahrar is a way of life." The chants were not about soccer teams, but rather how "America will no longer rule us after today." A thin, awkward young man with an excited smile named Ahmad Sameer was standing in the back during most of the event to coach members on what to say to media. Sameer would emerge as the group's theoretician and later the author of its manifesto. On that day, he and other Salafis inside the group would feel the power of having control over a crowd of impressionable young men who could swap their fanaticism for the World Cup for the Caliphate.

For the next year, the group's distinct black shirts would make appearances in various protests along with other Revolutionary Salafists such as Hazemon, the Salafi Front, and Students for Sharia. This included marching against the 2012 constitution, which like hardcore Salafists and Salafi Jihadists, they rejected because it did not implement Sharia. They also surrounded government buildings such as the High Court of Justice, sieged prosecutors questioning their members, and the Media Productions Company when Sheikh Abu Ismail called for a siege against the anti-Islamist television channels. They also encircled the Lebanese embassy to protest the siege of Salafist Sheikh Ahmad Al Assir by Lebanese forces. Other acts of political intimidation they are accused of participating in with others include the ransacking of the secular Wafd Party headquarters in December 2012 and a random attack on downtown Cairo cafes popular with activists.[5] They also reached outside Cairo to flex their muscles. In early 2013, Islamist relatives of a student who was accidently run over by a professor in Mansura University asked the Ahrar black shirts to come protest. Ahrar proceeded to try to surround the administration building and besiege it until the university President resigned. Violent clashes ensued, and authorities detained a few dozen of their members.

They also held many non-violent rallies with an Islamist twist, such as commemorating the fall of Muslim Andalusia. They held public talks that hosted other well-known Revolutionary Salafists such as Sheikh Hossam Abu El Boukhari,[6] a well-spoken and educated sectarian Salafi who was a feature of Egyptian political talk shows of the time debating secularists. He was one of the founders of an organization called the Coalition for the Defense of New Muslims, which instigated sectarian strife by claiming that the Coptic Church detained women who converted to Islam.

Ahrar's various activities had soon put them on the Ministry of Interior's radar during former President Mohamed Morsi's reign. Sheikh Abu Ismail, and Ahrar specifically, were a challenge and a headache for both the police and the Muslim Brotherhood. Things came to a head in late 2012 when police arrested one of Ahrar's founders, a computer programmer in his late twenties by the name of Ahmad Arafah. They charged him with owning an unlicensed automatic weapon, which was likely a pretext to search his home and detain him. If Ahmad Sameer was the brains, Arafah, his childhood best friend, was the muscle. In 2007, he was arrested on allegations of enforcing Hisba by hand. Following the arrest, Ahrar and many other Abu Ismail supporters quickly flocked to the prosecutor's office where Arafah was being held. They vowed to surround the building until he was released. The situation quickly escalated and threats became so intense that the authorities buckled under pressure and released him—something unusual

even for the chaotic post-revolutionary period in Egypt. Many of those who surrounded the prosecutor's office that day are now standing trial themselves. Authorities would later reveal that the infamous Islamic State group recruit by the name of Islam Yekin was among the crowd, and faces charges for intimidating the prosecution.[7]

Ahrar would continue to have run-ins with the law and create disturbances during Morsi's reign. The group refused to participate in protests supporting Morsi's rule in June 2013. They were committed to their principles because they believed the Brotherhood failed to deliver on the revolution's demands and implement Sharia. But things changed when Sheikh Abu Ismail was arrested. Shortly after that, many of the group's leaders were arrested, chief among them Arafah, on charges of attempting to jailbreak Abu Ismail and commit other acts of terror.[8] The group would go on to have other rallies in an attempt to set itself apart and exploit the moment by declaring that it was against the rule of both the military and the Brotherhood. They were a "third square." Naturally media outlets were duped into thinking that these were typical revolutionary activists, and secular activists who opposed both Islamists and the military were curious. This was exactly how Ahrar envisioned that the intentional vagueness on positions could work in its favor. But in those post-coup rallies, the clashes with police grew more intense. Authorities detained scores of Ahrar members. Others went into hiding. At least seven members were killed.

Ahrar no longer had a presence as a force on the ground after the July 2013 coup like most other anti-state Islamist groups. Ahrar's only remaining significance is in the ideas it has put forward, which continue to be shared by thousands of supporters online. This support base even extends to the Jordanian pro-Al Qaeda preacher Eyad al-Qunaibi, who has urged his online followers multiple times to read the group's manifesto and check out its ideas,[9] and to Tunisia, where an Ahrar Tunisia was founded.[10]

The Freemen's Battle

AHRAR'S LOGO IS THAT OF A LION LOOKING UP TO THE EAST. IT IS A SYMBOL OF STRENGTH and steadfastness also associated with Sheikh Abu Ismail. He delivered his sermons at the Assad ibn al-Furat Mosque in Giza, Egypt, named after the early Muslim theologian and warrior who initiated the Muslim conquest of Sicily in 827 AD.

An excerpt from the group's mission statement describes it as:

A youth movement that includes diverse youth who share a love for freedom. If, however, freedom is tied for many to the right to vote and freedom of expression, then it has a different meaning for us. We mean by freedom the liberation from the slavery that makes us gears inside a huge machine that produces only what the owners of this world desire. It is the slavery that is imposed on us by the global and local regimes in exchange for scraps for us to live by! Our view towards freedom stems from the values of our religion...

Its slogan: "An Ummah revolts, dignity restored, a homeland liberated."[11]

What sets Ahrar apart from other Revolutionary Salafist groups is its focus on fine-tuning a new ideological framing to guide the new current. Although Ahrar supported Abu Ismail, it refused to join the political party he helped establish due to Ahrar's absolute rejection of organized politics and any semblance of democracy. In the aftermath of Egypt's revolution, zealous Salafi youth were in open revolt against traditional Islamism. As Tadros writes, "The revolutionary moment had managed to revolutionize Sunni Islam in ways similar to what was done to Shi'a Islam under Ali Shariati and Ruhollah Khomeini."[12]

Ahrar attempts to take the first step to do just that for Revolutionary Salafists. Others from their current such as the Salafi Front have attempted to participate in the political process only to fail miserably. The rest, such as the unintellectual Hazemon, seemed like a transient phenomenon tied to the fate of Sheikh Abu Ismail and were easily attacked because they conformed to the traditional image of angry bearded Salafists threatening violence left and right. For this reason, it was essential for Ahrar to integrate Ultras elements and adopt their look to confuse enemies and have street muscle of clean-shaven, modern-dressed youth who were far more presentable to the masses.

One of the earliest Islamist scholars to broach the issue of popular mobilization and focus on the masses was the late Sheikh Rifa'i Surour, who once was a theoretician for Egyptian Islamic Jihad.[13] His dense book on Islamist political theory, *The Political Conception of the Islamist Movement*, argued that such terms as revolution can indeed be Islamic. He focused on the role of reaching and mobilizing the masses in achieving change.[14] Although it is unclear if Ahrar's theoretician Ahmad Sameer read him, Surour did have an outsized influence over Sheikh Abu Ismail and the current in general. Yet Surour himself still wrote in the manner of a traditional scholar without fully addressing the context of the modern world Islamists now have to challenge. He died well before the coup and Abu Ismail's

disqualification, and did not have to contend with the reality that the Salafists had failed to exploit the 2011 revolution. Instead, the status-quo Muslim Brothers took over and paved the way for the 2013 coup, the final stage in the counterrevolution.

The turbulence inside Egyptian Islamism has enabled Ahrar to present its ideas as an evolution of Islamism in a revolutionary age that once and for all would throw to the wayside archaic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This idea extends even to Salafi Jihadi groups with a fundamental structure as closed, elite vanguards whose methodology of change revolves around seizing power and implementing the desired Islamist change from the top down.

Ahrar's writings reveal a deep iconoclastic disposition simply directed at everything. For Ahrar, Islamists do not need to surrender to the modern political reality in the first place. Muslims must change by hand the modern world Westerners created. In short, Islamists cannot "play by the rules of a game designed to enslave [them]."[15] This doesn't simply extend to Muslim Brothers participating in elections but also to Salafi Jihadists such as the Islamic State group. Their victories in Syria and Iraq are likened to that of a hostage who managed to gain control of one room inside a house on a piece of land owned by his captors. The local regimes are part of a bigger regime, the so-called "New World Order," which America has engineered. The young Revolutionary Salafists believe in the standard conspiracy theories shared by anti-capitalist socialists who rail against the global economic system. The Middle East is a special target, they believe, because it is rich in energy resources. The West also recognizes that Islam presents the only model that can challenge its hegemony and therefore must subjugate it. The West may thus dominate, but Ahrar believes that the "devil is not in the White House, but rather he is inside [Muslims],"[16] because they choose to go along with this order.

Ahrar completely rejects the notion of "Political Islam," because those who subscribe to it falsely believe that they can implement Sharia in the "degenerate"[17] Western-imposed reality in which Muslims find themselves. The use of the word degenerate is a nod to the influential Indian Islamist theorist Abul Hassan Al Nadawi, who wrote the famous book, *What the World Lost with the Degeneration of Muslims.* He influenced theorists such as Sayyid Qutb, who wrote the forward to that book. Ahrar believes that there can be no reconciling with any one part of this global un-Islamic system. There can never truly be Islamic banks, not because they fail to adhere to Islamic principles, but rather because the global currency is the American dollar.

This corrupt reality, the "modern *Jahiliyyah*,"[18] can never be Islamized. The Prophet Muhammad first spoke against the *Jahiliyyah* in his own time until he revolted against it completely with Jihad, something that all advocates of so-called gradual

or non-violent political change must recognize, Ahrar argues. In other words, Muslims were masters of their own world then, a time when there could be a distinct *Dar al-Islam* and *Dar al-Kufr*. With globalization and Western hegemony, the lines are blurred, which is why you can't have an Islamic State in this modern world without completely destroying the modern global order everyone is forced to buy into.

Although Ahrar classifies the enemy and his order as modern *Jahiliyyah*, it is against *takfiri* Salafi Jihadists who label the Muslim masses as *Jahilyy* or apostates. The reason is that doing so results in "alienating the masses completely from the battle"[19] and labels them as the enemy. This anti-*takfirism* is a trend among new movements that rely on popular mobilization as an essential methodology for change and other armed groups that have learned from the mistakes of modern Salafi Jihadi groups that alienate local populations.

Furthermore, to Ahrar there is no such thing as "seeking power to implement Sharia," as all Islamists claim to desire. Seeking to implement Sharia by taking power in this global order is chasing a mirage at best. The very state they wish to implement Sharia in has become an "idol" itself. Sameer asks in Ahrar's manifesto, "What is Egypt for instance? If the people are asked to die for it to live?"[20] The Revolutionary Salafists of Egypt have of course been forced to contend with something as foundational as this after a century of failing to implement Sharia in their lands. Islamists had tried violence before and it failed. They had come to power and controlled the state, and yet they failed again. It may be understood then that the state must completely change and the world order destroyed, but perhaps also Sharia was being sought after in the completely wrong way.

This leads Ahrar to some interesting conclusions about concepts sacrosanct to Sunni orthodoxy, such as kingship and the domain of the ruler to implement God's Sharia. To Ahrar, the Islamists' original sin is believing that implementing Sharia is something that has to be connected to political rule or statehood. In fact, the very word "implementing" is problematic because it conjures up the belief that *someone* has to implement it. Islamists have fought among themselves and against the infidels to find that someone or group for deliverance. Sharia is instead "established" in society, just like when it was established during the Prophet's Meccan years. No Muslim can say that there was no Islam before Muhammad became a ruler in Medina after all, they argue. Sharia is thus not something for the ruler to implement on the ruled, but rather it is something established by the entire society. Sharia is thus "established in [periods] of rule, and outside it, in periods of weakness and empowerment."[21] How this utopian and popular "establishment" of Sharia happens is of course left vague.

Interestingly, similar ideas on Sharia and kingship appeared in Islam's early

days when Mu'tazila and Kharajite factions became disillusioned with the transformation of the imamate to a kingship as Islam grew (although Ahrar's members are highly unlikely to have studied this). Some among the Mu'tazila had put forward ideas on how exactly society can "establish" Sharia that Ahrar's manifesto avoids, such as having local elders take temporary lead or through some other communal mechanism. Patricia Crone described these ideas as anarchist in nature,[22] at least by Islamic standards, and it is perhaps a fitting label for Ahrar's views on the post-revolution society that would emerge in the aftermath of the destruction of the global order they desire. They would need to have faith in the Muslim masses' supposed predisposition to tap into God's Sharia to keep the order in such an anarchic environment.

The Methodology of Revolutionary Change

AHRAR THUS PUT FORWARD A RADICAL METHODOLOGY FOR CHANGE THAT CHALLENGES all traditional Islamist solutions that proposed "within this reality, the same system."[23] Islamists simply haven't been thinking outside the box. The goal of the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, was to gain legitimacy inside the system. Even when it was "kicked out," meaning the coup, the Brotherhood "still begged to come back."[24] Ahrar concludes that the cumulative impact of all these actions by Islamists has "distorted the consciousness of the people and made them unable to think outside the boundaries of this reality."[25] And so Ahrar proposes "destroying the values of the system and build new social, political, and economic values…[Ahrar is] calling for the creation of a new system on earth…the independence from the system of global oppression, the complete separation from its values and building a new [order] that flows out of [Islam]."[26]

The values of the modern reality that Ahrar rebels against are: subservience to the West, the trick of democracy, political secularism, and capitalism. It proposes building the new reality on three pillars influenced by Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*:

> 1. Turning away from the worship of man (God's slaves) to worshiping the God of the slaves. (This value demolishes the subservience to the West and democracy)

2. Turn away from the narrowness of the [material] world to the abundance of this world and the hereafter (this value demolishes capitalism)

3. Turn away from the inequities of religions and heretics and go toward the justice of Islam (this value demolishes political secularism)[27, 28]

Ahrar believes that "total revolution," revolution of "consciousness and resistance," is the only way to bring about Islamic change. The group argues that peaceful revolutions such as the Western-backed "colored revolutions" do not work and that it is "laughable" to think that democracy and revolution go hand in hand.[29] Revolution, Ahrar argues, "is a word that since its inception has been solidly tied to guerrilla warfare or popular violence."[30] This has to be accompanied with spreading the vision and targeting the masses or else revolution will fail. Jihad, Ahrar claims, does not contradict the meaning of revolution it puts forward. Rather, Ahrar chooses to use the discourse of revolution and resistance instead, as the meaning of Jihad is implied. This is likely intentional to make it difficult for observers to label the group easily as Salafi Jihadists.

A revolutionary vanguard will spread awareness in society with a clear vision to mobilize the masses. And if the masses themselves do not have the requisite knowledge to understand the vanguard's message, then the vanguard has to "manufacture consciousness" among the masses. But this is not done simply through propaganda or proselytization. Ahrar believes that "strength," meaning violence, is what manufactures the consciousness. Ahrar likens revolutionary strength to a motor and the masses to the parts of a car. They need each other to propel forward.[31] Ahrar's manifesto states, "Violence for the revolutionary body is not behavior that is separated from its message and its reach to people."[32]

This type of "revolutionary violence"[33] is different from that of other groups such as Salafi Jihadists, Ahrar contends. The other militant groups have "secluded themselves, their message, goals, and vision from the masses."[34] They have come to adopt "violence that is without a message."[35] In other words, they have become closed and elitist vanguards unlike the revolutionary vanguard Ahrar proposes. A similar critique of the contemporary Salafi Jihadist movement was made by a late theoretician for the Syrian militant group "Ahrar al-Sham" (no relation), Abu Ayman Al Hamawi, in his treatise, *Towards an Enlightened Creed*. It highlights how even for new Salafi armed groups, the closed vanguard model of groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State group is unsustainable.[36] Furthermore, Ahrar believes

that this elitist vanguard model enables regimes to focus their energy on attacking the vanguard, and for that reason, the regimes must face a confrontation by the revolting masses.

America features front and center as the real enemy Ahrar urges Muslims to fight. Sameer writes in *Freemen's Battle,* "America wages a war of ideas today against Islam that is no less brutal than the military war."[37] This is because Ahrar believes America and the West fight Islam because "Islam has and still holds the requisite components to remove and replace their civilization…and resist their hegemony."[38]

The "American Caliphate," Ahrar argues, rules this world with "idols" such as the false concept of "international legitimacy" and global organizations designed to subjugate Muslims.[39] Rulers are to be looked at as Emirs in this false Caliphate. *Bayt al-Mal* is the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the *Diwan* for Grievances is the United Nations, and finally the Caliphate's conquering army is NATO. The novel phrasing's design makes the point to readers that there is no ignoring the world order by pretending that Muslims can truly establish the Islamic State in their locale, like the Islamic State group wants to.

However, the manifesto is unclear about what to do to counter this. Sameer writes, "I am intentionally in this book drawing the broad outline for this battle without getting into specifics."[40] But in a later online article describing his views on the Islamic State, he sees that it has managed only to "control a piece of land inside one of the prisons."[41] He stresses that the only way for Salafi Jihadists today to change the momentum to their favor is "the complete and immediate return to the idea of [hitting] 'the head of the serpent,' and to focus on directly targeting the interests of [the world order, i.e., America],"[42] while making use of the land that Jihadists already control. This gives a glimpse into the developing mindset of pro-violence Revolutionary Salafists whose answer to the Jihadi dilemma on whether to focus on the near enemy or the far enemy first is by answering: both.

Conclusion

IN THIS AGE OF SEISMIC TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, the West should pay attention to the ideas emerging in reaction to these changes and not just to the groups currently dominating the scene. Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group will continue to be formidable enemies thanks to their military

prowess and wealth. But the Middle East continues to be a region animated by ideas just as much as by weapons and oil. Salafi Jihadism has found fertile ground where political vacuums existed and there were weak militaries. The model cannot be easily replicated everywhere. This is what has led Revolutionary Salafists such as Ahrar to put forward a model that they believe can. This model aims to use the power of mass mobilization to fight a long battle of attrition against the West and local leaders. Jihadists no longer would fight the battle *on behalf* of the Muslim masses, as they do today, but rather *with* them.

The idea is absurd. But then again, the same could've been said about mass uprisings rocking Arab capitals in 2011 or the notion that a rag-tag group of seemingly delusional men in the mountains of Afghanistan would kill nearly 3000 Americans in one day. Samuel Tadros observes, "Revolutionary Salafism has the potential to transform Islamism in ways that other Islamist currents have consistently failed to achieve. Revolutionary Salafism is a transformative ideology waiting at the corner, awaiting its Lenin."[43] The question is not so much whether or not this particular idea will take root, but rather understanding the direction in which the young generation of Islamists is taking Islamism in the age of revolution and the Islamic State group. If Ahrar's vision and theory, like so many others, yield little, the result may be a reinvigorated push for action. And that may mean more and more radicalized youth ripe for recruitment by existing Jihadi groups.

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Another "State" of Hate: Al-Nusra's Quest to Establish an Islamic Emirate in the Levant

By Yasir Abbas

THE AL-NUSRA FRONT (ANF) HAD MODEST ORIGINS AS A SMALL GROUP of Syrian fighters sent by the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) to form its wing in Syria. But over the course of the Syrian conflict, ANF has transformed itself into al-Qaeda's (AQ) most active and important affiliate in the Middle East. Today, ANF and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) are enemies, and ANF is one of the most powerful, respected, and feared armed groups in Syria. Its growth, however, has not been smooth. Following a jihadi civil war with ISIS in 2013, ANF was on the verge of complete collapse.[1] Since then, ANF has proven resurgent, scoring sweeping gains against the Assad regime and ISIS, while seizing territory in northern and southern Syria. Through it all, the organization has skilfully manipulated its environment, and positioned itself to become the powerful, popular group it is today.

Most important, ANF has expanded its territorial holdings without alienating the majority of the population in opposition-held areas. It did so by using a

variety of tactics, such as avoiding civilian matters, largely derived from its Salafi-jihadi interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. ANF's Salafi-jihadi rival, ISIS, takes an uncompromising, brutal approach toward anyone who does not accept its strict Islamic interpretations. ANF, in contrast, accepts Salafist principles, but uses them to justify a pragmatic, gradual approach to cooperation and collaboration with other armed opposition groups in Syria.

Roots and Expansion

ANF ENTERED SYRIA FROM IRAQ IN AUGUST 2011 WITH EIGHT SENIOR SYRIAN operatives. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), ISIS's precursor, had dispatched the team, whose leader was Abu Mohamed al-Jawlani, ANF's current leader, who at the time a senior ISI operative. ISI was the primary source of funds and arms. The mission was to establish ISI's presence in the nascent Syrian conflict.[2,3] Soon after its arrival, the small group gained a high profile among the largely untrained and unequipped Syrian rebels.[4] ANF conducted a series of military operations against the regime, including regime security targets deep inside government-held areas in Damascus.[5] Compared to the largely ineffective, poorly-organized, and ill-equipped armed opposition, ANF's military prowess shone brightly. Still, many Syrians remained suspicious of ANF's long-term objectives and the future it envisioned for the country, in large part because of its hard-line Salafist ideology.[6] Doubtless aware of this wariness, ANF initially refrained from interfering in civilian matters when establishing a military presence among communities. This gradual approach, combined with striking military gains, served to mitigate those suspicions and helped to shape ANF's image as a welcomed and relatively popular group to counter the Syrian regime.[7]

In its early days, ANF worked closely with rebel groups to fight the regime, to establish joint sharia courts and other conflict resolution committees,[8] and to provide protection and assistance to the local population and aid organizations alike.[9] ANF was more than willing to join into military alliances with moderate Islamist and secular groups affiliated with Free Syrian Army (FSA). Although ANF worked with non-Salafi armed groups in areas such as Idlib, Homs, Hama, Dar'a, and al-Qalamun (northwest of Damascus), its coordination was always stronger with like-minded Salafi groups such as Ahrar al-Sham (AAS), Ajnad al-Sham, and Jund al-Aqsa.

ANF's rising profile and popularity soon created tensions with ISI. On April 9,

2013,[10] Baghdadi, the future ISIS Caliph, announced the merger of ANF and ISI to form the ISIS. On April 10 , Jawlani disobeyed Baghdadi's order and instead gave allegiance, or *bay'a*, to AQ's top leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Jawlani opted for ANF to become AQ's wing in Syria and effectively asserted the primacy of the group's South Asia-based leadership over its near neighbors in Iraq.[11]

Relations between the two groups soured further in the months that followed. Despite Zawahiri's personal intervention, and pleas from senior Salafi-jihadi ideologues,[12] including Abu Mohamad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qutada al-Filistini,[13] to end the dispute, ANF-ISIS relations rapidly deteriorated.[14] In early 2014, military confrontations between the two groups broke out in Idlib, al-Hasaka, Raqqa, and Dayr al-Zawr provinces.[15] ISIS was able to dislodge ANF, along with other rebel groups, from al-Hasaka, Raqqa, and later Dayr al-Zawr, in return largely abandoning its presence in Idlib and Aleppo to ANF and other rebel groups.

This split was not a complete surprise, however. Even before the Syrian conflict's inception, ISI and AQ showed signs of unease and mutual distrust. AQ had complained about ISI's increasing autonomy from AQ. South Asia-based AQ's central officials often privately criticized ISI's infamous vehicle-born improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) campaign against Shi'a civilians and its unbending ideological imposition on Sunni civilians in Iraq.[16] In a letter to then-ISI leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Zawahiri recommended gaining Sunnis' trust and support by preparing them with instructions and sharia courses before enforcing a Salafi agenda. Zawahiri told his ostensible employee Zarqawi not "to throw them (Sunnis) in the sea before teaching them how to swim."[17] ISI further antagonized Zawahiri and his associates when ISI neglected to consult AQ before appointing Baghdadi to succeed the slain ISI leader Abu Bakr al-Masri.[18] Nonetheless, ISI continued to pay lip service to AQ by seeking Zawahiri's consultation in its decision-making—even if this was often after-the-fact—to ensure the continuation of its support.[19] However, when ISI's (and later ISIS's) interests collided[20] with AQ in the Spring of 2013, it did not hesitate to disobey direct orders and defect from AQ.

In the months following the ANF-ISIS split, many of ANF's foreign fighters defected to ISIS, leaving the powerful group noticeably weakened.[21] Even Dayr al-Zawr, an ANF stronghold and reportedly the birthplace of Jawlani, had fallen to ISIS by July 2014.[22] Furthermore, other jihadi groups and erstwhile ANF allies defected to ISIS *en masse*, leaving ANF more vulnerable than ever to fragmentation and collapse.[23] By mid-2014, ANF's star had fallen, and the organization was on the verge of dissolution.

Following this string of defeats and defections, ANF shifted its focus to Idlib province, which was one of the few areas left in Syria where it could be shielded

from ISIS encroachment.[24] At least on the surface, ANF was an organization in decline that was racked with defections and internal divisions.[25] But Jawlani's leadership and AQ's unwavering support ensured that ANF was able to regroup and re-emerge as one of the most powerful opposition armed groups in Syria. Through pragmatic alliances with other Islamists, such as AAS, Jawlani staved off total collapse and scored major military gains that would form the bedrock of ANF's newfound legitimacy-through-action. Further, AQ's support enhanced the group's standing among jihadists, whether through publicly endorsing ANF as its affiliate or through deploying senior AQ veterans to provide strategic guidance and training. Such support still benefits ANF, as its influence, military might, and presence continue to crest.

ANF's Objectives in the Levant

ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, ANF HAS OPENLY DECLARED THAT IT SEEKS TO ESTABLISH a political state system based on a strident Salafi-jihadi interpretation of sharia.[26] This goal is clear from the first public statements the group released, which avowed ANF's central objective as aid for the people of the Levant (*nusrat ahl al-sham*) and, tellingly, to "implement God's law on earth (*tatbiq shar' Allah fil-ard*).[27] ANF seeks to establish a system based on sharia by aborting alternatives, especially those promoting a secular democratic system.[28] However, ANF has not proceeded towards this goal in the same strict, dogmatic fashion that we have seen from ISIS. Rather, ANF is able to flex and adapt to variegated local environments, often deliberately obscuring its long-term goals in pursuit of short-term strategic objectives, and selectively attacking and purging pro-democracy armed groups in Syria.[29] As a result, ANF seems to have short-and long-term visions that, at least on the surface, appear incompatible. For example, although the group had claimed that it did not enter Syria to rule over the population, ANF's consolidation of power and religious imposition indicate that its ultimate objective is in fact to establish an Islamic state (*imara*) in Syria.

In service of both its long-term goal and its short term objectives, ANF makes use of selected religious teachings and concepts to both guide and justify its actions. The most important of those religious concepts are *nikaya* (fighting to inflict pain on "God's enemies") and *tamkin* (fighting to empower or enable "Muslim rule"). These two concepts are often used by ANF to allude to its long-term and short-term objectives respectively. ANF's top leadership has often expressed

its intent to pursue *tamkin*, though not *nikaya*. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one the most renowned Salafi-jihadi ideologues and one with a particular influence on both AQ and ANF, encouraged the movement to pursue *tamkin* over *nikaya* in the first instance. "Muslims must focus their efforts on... *tamkin*, or as it is called in the modern day, 'liberation'," wrote al-Maqdisi in his book "*waqfat m'a thmarat al-jihad*" (Stances on the Fruits of Jihad).[30] Echoing al-Maqdisi's call, Abu Malek al-Shami, ANF's leader in al-Qalamun, stressed the organization's efforts to fight for *tamkin*. "Certainly, our jihad as Jabhat al-Nusra in the Levant does not differ from that of our brothers in al-Qaeda around the world, and is jihad for *tamkin* (i.e., enabling) the religion of God and *tamkin* for Muslims on Earth," al-Shami wrote in an open letter.[31] *Tamkin*, according to ANF, should be planned and executed by a group of elites with thorough religious expertise and full commitment to the jihadi cause. "*Tamkin* needs a complete and an all-encompassing plan in which visionary and experienced godly scholars, proselytizers, and...honest Mujahedeen...devote themselves to the order of jihad and tend to its plant with their pure hands, noble objectives, and loyal intentions until it bears its fruit to be harvested by the same hands...and not by others," al-Maqdisi wrote.[32]

ANF sees only itself and its members as the aforementioned "godly leaders" and thus the only ones who may harvest the "fruits of jihad." Despite its assurances to allies, it has thus far exhibited behaviour that is indicative of a single-minded intent to rule over Syria using such a method. For example, in its strongholds in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, ANF refuses to participate in joint governance ventures.[33] Further, after ensuring its ability to survive and thrive without partnering with other groups, ANF has erected its own governance structures. Despite tacit cooperation with AAS in Idlib, for example, ANF has also clashed with the group on issues of governance on several occasions.[34] "[ANF] has a different project than [AAS]," said a former local council member from Idlib Province. "Al-Jabha (ANF) does not see AAS as a fit partner to govern," he added.[35] Recently, a high-level ANF leader published an article criticizing AAS, its leadership, and its policies[36] while ANF also broke away from several joint governance ventures with AAS and other groups in Aleppo and Idlib. Chief among them are the establishment of ANF sharia courts (Dar al-Qada) and ANF-only services offices in Aleppo Province. In summary, ANF may start out working with other groups to garner support. But when given the means and opportunity, it will work independently of other groups, and if possible, enforce full control over both governance and security.

ANF's Approach

UNLIKE ISIS, WHICH DEPENDS ON VIOLENCE TO COMPEL THE LOCAL POPULATION TO adhere to its ideology and rule, ANF's approach is largely based on gradualism, persuasion, and pragmatism, drawing from a concept roughly translated as "minding interests and avoiding spoilers" (*riayat al-maslaha wa mani' al-mafasid*). Using this concept—and avoiding armed confrontation with other Sunni groups as much as possible—ANF is able to tailor its overall strategy to different needs in different localities. This approach makes its strategy appear more complex, and at least on the surface, more fragmented.

ANF's radical ideology, its long-term political objectives, and its transnational nature all have made the Syrian people suspicious of the group.[37] To counter this image, ANF uses a gradual approach to gain local sympathy and buy-in, through which it can further expand its presence and influence. This approach is promoted by Salafi-jihadi religious scholars and ANF's top leaders, who have often stressed the importance of gradualism and persuasion in their approach to the Syrian people. Despite the fact that ANF has used violence to impose rigid, Salafi practices on the daily lives of some, more often the group relies on nonviolent tactics to influence behaviour. In Idlib Province, for example, ANF employs charity *da'wa* (proselytization) organizations to indoctrinate and influence the public through face-to-face interactions, online engagement, and public shaming. ANF also carries out campaigns to influence Syrian public opinion: In late December 2015, for example, ANF initiated an anti-smoking campaign in which ANF fighters distributed toothbrushes and *swaks* (sticks traditionally used in the Arabian Peninsula for oral hygiene) to locals in Idlib Province.

These policies are all calculated steps imposed by senior AQ leadership and ideologues, and ones which have proven successful through trial-and-error both in Syria and in other countries where AQ has experimented with governance. Jawlani, for example, emphasised ANF's gradualist approach in an interview with Qatar-based pan-Arab satellite channel *Al-Jazeera*, stating that the Syrian people will not accept ANF's conservative ideology after decades under a secular regime and thus should not be punished for their imperfection in adopting the group's dogma.[38] ANF often cites influential religious scholars who also speak frequently of the importance of the gradual approach in introducing Salafi ideology. "Being mindful and gradual is necessary to effect change and elicit a positive response [from the population], because it is not easy to divert a mind from the familiar [or to] redirect its proclivities," wrote Ali al-Salabi, a Salafist scholar, in his book on the

jurisprudence of *tamkin* in the Qur'an.[39] "From the Sunna,[40] *tamkin* is gradual-ism; being mindful of transforming from the easy to the difficult, from the difficult to the more difficult, from the near-term goal to the long-term objective, and from the partial plan to the total plan," added ANF's top leader in al-Qalamun.

Practically speaking, ANF has implemented this ideology by inserting itself gradually and persuasively. Before mid-2014, ANF was largely disengaged from governance. Instead, ANF delegated service provision to humanitarian agencies and secular local councils, despite the fact that these councils and organizations represented incompatible long-term political projects.[41] Even as late as March 2015, ANF only barely interfered in governance.[42] "[Al-Nusra] Front offered noth-ing but support and assistance to the [local] council," a local activist from Idlib said in an interview.[43] But over time, ANF began asserting its influence more forcefully in service provision and civilian affairs. On 12 August 2015, the ANF-dominated *shura* (consultative) Council in Kafr Nubul, Idlib Province finally stepped into a governing role, effectively relieving the city's local council of its duties.[44] After ANF's sweeping advances in Idlib province as part of the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) coalition in the spring and summer of 2015, the group immediately moved to use its enhanced stature to further meddle in service pro-vision. ANF started running landline phone service and water and electricity projects, and began intervening in local council-type governance, which in some cases included the collection of fees and taxes.[45] In early October 2015, ANF attempted to replace over the Saraqeb City local council with its own members. Although ANF was unable to take hold of the council due to AAS's intervention, it did succeed in securing one vote in the city's *shura* council, which oversees (theoretically in an observer capacity) the council's daily operations.[46,47]

ANF's interference in more intimate aspects of civilian life—such as religion and education—is slowly growing. In late 2015, multiple reports from Idlib city and Ma'rat al-Nu'man indicated that ANF and its ally Jund al-Aqsa had begun an unprecedented crackdown on "un-Islamic" clothing.[48] Further, ANF replaced mosque imams with its own in nearly all areas under its control.[49] ANF has been able to implement these aggressive policies by grace of its growing military power and political standing, both among rebel groups and the population. With this increased standing, ANF seeks to reach *tamkin* by gradually increasing its ac-tivities in different governance and service provision sectors, tightening its grip through popular buy-in.

Paired with this "gradual extremism" is ANF's noted pragmatism. With its ear to the ground over the past three years, ANF has transformed from a group that would use any means to accomplish its singular objective—ending the enemy's

aggression (*dafi' al-'adu al-sail*)—to a highly selective partner that cooperates only with close allies or by necessity. The extent to which ANF cooperates with other groups is contingent on its relative military strength in the area. Even though Jawlani admitted in an interview with *Al-Jazeera* that ANF "does not work with corrupt armed groups," ANF has in fact shown itself willing to work with a wide range of groups, from secular ones—such FSA affiliated groups—to Islamists with competing goals. In the southern province of al-Qunaytra and the western mountains of al-Qalamun, where ANF has a weak presence and needs others' cooperation to survive, the group often works with FSA-affiliated groups and sometimes with its arch-rival ISIS.[50] On the other hand, in its Idlib stronghold, ANF is more selective in its military partners. For example, ANF refused to allow FSA-affiliated groups or Jaysh al-Islam—like ANF a Salafist armed group with a national focus—to participate in the powerful Jaysh al-Fatah coalition in mid-2015, and instead partnered only with like-minded Islamist armed groups.[51] The approach enables ANF to survive and even thrive in various hostile environments and creates a sense of confusion among the Syrian population—and the international community—about the group's long-term objectives and the threat it poses to their future.

A National Focus?

ANF HAS PUBLICIZED ITS WELL-DEFINED "NATIONAL" OR "SYRIA-ONLY" APPROACH. This focus is not driven by ideology or long-term goals, but by the same pragmatism that has led to its success in Syria. As an affiliate of AQ, ANF believes it can be successful only with the support of the local population (allowing the group to recruit and gain material and security support), and by dampening the West's willingness to strike against it. It believes that it can achieve both of these goals by localizing its fight against its "near" rivals (the Assad regime and to a lesser extent ISIS and "corrupt" domestic secular armed groups), and working alongside nationalist and secular actors, so that it does not appear to present an immediate threat to the West.[52] Clearly, having an overtly transnational objective would alienate the Syrian people and fellow rebel groups on whom ANF relies to survive in many parts of the country.

ANF seeks to couch its transnational aims by using a variety of tactics employed at the local level. One such tactic is to create the conditions for a positive relationship between the population and ANF's foreign members. In a recent statement, Abdullah al-Muhaysini, a radical preacher with close ties to ANF, advised foreign

fighters to avoid joining the religious police, and instead focus on areas where their interaction with the public was less prone to be confrontational.[53] This positive relationship is important for ANF, which is dominated, at least at the top levels, by foreign figures.[54] In northern Hama countryside, for example, the majority of mid-level military commanders are local Syrians, while senior commanders are mostly foreign.[55] This has thus far allowed ANF to project a Syrian façade to the local population despite its ultimately foreign military and ideological leadership structure.

Another important strategic decision that avoids offending the local population is ANF's refusal to engage directly in transnational terrorism. Even when AQ sought to exploit the operational space under ANF's control to plan and stage terror attacks against the West, ANF's leadership has had little-to-no public connection to the AQ planning cells. The best known example is the so called Khorasan Group, which is believed to be composed of senior AQ operatives planning terror attacks against the West from bases in Syria.[56] "Hiding" this group is again likely a calculated, pragmatic decision to prevent alienating the Syrian population and to preserve focus on the immediate near war in Syria.

While ANF has in practice limited itself to the Syrian sphere of battle, international coalition airstrikes on the so-called Khorasan Group,[57] and attendant claims about the foreign aspirations of this nebulous group, have raised some doubts among Syrians.[58] This matter seems to be of some debate within ANF itself, however, with one of the group's *shar'is*, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, saying that al-Qaeda Central (through Abu Yahya al-Libi) informed the group's Syrian affiliate "not to think of any external action from Syria…out of fear that the West would take [action] as a pretext to intervene in Syria."[59] Qahtani went on to say that al-Libi advised this "even if we thought the West wouldn't discover it" and warned "against acting in Europe and elsewhere…because this would hurt the Syrian battlefield and the mujahedeen there would be targeted on this account."[60] Notwithstanding Abu Mariya's statement, ANF Idlib spokesman Abu 'Azzam al-Ansari said that indeed, al-Qaeda in Syria's intent was to confront America and that it was the organization's prerogative to "decide when and where."[61] Nonetheless, ANF has yet to publicly acknowledge the Khorasan Group and little public knowledge exists regarding its structure and intent.

ANF's Affiliation with Al-Qaeda

ANF's affiliation with AQ remains strong despite calls from within the organization and other opposition armed groups for ANF to disassociate itself from

Zawahiri's transnational network. At this time, ANF policies are heavily influenced, if not totally guided and controlled, by AQ's top commands, or as Jawlani has often put it, "directions."[62] ANF's strategy of winning the hearts and minds of the local population follows al-Zawahri's guidelines directly.[63] AQ-ANF relationship is maintained through senior members within ANF deployed by the former.[64] Although ANF was established by ISI, AQ strongly supported ANF following the schism with ISIS, further strengthening the two organizations' relationship. ANF's affiliation with AQ is beneficial for the former, not least as it grants ANF access to international funds from AQ sympathizers and access to AQ's experts, trainers, and other assets. Finally, the presence of veteran AQ operatives with deep AQ ties further strengthens ANF-AQ relations on the individual level, making it even more difficult to imagine ANF ever breaking from AQ.

ANF Relations With Other Opposition Armed Groups

ANF's relationships with other armed groups vary from one area to another. The extent to which ANF cooperates with other groups depends on local conditions. ANF tries to maintain minimum criteria for cooperation with armed groups, the most important of which is that partners must enjoy a good reputation while not displaying overt hostility to ANF or publicly renouncing its objectives in Syria. The next section will explore ANF's relationship with AAS, one of ANF's most effective partners—and competitors—in Syria, as well as FSA-affiliated groups and other radical jihadi armed groups.

Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya

Although ANF and AAS cooperate closely, their relationship is more complex and tense than might initially be apparent. Militarily, AAS and ANF are close allies. Their alliance in Idlib Province in May 2015 under the Jaysh al-Fatah umbrella yielded impressive victories, including the takeover of Idlib city and several important regime military installations. These were arguably the most important military gains by a rebel group since the fall of Raqqa in 2013. ANF and AAS have also cooperated closely in Dar'a and Homs governorates in the past. Nonetheless, ANF and AAS have many political differences and have been competing for dominance in areas of shared control. That has strained their relationship.

Further, deep religious differences often surface between the two groups, including on questions of governance, relations with foreign actors, and ANF's affiliation with AQ (see below).

In Idlib Province, ANF and AAS frequently clash with one another on issues of governance and influence, clashes that have at times resulted in direct military confrontation. One consequence of this "(un)friendly competition" is that AAS is now singularly saddled with the responsibility of checking ANF advances in the province. In January 2015, ANF killed a midlevel AAS *shari'* (religious authority) near Binnish city after an argument over the location of a particular ANF checkpoint.[65] The top AAS leader at the time, Abu Jabr al-Shaikh, later issued an aggressive statement threatening to confront ANF if the killers were not turned over to AAS.[66] While the two did not eventually come to blows, the incident underscores the tensions underlying their alliance.

Similarly, ANF and AAS compete for influence in the governance arena in other areas where they share control. After a joint venture by ANF and AAS yielded the founding of the Islamic Commission to Administer Liberated Areas in Idlib, both groups embarked on expanding their influence through their respective sharia courts around the province, in some cases clashing with one other.[67] In April 2015 in Salqin City, for example, AAS played a major role in forcing ANF to end its interference in the local council's daily operations.[68] More recently, AAS prevented ANF from taking over the Saraqeb City local council by force. "Ahrar have always checked Nusra," a local council member in Idlib Province said in an interview in April 2015. "Without Ahrar, ANF would have taken over everything [in the province]," he added.[69]

More fundamentally, ANF and AAS differ in their policies. AAS is willing to compromise with external actors. It will consider cooperation with the West to fight ISIS. It coordinates with secular groups. And it has some willingness to compromise on the outlook for Syria's future government. All of this conflicts with ANF's core objectives in Syria.[70] ANF, in return, sees AAS's actions as soft and unacceptably flexible, and, importantly, a betrayal of the Salafi-jihadi creed.[71] Despite these differences, both groups have been able to forestall full-fledged confrontation, largely due to the presence of a common enemy: the Syrian regime.

ANF's affiliation with AQ has long been a cause of tension with fellow Salafi-jihadi groups, namely AAS, and with FSA-affiliated groups. AAS has repeatedly called on ANF to disassociate itself from AQ, largely for practical reasons, suggesting that ANF's association with AQ is taking the Syrian revolution "down the wrong path."[72] The association with AQ is destructive, AAS argues, because of AQ's counter-productive hostility toward the West and the group's poor reputation

with the Syrian people.[73] Taking orders from a Pakistan-based leadership also appears to place AQ's interests over the driving principles of the revolution. However, ANF needs the material support and institutional knowledge it reaps from its AQ connection and is unlikely to bow to pressure to disassociate.

Although this conflict between ANF and AAS runs deep, internal conflict within AAS has thus far prevented the latter from truly checking ANF's expansion in Northern Syria. Hard-liners within AAS—mainly members of the shura council—seek to further strengthen relations and cooperation with ANF. On the other hand, more "moderate" members in AAS—often those in its political offices, such as Labib al-Nahhas and Abu 'Azzam al-Ansari—call for stronger relations with Free Syrian Army factions. This division, at least at this time, plays an important role in limiting AAS's ability to check to ANF's expansion in northern Syria.

FSA-affiliated Armed Groups

ANF's relations with secular FSA-affiliated groups differ markedly from one group to another. In some areas, such as in Homs Province's northern countryside, ANF cooperates with FSA-affiliated groups—especially those with paltry military capabilities that thus pose no long-term threat to ANF.[74] In the north, ANF often allows FSA-affiliated groups to fight on the same fronts, although it does not publicize coordination or cooperation with these groups. Nonetheless, ANF perceives any secular project as a threat to its objectives in Syria. Thus, it maintains only a basic level of cooperation with FSA groups, and eliminates them wherever those groups do not have powerful backers. The evidence for this trend is overwhelming, with several cases of the ANF taking over both powerful and weak FSA-affiliated armed groups when possible, including Division 30, Hazim, Haq Front, Suqoor al-Ghab, Syria Revolutionary Front, Division 13, and several other FSA-affiliated groups.

Other Salafi-Jihadi Groups

On the other hand, ANF maintains close ties with radical armed groups, especially those staffed by AQ veterans. Groups such as Ansar al-Din, Jund al-Aqsa, and Ajnad al-Sham are often included in ANF's military coalitions, though some are more closely allied than others. The closest ANF ally is Jund al-Aqsa, which was formed by Abu 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Qatari, an AQ veteran who briefly left ANF's

side after the latter group's split with ISIS.[75] Jund al-Aqsa remained neutral in the conflict between ISIS and ANF, and called for reconciliation between the two groups.[76] A significant number of foreign fighters who opposed the conflict with ISIS later joined Jund al-Aqsa.[77] As a result, Jund al-Aqsa has one of the largest foreign fighter populations of any group, by some estimates surpassing 40 percent.[78]

Interestingly, Jund al-Aqsa has also exhibited some pro-ISIS tendencies: in 2015, Jund organized a funeral ceremony for a diseased ISIS commander in Idlib Province.[79] "They almost joined ISIS last year," an activist with close ties to ANF said in an interview. "It took a lot of convincing by Nusra to keep Jund [al-Aqsa] from joining ISIS," he added. Other sources claimed that the relationship between Jund and ISIS is closer. More recently, 40 Jund al-Aqsa fighters reportedly defected to ISIS.[80] Thus far, Jund al-Aqasa has been forced—not either by circumstances or ANF—to take sides in the ANF-ISIL conflict. This is probably because it lacks direct frontlines with ISIS. If Jund eventually decides to join ISIS, it will be a major blow to ANF—and a major achievement for ISIS—in the heart of its stronghold. Nonetheless, the probability of Jund joining ISIS in the foreseeable future remains unlikely at this time.

ANF also maintains good working relationships with other jihadi groups such as Ajnad al-Sham, Jaysh al-Muhajireen, and Ansar al-Din. Despite their similar ideologies, long- and short-term objectives, and relationships with AQ, these groups have resisted merging into ANF. "Being separate groups gives Nusra and its allies more political power and sway when dealing with other groups," an activist said in a recent interview.[81] The activist explained that remaining nominally separate entities is politically advantageous as in many cases each distinct group is given its own representative in decision-making bodies. This is the case in the Saraqeb city *shura* council, for example, where ANF and Jund al-Aqsa are both allowed one vote, making them a more powerful voting bloc.[82]

Factions and Leadership

According to interviewees, and open and closed source reporting, there are roughly three "types" of ANF members: hardliners, centrists, and moderates, the latter also known as "doves" (*hamaim*). At this time, the hardliners are on the ascendancy, calling for more aggressive policies with respect to other armed groups, namely FSA-affiliated groups and AAS.[83] Hardliners also routinely condemn AAS's willingness to compromise and their acceptance of "modern concepts," such as human rights and the international state system. Although the hardliners

seem to be winning ideological battles within ANF, such as maintaining its relationship with AQ, they have failed to completely dominate ANF's discourse or policymaking. While they are often accused of being close to ISIS, there is little hard evidence to prove that the group's hardliners are any more sympathetic to the rival group. The centrists, who are also referred to as the pragmatists, are closer to the hardliners and AQ than the more lenient faction (the "doves"). Chief among them is ANF's top leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, and Abu 'Abdullah al-Shami, the ANF's chief spokesman. Instead of confronting AAS on its political views and objectives, ANF's centrists attempt to mitigate the conflict or at least delay the confrontation with allies until conditions demand it.

On the organization's left, the moderates, or "doves," advocate more cooperation with groups such as AAS and full integration into the Syrian revolutionary forces. Among the most vocal champions of this faction are Abu Maria al-Qahtani and Saleh al-Hamawi, both of whom have been effectively side-lined from ANF for their leniency.[84] The doves remain the weakest faction among the three and are unlikely to have significant impact on the ANF's strategy or outlook going forward, though their presence within the group persists.

Messaging

Although ANF does not have as complex a media production capability as ISIS, it has thus far succeeded in shaping the local perception of its goals in Syria.[85] ANF messaging focuses mainly on presenting itself as a force that serves the Syrian people by fighting the regime, while touting its "true" Islamic credentials. It attempts to differentiate those credentials from ISIS's more radical methods. This message has remained consistent in its media productions, which mainly report on military gains against the regime and some service provision. "ANF is trying to present itself as an alternative to both ISIS and the regime," said one activist from Idlib in an interview.[86] Most ANF messaging appears to follow from AQ's strategy to win the hearts and minds of local populations using a less intrusive approach.

The group's narrative holds that as ANF first emerged from among the smattering of rebel groups, it understood the fight in terms of the duty to "aid oppressed Muslims." This is both established jihadist rhetoric and a reflection of popular sentiment across the Arab and Muslim world. Echoing this, ANF's founding statement—released as an audio recording—announced that: "The time of subduing Muslims has ended and gone...The strength of the Islamic *umma* (nation) has

regained its will and determination to defend itself against tyrants and oppressors and to defend its wealth, honour, and the chastity and lives of the faithful."

From ANF's rhetoric, however, it is clear that the group conceptualizes *nusra* differently from ISIS, thereby employing it and justifying it in different ways. In ANF's understanding of the term, *nusra* is meant to gradually convince the population of the merits of al-Qaeda's approach, leading to a more "natural" and non-coercive Islamization of society and of the conflict. The goal, according to top ANF religious official Sami al-'Uraydi, is to reach the state of *Jihad al-Umma,* or "Jihad of the Nation" in which all Muslims sincerely participate of their own accord. This goal and modus operandi stands in contrast to Jihad al-Nukhba, "The Elite's Jihad" in ANF and al-Qaeda's terminology, in which a smaller group of ultra-committed jihadis wage war and treat the population according to uncompromising Salafi-jihadi standards. According to ANF and its supporters, this approach risks alienating populations whose support is needed for the Salafi-jihadi project to succeed and should therefore be avoided.

As such, *nusra*, in ANF's discourse, must directly contribute to this gradual process of Islamization. To do so, the group must speak to the population in terms that it is more willing to accept, while introducing Salafi-jihadi concepts that the population is expected to eventually internalize. In ANF's rhetoric, therefore, references to the "Syrian revolution" are common, while they are absent from ISIS releases.[87] In its statements, ANF is adamant that its only purpose is to "lift oppression from Muslims" while adding that it seeks to enable "the implementation the law of the Lord." This understanding of the function of *nusra* underpins the group's adaptability to local sensitivities. Finally, this narrative technique is also found in ANF's messaging about the moderate armed groups it has attacked and destroyed. It refrained from using the term "apostates," a controversial and religiously-loaded term. Instead ANF frequently described the groups as corruptors and criminals, echoing language used consistently by all factions throughout the revolution to describe enemies such as the regime and its allied militias.

Conclusion

THERE ARE NO AMBIGUITIES IN ANF'S LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA: IT SEEKS to establish what it regards as an Islamic political system that adheres to a strict Salafi interpretation of Islam and is ultimately under the control of ANF itself. The group understands that it cannot achieve these objectives without the pop-

ulation's support, or without cooperating with other opposition armed groups, at least temporally. Its Syria-only approach, its pragmatic policies toward local actors, and its work with strong opposition armed groups have—for the time-being—allowed the AQ affiliate to achieve its medium-term objective: the establishment of a strong political and military presence, the consolidation of its relations with like-minded armed groups, and the acquisition of popular support. ANF's long-term objective—an Islamic emirate dominated, if not ruled, by ANF in Syria—is certain to be a more difficult and bloody endeavour.

NOTES

1. "Is Jabhat al-Nosra Breaking Apart?" Aron Lund, Syrian Comment, May 22, 2015 http://goo.gl/SF0gtX.
2. "Today's meeting with Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani: Al-Nusra and the Future of Syria," Al-Jazeera Arabic, December 19 2013, https://goo.gl/jHgJIN.
3. Ibid.
4. ANF did not declare its affiliation with ISI, nor its relationship with AQ. Rather, it operated with complete secrecy. The secrecy was likely by AQ's orders: Zawahiri chastised Jawlani after the latter public announcement of his affiliation with AQ in 2013.
5. "Most Notable Bombings in Damascus Since 2011," al Jazeera July 18, 2012, http://goo.gl/y5JA6q.
6. The information presented here is based on over a dozen of interviews with local activists, FSA fighters, and local council members throughout late 2014 and 2015.
7. Several protests around Syria broke following the U.S. designation of ANF as a terrorist Organization in support for ANF, using hashtag "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra," https://goo.gl/OeQjUiw.
8. Interview with ANF leader in Aleppo, Al Jazeera http://goo.gl/DyxOs6.
9. "Jabhat al Nusra for the People of the Levant: From Establishment to Division," The Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies, p14, November 2013, https://goo.gl/aZGDca.
10. Baghdadi's Announcement to dissolve ANF and the creation of ISIL, April 9, 2013, https://goo.gl/r5WwMO.
11. "A Speech from the Conqueror, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, Jabhat al-Nusra Amir and His Bay'a to Zawahiri," al-Manara al-Bayda, April 10, 2013, https://goo.gl/YORT2x.
12. "Al-Nusra Respond to Kurasani's Initiative to Reconcile with the [Islamic] State," ARA News, October 2014, http://goo.gl/F8IgGE.

13. "An Important Message From Abu Qutada to the Brothers in the [Islamic] State," Al-Malahem Walfitan, November, 2013, http://goo.gl/RhSgjH.

14. "Zawahiri's Message to al-Baghdadi and al-Jawlani," https://goo.gl/1sUOF2.

15. "Will the 'Eastern' Battles be the Point of no Return Between the 'Islamic State' and 'al-Nusra?'" France24, April 4, 2014, http://goo.gl/aZEpzO.

16. Zawahiri's letter to Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi, 2005 https://goo.gl/kbb8jl.

17. Ibid.

18. Zarqawi's "Testimony to Prevent Bloodshed Among the Mujahedeen in the Levant," Al-Sahab Media Production, May 2014, https://goo.gl/28bzkG.

19. Ibid.

20. Zawahri ordered ISIS's to remain an Iraq-only organization and cease their expansion into Syria, which Baghdadi saw as a direct threat to his authority and interest. For more, read Zawahri's statement here: http://justpaste.it/gq9b.

21. "Between Daesh's Caliphate and Nusra's Emirate: Defections and the Balance of Interests," al-Aan TV, August 4, 2014, http://goo.gl/bdR1Jr.

22. "Jabhat al Nusra Retreats from its Positions in Dayr al-Zwar After the Death of its Amir by Daesh," al-Aan TV, July 14, 2014 http://goo.gl/Mks6wq.

23. "Armed Groups in Jabhat al Nusra's Stronghold Give Allegiance to the Islamic State," RT Arabic, July 3, 2014, https://goo.gl/LRDJIq.

24. "Jabhat al-Nusra for the People of the Levant: From Establishment to Division," The Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies, p22, November 2013, https://goo.gl/aZGDca.

25. Al-Quds al-Arabi, May 18, 2013 http://goo.gl/02iw6m.

26. Without Borders: Abu Mohammed al Jawlani: Jabhat al-Nusra's Amir," Al-Jazeera, June 3, 2015, https://goo.gl/219wuH.

27. Ibid.

28. ANF religious leaders and political leaders have expressed their complete opposition to democracy and other political systems on several occasions.

29. When it was able to without major blowback, ANF purged major FSA-affilaited amred groups, including Hazm, The Syrian Revolutionary Front, Division 13, Division 30, among many other smaller groups in Idlib and Aleppo. Thus far, ANF has been successful in containing negative reaction by the local population and armed groups in regard to its aggression to FSA-affiliated armed groups.

30. "Stances on the Fruits of Jihad," Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, 1988, https://goo.gl/gtS1yq.

31. "Answers and Details in Response to Questions," Abi Malik al-Shami, http://goo.gl/Eq2xDU.

32. This section was quoted by al-Shami in his open letter, signifying al-Maqdisi's influence over the group.

33. While it does participate in joint governance in Idlib City with like-minded salafi–jihadi groups, it seeks to segregate responsibilities and areas it governs from other armed groups, even those who share their ideology.

34. Several conflicts between the two groups were reported during interviews with local activists and local council members over the past year, with Saraqeb being the most recent flashpoint between the two groups.

35. Interview with the author, October 7, 2015.

36. Abu Firas al-Suri "Ana al Nadeer al-Arian," http://goo.gl/Cq6cZJ.

37. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Future of Syria," Rawabet Center for Research and Strategic Studies, August 9, 2015, http://goo.gl/vC4d6L.

38. "Today's meeting with Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani: Al-Nusra and the Future of Syria," Al-Jazeera Arabic, December 19, 2013, https://goo.gl/jHgJIN.

39. "On the Jurisprudence of *Tamkin* in the Qur'an," Ali al-Salabi, 2009, http://goo.gl/FBQ6ri.

40. "Sunna" denotes an established practice of the prophet.

41. Interviews with several local council member in areas under ANF influence, including Saraqeb, Salqin, and Kafr Nubul.

42. Interviews conducted by the author with several activists and local councils' member in Idlib Province.

43. Interview with the author, May 2015.

44. "Shura Council Relieves the Local Council in Kafr Nubul in Idlib of Its Duties," Smart News, August 12, 2015.

45. Interview with the Author, October 2015.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. ARA News, March 7, 2015, http://goo.gl/ZpNtEq.

49. Several interviews with activists and local residents in Idlib Province in 2015 and 2016

50. "Al Nusra and the Islamic State in Qalamun: the Deferred Battle," by Mohammed Nimr, Al-Nahar, Jun 3, 2014, http://goo.gl/GaQg69.

51. Even though FSA-affiliated groups were not a party to the coalition, several FSA-groups, including ones that receive U.S.-supplied weapons, participated in the Idlib Campaign without getting credit for their participation.

52. The population-centric approach was mandated by AQ central in a letter to its affiliates.

53. A Syrian activist and former fighter confirmed to the author that ANF's efforts to conceal its foreign identity by appointing positions with higher level of contact with the local population to Syrian nationals and keeping its foreign fighters hidden from the public eye.

54. Many of ANF's top leadership positions in military, political and religious roles are occupied by non-Syrians.

55. Interview with the author.

56. "Jihadology Podcast: The Khurasan Group: Myth and Reality" October 7, 2015, turned http://goo.gl/MCXrVA.

57. The Khorasan Group (KG) does not appear to be a name ANF uses, but rather, was a name given by Western intelligence agencies. There is some indication that what these agencies call KG is termed internally as the "Wolf Unit" by ANF.

58. Khadija al-Rahhali "Hasri: watha'iq tazhar an majmou'a khorasan hiyya nafsuha majmou'a al-dhi'ib al-tab'ea lil-nusra" (Exclusive: documents show that the Khorasan Group is the same as Nusra's Wolf Unit). Al-Aan. October 1, 2014, http://goo.gl/2uQVsQ.

59. Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, Twitter, November 30, 2014, https://goo.gl/nK790P.

60. Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, Twitter, November 30, 2014, https://goo.gl/da0q8O.

61. "Nusra Spokesman: Reports of Islamic State Alliance 'Not True.' Syria Direct, November 17, 2014, http://goo.gl/lqba8e.

62. Without Borders: Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani: Jabhat al Nusra's Amir," Al-Jazeera, June 3, 2015, https://goo.gl/219wuH.

63. Zawahiri's letter to Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi, 2005, https://goo.gl/kbb8jl.

64. The presence of senior AQ members within ANF has been documented on several occasions, including the death of senior AQ operatives during recent ANF military operations in Idlib Province.

65. "Nusra Kills an Ahrar Shar'i Judge," al-Arabi al-Jadeed, January 31, 2015, http://goo.gl/0xFo2L.

66. "Ahrar al Sham Demands Nusra Dealt with through Qasas following the Death of one of its Judges," Hara FM, January 31, 2015, http://goo.gl/cYKlO5.

67. Conflict between Jihadi Movements, Ahrar al Sham and Jabhat al Nusra Causes more to Give Allegiance to the Islamic State," Al-Quds al-Arabi, October 21, 2014, http://goo.gl/0xFo2L.

68. Interview with the author, April 2015.

69. Interview with the Author, November 20, 2015.

70. "The Deadly Consequences of Misleading Syria's Revolutionaries," Labib al-Nahhas, July 10, 2015, https://goo.gl/K4CSMM.

71. Not all factions within ANF see it this way. What have been dubbed the "doves" or "*hamaim*" are less critical of AAS's leniency and adaptability. Both hardliners (such as Abu Firas al-Suri) and doves have been marginalized and even purged by the more centrist faction—AQ central adherents.

72. "Are Syrian Islamists moving to counterbalance Al-Qaeda? Will it last?" by Charles Lister, The Brookings Institute, March 23, 2015, http://goo.gl/pYHgX5.

73. "Ahrar Leader Criticizes Nusra's Affiliation with al-Qaeda and Attacks Daesh," All4Syria, March 19, 2015, http://goo.gl/zdjKzu.

74. "New Opposition Front In Homs," al-Arabi al-Jadeed, May 6, 2015, http://goo.gl/9OCNTp.

75. "Why Did Jund Al-Aqsa Join Nusra Front in Taking Out 'Moderate' Rebels in Idlib?" by Tam Hussein, the Huffington Post, June 1, 2015, http://goo.gl/6a2bz9.

76. Ibid.

77. Interview with the author, October 3, 2015.

78. "A report from inside a battalion of European Jihadists in Syria," Nieuwsuur, October 11, 2014, https://goo.gl/DELH2m.

79. "Attacks Against Jund al-Aqsa Following Qasoom's Assassination and Accusations of [Being Daesh's Affiliate]," Arabi 21, June 2015, http://goo.gl/aGrMRp; also see ARA News report on Jund's funeral ceremony for an ISIS commander in Idlib Province, http://goo.gl/KNju4Y.

80. "Around 40 Fighters From Jund al-Aqsa join Daesh," SOHR, August 2015, http://goo.gl/3dHleZ/.

81. Interview with the author, October 7, 2015.

82. Although this is true in Saraqeb, with ANF and JA receiving one seat each in the Shura Council, in many other instances division of governance and war spoils depend solely on the number of fighters and equipment each armed groups contributed to a given military operation, as was the case in Idlib city.

83. The latest public display of hardliners opinions within ANF was Abu Firas al-Suri, in which he condemned ANF members for advocating for the disassociation with AQ as well as AAS's policies.

84. "The Case of Firing Saleh al-Hamawai From Jabhat al Nusra," Eldorar, July 2015, http://goo.gl/JWKjhP.

85. Its production capabilities, already much inferior to ISIL's, recently took a hit when a production studio was raided and shut down in Saudi Arabia.

86. Interview with the author, October 7, 2015.

87. Jawlani refers to the unrest in Syria in most of his speeches and interviews as the "blessed revolution."

Prospects for the Islamic State in Pakistan

By Farhan Zahid and Muhammad Ismail Khan

THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SHAM'S (ISIS) BRUTAL RULE AND terrorist atrocities have understandably attracted the world's attention to its actions in the core Middle East states, Libya and the Maghreb, and in Europe. But ISIS is not only moving westward. What has not received adequate attention is its push eastward, particularly into pivotal Pakistan.

The goal of pushing tentacles in multiple directions is to establish ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's vision of a global caliphate, with him as caliph. In 2014, al-Baghdadi proclaimed that "once the caliph and his fighters arrive in a particular area, the legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations" is nullified.[1] In contrast to ISIS, other jihadist groups largely focus on local, more parochial conflicts with their immediate rulers.

The focus of this paper is ISIS's prospects in Pakistan. Some jihadists there endorse al-Badghadi the person, while others support him because of common hatreds. Supporters include urban men and women packing up for Syria to participate in the civil war and live under the caliphate, as well as militants seeking ways to act on their Sunni extremist or anti-Shia agenda in Pakistan. Still other

ISIS sympathizers haven't overtly declared their allegiance to the caliphate, as if waiting to see how the splintered jihad movement in Pakistan evolves.

Meanwhile, after refusing to acknowledge the presence of ISIS in the country for months, Pakistani authorities have finally started to concede the group's existence.[2] Only recently did the authorities uncover ISIS cells in Karachi[3] and Punjab.[4] Given the presence of numerous violent Islamist groups in different parts of the country, ISIS may discover more opportunities to expand into Pakistan.

On the Trail of ISIS

THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND THE JIHADIST MOVEMENT THAT GAVE rise to ISIS are longstanding. Pakistan was a base for the group's founding member, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, during key junctures in his militant career. Zarqawi took up arms in Pakistan during the Afghan War from 1979–1989. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, he established his training camp in Herat.[5] ISIS's ideological father, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, visited Pakistan in the 1980s as well before moving to Jordan in the early 1990s.[6]

Before 9/11, Zarqawi's intensely anti-Shia views prevented him from developing much of a rapport with Osama bin Laden.[7] As early as 1999, a meeting between Zarqawi and Bin Laden did not go well.[8] Zarqawi's "hatred of Shiites also seemed to bin Laden to be potentially divisive."[9] Indeed, Zarqawi helped fuel deepening sectarianism, even by the standards of the Al-Qaeda (AQ) movement, which to this day has caused rifts in the jihadist movement.

After 9/11, Zarqawi left Afghanistan for Iraq. After America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, he fought against U.S. forces. Zarqawi had already established his own Islamist group, Jamaat ul Tawheed wal Jihad, which attracted young Islamists to fight American forces in the Sunni regions of Iraq. Zarqawi's group was one of the most active and ruthless in the ensuing insurgency, in which 4,488 U.S. soldiers died. In a letter Zarqawi wrote to bin Laden in 2004, he conditioned his alliance with the AQ on a plan to attack Shias in Iraq.[10]

That same year Zarqawi rechristened his group as "Al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers," also known as Al-Qaeda in Iraq. But the leadership of AQ had doubts. In 2005, AQ Deputy al-Zawahiri wrote to Zarqawi about his "attacks on Shia," saying that in Zawahiri's opinion, this "matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it."[11] (To be sure, some deadly attacks on Shia in Iraq were conducted before 2004, and AQ itself had sectarian blood on

its hands). Along with his wife, Zarqawi was finally killed in a daisy-cutter strike in a suburb of Baghdad in 2006.

Militants in FATA: The Bandwagon Effect?

EVER SINCE ISIS PROCLAIMED THE CALIPHATE IN JUNE 2014, IT HAS BEEN TRYING to attract Pakistani jihadi groups. One group that analysts anxiously watch is the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). TTP is not a centralized militant group, but instead comprises a network of more than 42 smaller groups. Since its genesis in 2007, it has claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks across the country, including on schools, anti-polio workers, political leaders, military officials, and others. Some of these attacks did not bear the direct fingerprints of the TTP but instead were the handiwork of local militant groups. Nevertheless, the TTP claimed responsibility, and it used this to try to appeal to other anti-Pakistan militants and rally them to join a common struggle. In fact, the TTP was never a monolithic group, yet it acted as one because of its strong appeal to other local militant leaders and groups.

Initially, TTP's Fazalullah faction, led by Mullah Fazalullah, tilted toward ISIS. In a 2014 statement addressing ISIS, TTP's spokesperson said:

> Oh our brothers, we are proud of you in your victories. We are with you in your happiness and your sorrow. In these troubled days, we call for your patience and stability, especially now that all your enemies are united against you. Please put all your rivalries behind you... All Muslims in the world have great expectations of you ... We are with you, we will provide you with Mujahideen [fighters] and with every possible support.[12]

To put things into context, the TTP's brand name started suffering during 2014. The group began to splinter after the death of its head, Hakeemullah Mehsud, in a U.S. drone strike in December 2014. Earlier, the group was losing its appeal because of indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Pakistan, and it needed to reinvigorate itself. There was also considerable discord inside the group on whether or not to negotiate with the Pakistani government. Consequently, militants had starting leaving the TTP framework and subsequently formed splinter groups.[13]

Then, when ISIS had announced the formation of the caliphate, many TTP militants jumped on what they saw as a new bandwagon.

It was at that time that the TTP's spokesman, the chiefs of Orakzai, Khyber, and Kurram tribal agencies, and the Peshawar and Hangu districts pledged unconditional allegiance to the caliph al-Baghdadi.[14] As a result, they defected from the main TTP. (Several of these figures, along with other ISIS commanders, would later be killed in a drone strike in Nangarhar, Afghanistan).[15, 16] The TTP spokesperson who joined ISIS said:

> I declare allegiance to the Caliph of Muslims, Amirul Momineen Abu Bakar al Baghdadi al Qarshi al Hussaini. I will listen and follow his every instruction whatever the situation may have been. This allegiance is neither from the TTP or its leader Ma ulvi Fazlullah. This is only from me and five leaders ... I appeal to the Ameerul Momineen to accept my allegiance.[17]

With this, some TTP commanders defected and pledged allegiance to ISIS, officially becoming part of ISIS in Pakistan. ISIS now considers Pakistan as part of what it calls the "Khurassan Waliyat," a broad region that includes Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia. At the same time, some TTP commanders kept a distance from ISIS. One such set of people belongs to Jamaat al-Ahrar (JA), a splinter of the TTP. Led by Omar Khalid Khurasani, a former TTP commander,[18] JA issued a reconciliatory statement toward ISIS without formally pledging allegiance to the caliphate, saying, "We respect them. They are our Mujahideen brothers. If they ask us for help, we will look into it and decide."[19] Ultimately, internal militant dynamics and JA's own split with TTP led JA to endorse Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar. That divergence may have been inevitable given the bad blood between JA and TTP, which had endorsed al-Baghdadi.

The Urban Characteristics

DESPITE THE SUPPORT FOR ISIS AMONG SOME TRIBAL LEADERS, IT HAS BEEN IN Pakistan's more settled areas where the impact of the caliphate has been most strongly felt. The first group to pledge allegiance to ISIS just after the announcement of the caliphate's creation was Karachi-based Tehreek-e-Khilfat Pakistan (TKP). "From today," the group's spokesman said, "Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

shall consider Tehreek-e-Khilafat and Jihad mujahideen fighters of Pakistan as one of the arrows among his arrows, which he has kept for his bow."[20] Little is known about TKP, other than it has a small network in metropolitan Karachi, it perpetrated one terror attack in Karachi, and it had once been part of TTP.

In late 2014, another urban group in Pakistan, Jundullah, met with an ISIS delegation and then pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi. "They [Islamic State] are our brothers, whatever plan they have, we will support them," the spokesman said.[21] The founding members of Jundullah were mostly from the Pakistani Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami, whose members, like many Jundullah members today, hail from educated and middle class backgrounds.[22]

These social characteristics—urban, degree-holders, middle class—are what increasingly define the individuals who are, on their own, pledging loyalty to ISIS. Lately, ISIS's growth in Iraq, Syria, and Libya inspired many young men and women in Pakistan to travel to Syria to join ISIS, to pledge allegiance to Caliph al-Baghdadi, or to form small cells to conduct terrorist attacks in Pakistan. Strikingly, ISIS recruitment appears to be high in Pakistan's well-off Punjab province as well as Karachi. ISIS literature widely available online has been effective in luring educated and affluent people into the fold, as evidenced by the propaganda recovered from the ISIS cells that have been thwarted in Karachi, Islamabad, and Sialkot. This stands in contrast to militant groups mentioned above, such as TTP, who operate in tribal areas where Internet penetration is low.

Aiming for Pakistani Militant Leadership

AS A RESULT OF ISIS'S INROADS IN PAKISTAN, THE COUNTRY HAS QUICKLY BECOME an important front in the battle between ISIS and AQ for leadership of the global jihadi movement. As ISIS strives to establish itself in the Pakistani militant scene, its competition with AQ for "market share" is increasingly becoming a zero-sum competition—as, indeed, the shifting allegiances within Jundullah and TKP show. In fact, since the war in Syria erupted, many AQ fighters (most of whom were Arabs) have left Pakistan for the Middle East and joined ISIS. To them, joining the caliphate was a homecoming, and they might have found the Middle East more conducive to waging jihad than in Pakistan, where AQ has increasingly come under drone attacks.

Like ISIS, AQ has deep roots in Pakistan. Pakistan's militant networks have long provided a safe haven for AQ. Osama bin Laden was killed there, and the core leadership of the AQ-central, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, is thought to be there. Yet ISIS uses its former status as a chapter of AQ to claim that is the true heir of the original AQ and the true leader of global jihad.[23, 24] Analysts do not dismiss the possibility that the two groups could join hands in the future to combine against a joint enemy. For now, however, the two groups are what terrorism analyst Michael Ryan has described as "tactical twins and strategic enemies."[25]

AQ's core leadership in South Asia has not endorsed ISIS's call for a caliphate. Indeed, in 2014 al-Zawahiri renewed his allegiance oath to the Afghan Taliban's head Mullah Omar as the caliph.[26] Moreover, AQ announced its own ambitions on the Asian subcontinent with the formation of Al-Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). In al-Zawahiri's video message announcing AQIS, he described it in the following words:

> This entity was not established today, but it is the fruit of a blessed effort for more than two years to gather the mujahideen in the Indian subcontinent into a single entity to be with the main group, Qaedat al-Jihad, from the soldiers of the Islamic Emirate and its triumphant emir, Allah permitting, Emir of the Believers Mullah Muhammad Omar Mujahid.[27]

This group has been able to launch some high-profile, albeit unsuccessful, attacks in Pakistan, including the attempted hijacking of a Pakistan Navy ship.[28] Al-Zawahiri seems determined to reinvigorate AQ and reverse its shrinking prestige in the era of ISIS, which since its rise has received the majority of international attention.

AQ has for years cultivated ties with Islamist militant groups throughout Pakistan. It formed a "nexus" with other militant groups such as Pakistani Taliban and local sectarian outfits.[29] According to several analysts, while Pakistani Taliban provided the space or support in the tribal areas, AQ contributed the training and finances,[30] and sectarian outfits supplied personnel. AQ, for instance, taught suicide bombing to Pakistani militants. AQ would not want those groups to fall into ISIS's orbit.

Following the ouster of the Taliban from Afghanistan, several AQ militants and their Pakistani or foreign allies who waged fights in South Asia set their sights on the Indian subcontinent as the core focus of their jihadist struggle.[31] The most evident example of this was the formation of AQIS in September 2014.[32]

Al-Zawahiri now seems determined to expand from Pakistan into India and to drag Indian Muslims into Al-Qaeda's fold. The AQIS chief made Asim Umar, a veteran jihadi of Indian origin, the Emir of AQ's new chapter and tried to stoke the fires. He asked:

> "Why is it that the Muslims of India are totally absent from the fields of jihad?"[33]

> "Rise! Awaken! Participate in this global jihad to give a final push to the collapsing edifice of America."[34, 35]

The intensifying competition for jihadists' hearts and minds between AQ and ISIS is forcing potential recruits to choose, and it is also one factor that is driving jihadist groups to expand. While both AQ and ISIS have global ambitions, they are practically constrained by where they are located. As of now, AQ's core is still mainly in Pakistan, while ISIS's core is in the Middle East. ISIS's focus on the Middle East, as opposed to South Asia, is not lost on even those Pakistani militants who have joined the movement. The spokesman for the TKP, which joined ISIS, has said he hopes for the "expansion of Islamic State boundaries toward the subcontinent and Khurasan region."[36] Even though the allegiance of small groups such as the TKP to ISIS may not detract much from Al-Qaeda in the near term, it does represent a developing trend among Pakistan-based jihadi groups that could benefit ISIS on the subcontinent over time.

Shared Ideology

BECAUSE ISIS HAS EMERGED OUT OF THE MILITANT SALAFI SCHOOL OF THOUGHT, the growth of that school in Pakistan is likely partly responsible for the rise of ISIS there. A way to gauge that growth would be the proliferation of madrassas and other platforms espousing Salafi thought.[37] This is not to say that the rise of ISIS has been caused directly by activity in those madrassas. But these institutions do propagate thinking and principles that militant groups such as ISIS can later exploit.

One reason Pakistan may be a fertile growth area for the ISIS caliphate is the rise of a similar school of thought, Ahl-e-Hadith.[38] There has been more than a one hundred percent increase in Ahl-e-Hadith madrassas in Pakistan since the 1980s.[39] In Pakistan, the top militant group adhering to the Ahl-e-Hadith school

of thought is Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), the notorious anti-India group that was responsible for the Mumbai attacks in 2008.[40] While Ahl-e-Hadith is not theologically identical to Salafi Islam, the two movements share a lot of common ground.

Moreover, many Pakistanis who were guest workers in Arab Gulf countries adopted the Salafi brand of Islam, which is prevalent there. Take, for example, the family of Tashfeen Malik, one of the San Bernardino shooters. According to sources in Pakistan, where she studied, Malik's family grew closer to hardline Islam during their time in Saudi Arabia, making her easy bait for ISIS.[41] Obviously, not all Salafi Muslims adhere to ISIS's agenda (Saudi Arabia has joined in the fight against ISIS), but Salafist ideology has clearly been a factor in recruitment and radicalization.

While ISIS may thus find sympathizers in Pakistan, shared ideology will not necessarily lead to collaboration between Pakistani militant groups and the caliphate. During the Afghan war in the 1980s, LeT maintained good relations with AQ on the basis of a common outlook and an anti-India and anti-Western agenda. After the death of Osama bin Laden, LeT's leader led public prayers for him. Despite this, there are clear differences between the two groups over tactics and goals. While al-Qaeda has attacked Pakistan, LeT has not hitherto used violence in Pakistan. Some splinter groups have perpetrated acts of terrorism, but overall LeT high command and its base has so far been focused on inflicting terrorist attacks in India. Moreover, Bin Laden, according to documents captured from his compound, was wary of relations with LeT because of the latter's close ties with the Pakistani security apparatus.[42] The same could be a dividing point in the ISIS-LeT relations. Even now, the Pakistani state's response toward the two seems different. While the Pakistani security services have been blamed for ignoring or even supporting the LeT, the government in Islamabad has vowed not to allow the "shadow of Daesh" in Pakistan.[43] Thus, it is difficult to say if the LeT will join hands with ISIS or not.

Still, just as AQ fighters have slipped into ISIS, LeT members have also become involved with ISIS. The ISIS cell that Pakistani officials uncovered in late December 2015 in Punjab included former workers of Jamaat-ud-Dawa, which the U.S. Treasury Department considers a charity front for LeT. In the future, it is possible that LeT's relations with the Pakistani security apparatus could deteriorate and the group could go its own way. If this trend continues, it may even force LeT members to revisit their stance on whether or not to conduct terrorism inside Pakistan. If the past is any prologue, then the government's public action against ISIS-inspired LeT members may even galvanize additional LeT members to fight against the Pakistani state, including by joining a globally prominent and

ideologically like-minded organization such as ISIS. (As one example of this dynamic, a great number of militant Deobandi outfits rallied to form Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in December 2007 after the military crackdown on the Red Mosque in July of that year.)[44]

Shared Hatreds

ISIS HAS ALSO FOUND SUPPORT IN PAKISTAN BECAUSE IT SHARES A VIRULENT HATRED of Shia with several Pakistani militant groups. The proscribed sectarian terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), for example, distributed pamphlets in 2011, saying:

> All Shias are worthy of killing. We will rid Pakistan of [this] unclean people. Pakistan means land of the pure, and the Shias have no right to be here......We will make Pakistan their graveyard—their houses will be destroyed by bombs and suicide bombers.[45]

LeJ's leader, Malik Ishaq, who confessed in court to having killed dozens of Shia, was himself killed in an encounter after reports emerged that he might have joined ISIS.[46] Ishaq had been in police custody for more than 10 years and was charged in 100 cases of murder and terrorism.[47] Similar sectarian hatreds in Iraq and Syria have provided fertile ground for ISIS's resurgence there. In the future, the leading Sunni extremist outfits in Pakistan (including anti-Shia groups such as LeJ and anti-state insurgent groups such as the TTP) may also create fertile ground for ISIS's expansion in South Asia.

Since the early 1980s, Pakistan has been a playing field for violent sectarian groups, mostly anti-Shia and anti-Barelvi sects of Islam. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) data, since 1989 there have been 3,016 incidents of sectarian violence in Pakistan, mostly by militant Deobandi-Sunni outfits against Shias or Sunni-Barelvis, in which 5,227 people lost their lives and 9,903 received injuries.[48] Some of the hostilities in South Asia have been spillover from the ongoing "cold war" between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Sectarianism in Pakistan may provide an environment for ISIS to spread its tentacles. The decision of Jundullah to join ISIS may well have been because of ISIS's anti-Shia activities. Likewise, the deeply anti-Shia LeJ might also be ripe for joining ISIS. Despite having slight ideological differences with ISIS due to LeJ's

adherence to the Deobandi movement within Islam, both ISIS and LeJ may find common ground in their anti-Shia sectarianism.

The top anti-Pakistan militant group, TTP, is also a deeply sectarian outfit, with several of its top members responsible for killing Shia. Some of TTP's sub-groups based in different tribal agencies are headed by individuals who were once affiliated with the LeJ. For example, the now deceased founder of TTP's chapter responsible for the attack on school children in December 2014 in Peshawar and for another attack on a university in January 2016 was once an adherent of LeJ.[49]

In 2014, the government of western Balochistan province (which borders Iran) wrote to the federal government in Islamabad that ISIS has offered "some elements of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Ahl-e-Sunnat Wai Jamat (another extremist outfit) to join hands in Pakistan." They reportedly formed "a ten-member Strategic Planning Wing" that aimed to carry out attacks against law-enforcement agencies.[50] The LeJ was already responsible for some of the deadliest attacks against Shia Hazaras in Balochistan; in 2013, more than 100 people died in one such attack.[51]

There is a distinct likelihood that the nascent ISIS recruitment in Afghanistan and Pakistan is going to increase, especially by recruiting Sunnis in Shia-populated areas. The caliphate ISIS has established may eventually lure more experienced jihadis into its fold as well. Al-Qaeda and its ally TTP are currently holding little or no territory in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, ISIS claims to be the torch-bearer of global jihad and controls territory in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere (even though its actual holdings may, in fact, be shrinking.) This gives the ISIS brand considerable prestige in South Asia.

Prospects

ISIS'S PROSPECTS IN PAKISTAN DEPEND ON HOW ONE VIEWS THE GOALS OF ISIS. If the intent is to create a state, as it did in Iraq and Syria, then this is likely to be difficult for ISIS to do in Pakistan. For the last 13 years, Islamabad has responded harshly to those elements of the Islamist insurgency inside its borders that have directly threatened the Pakistani state. In some ways, what ISIS achieved in Iraq and Syria is similar to what the TTP achieved in parts of FATA, where there has been an administrative vacuum. For quite some time, the TTP had its emirate in North Waziristan. But this emirate was not allowed to show its flag in Pakistan's

heartland. Pakistan's government launched an operation in Swat, a quasi-tribal administration, after militants from there tried to expand their insurgency into settled areas. The government is unlikely to accept a similar effort by ISIS.

If ISIS focuses on less populated areas, it is bound to be met with American drones strikes. The U.S. generally targets foreign fighters, not the local TTP insurgents.[52] The drones have been able to cause more damage to AQ's leadership than any other available means, and ISIS would face the same risks. Moreover, the U.S. recently declared ISIS-K (Khurasan) a terrorist outfit, and several of ISIS-K's Pakistani leaders have been killed in drone attacks. Hafiz Saeed Khan Orakzai, a former Guantanamo detainee and the Emir of Khurasan Waliyat, was killed in a drone strike in Afghanistan. Shahidullah Shahid, the former spokesperson of TTP (Fazaullah group), lost his life alongside other recent joiners from the TTP in Afghanistan.

A third obstacle is the lack of leadership. ISIS has not been able to find charismatic leadership in South Asia to lure in fresh recruits. Without an able and experienced leadership, ISIS in Pakistan may not be able to take off and establish its rule over territory, as it did in the Middle East.

Finally, unlike in Syria-Iraq, ISIS may find it hard to inspire foreigners to fight in Pakistan. Many foreign militants have left Pakistan to escape belated military onslaught or to participate in battles in the Middle East.[53] This may prove to be a constraint if ISIS's plans for expansion require recruiting in Pakistan from the available pool of foreign Islamist insurgents.

While these obstacles are considerable, ISIS also has some openings in Pakistan that it can exploit. The focus now is on tribal areas as a likely theater for ISIS expansion, but the real threat may come from ISIS luring individuals to its ideology in urban areas. The group's penetration among educated individuals in urban areas around the globe cannot be denied. In addition, ISIS's anti-Shia ideology and tactics could be a powerful lure for jihadis in Pakistan. Recruiting among the anti-Shia LeJ and Ahl-e-Hadith LeT may be the best opportunities for ISIS to widen its Pakistani network, particularly in Punjab. In the end, while ISIS may find it hard to extend its control to Pakistan, it may be able to cobble together enough adherents—fighters and polemicists—to cause turmoil in Pakistan for years to come.

NOTES

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36. TFK spokesman.

37. The growth of Salafi Islam in Pakistan is on the rise. Amir Rana, an expert on radicalization in Pakistan, studied the Islamist parties and militant groups in Pakistan. He concluded that out of 237 Islamist groups, 20 adhere to Ahl-e-Hadith (local version of Salafi Islam). Out of these 20, 4 are political, 10 sectarian, 3 militant and 3 involved in proselytizing activities. For details please see Muhammad Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jehadi Organizations in Pakistan*, Mashal Books, Lahore, 2009.

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Qaradawi's View on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

By Nesya Rubinstein-Shemer

I N THE LAST ROUND OF TALKS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS IN Munich in 2014, an unusual discussion was held between Saib Arikat, the head of the Palestinian delegation, and Tzippi Livni, head of the Israeli delegation. Arikat offended Livni when he announced that his ancestors were Canaanites who lived in Jericho 3,000 years before the nation of Israel came to the city. The Israeli delegation was surprised and unprepared for this argument. Arikat argued that the Palestinians, with himself as their representative, are, in reality, the descendants of the Canaanites and therefore they have more rights to the land of Palestine than the Jews. Livni replied that Israel and the Palestinians shouldn't be asking which historical narrative is more accurate but should instead focus on how to build a future: "I do not look at a peace agreement in a romantic way. Zionism is not any less dangerous than naiveté. Israel wants peace because it is in its interest."[1]

Livni's reply reflects a common attitude of commentators and diplomats to religiously-based arguments regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They usually consider them as propaganda meant for domestic consumption. According to them, these arguments are not reflective of a practical political reality because in *realpolitik*, it is interests and not abstract ideas that win.

Yet Arikat is far from alone in suggesting that the roots of the conflict date back

millennia. Consider Musab Hasan Yusuf, the son of Sheikh Hasan Yusuf, one of Hamas' senior leaders in the West Bank. By virtue of his family, background, and education, Musab Hasan Yusuf won the trust of Hamas's upper echelons and took an active part in the first *intifada*. As a result of his revulsion at Hamas' brutal tactics, he became an Israeli secret service agent. Until he was exposed, he provided the Israeli Secret Service with information that prevented many terrorist attacks and saved hundreds of Israeli lives. Today, he lives as a Christian in the United States. Musab Hasan Yusuf begins his autobiography, *The Son of Hamas*, like this:

> Today, when I associate with Americans, I discover that most of them have a million questions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict but very few answers and even less accurate information. I hear questions like:
>
> "Why can't people in the Middle East get along with each other?"
>
> "Who is right, the Israelis or the Palestinians?"
>
> "To whom does the land of Israel really belong?"
>
> "Why doesn't Israel return the land that it captured in 1967?"
>
> "Why do the Palestinians hate Israel so much?" and
>
> "How can Israel protect itself from suicidal terrorists and missile attacks?"
>
> These are good questions. All of them. But none of them touches on the real subject, the root of the problems. The current conflict begins with the hatred between [Abraham's two wives] Sarah and Hagar, which is described in the book of Genesis.[2]

That Arikat and Yusuf, who are poles apart politically, both see ancient roots in today's conflict suggests those roots are a topic worth exploring. Hamas and Fatah see the roots of the conflict reaching back to Abraham's tent and to the hatred between his two wives, which ended with the banishment of Hagar and her son Ishmael. The contemporary Islamization of Palestinian society and the Palestinian struggle emphasizes the notion that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is just the

latest phase of a now ancient conflict between Judaism and Islam which was first expressed in the war between Muhammad and the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula. For example, at a public rally for Fatah—which is not a religious movement but rather a national independence movement—the head Mufti of the Palestinian Authority defined the war with Israel thusly:

> [As a] war of religion and faith, a war with the descendants of the apes and pigs [a nickname for the Jews according to the Quran], which will only end in the end of days when there will be a final battle between us and them, and then the Jews will hide behind the trees and the stones, which will open up their mouths and say to the Muslims, "O Muslim, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him."[3]

To illustrate how the religious-historical language in the Middle East is unlike the modern Western language of political-interests, this article will analyze the way Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the top religious personalities in the Sunni Muslim world and the religious leader of the Hamas movement, understands the religious sources of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Born in 1926, Qaradawi is a popular Egyptian-Qatari scholar with great influence. Many researchers have described him as the most influential Muslim jurist in our generation.[4] His popularity and his influence are mostly credited to his successful use of television and the Internet and the distribution of his books. His weekly program on *Al-Jazeera*, *al-Sharia wa-l-Hayyat* (*Islamic Law and Life*), draws 60 million viewers from around the world. In addition to condoning the use of suicide bombers and a struggle without concessions to free Palestine, Qaradawi is a supporter of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad morally and economically through many charitable donations that pass through his hands.[5]

In his many books, Qaradawi seeks to deal with the Jewish claim to Israel by rewriting various verses in the Bible as well as the Quran and by creating a new narrative aligned with his political agenda. Just as Zionism looks to the Bible as the source for its claim on the land of Israel, so, too, does Qaradawi return to the stories of Abraham as the theological source of the political struggle taking place today. According to him, the reason for the current struggle is the fact that Israel occupied Palestine, which is rightfully a part of the lands of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*).[6] But this struggle was expected as it is a part of the struggle that is supposed to take place between the Muslims and the Jews at the end of days. This is the reason, according to Qaradawi, that the Quran talks so much about the Jews. God wants

the Muslims to keep their character and nature so that when the time comes, they can overcome the Jews.[7]

Qaradawi's overall goal is political: he seeks to use religion to close off any argument which would support Jewish rights to the Holy Land and to provide religious justification for the destruction of Israel. He evidently hopes that the aggregate of all these arguments will make a convincing case for all sectors of Muslim, Arab and Palestinian opinion. The difficulty, for Qaradawi, is that his arguments are different in kind and they also frequently contradict one another. They also sometimes involve innovations with regard to the Quran and its standard interpretations as well as errors regarding the Biblical text and its standard meanings.

Ishmael and Isaac: Who is Abraham's Heir?

LIKE MUSAB HASAN YUSUF, QARADAWI ARGUES THAT THE CURRENT BATTLE BETWEEN Islam and Judaism has roots connected to the complicated relations between Hagar and Sarah. When the childless Sarah despaired of ever giving Abraham her own child, she gave Abraham her servant, Hagar, for a wife. Hagar bore him Ishmael. When Ishmael was thirteen years old, Sarah bore Isaac. That is when Sarah commanded Abraham to banish both Hagar and Ishmael. According to the Muslim version of the story, Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to the area of Mecca. Abraham missed his son very much and went to visit him. On one of these visits, Abraham and Ishmael established the Kaaba in Mecca as a house of prayer to the one God. Abraham was the first monotheist (*hanif*), and the Arabs are the descendants from the sons of Ishmael.[8]

In the book of Genesis (17:1–8) God promises the land to Abraham and his descendants: "God appeared to Abram and said to him….and I will give to you and your offspring after you the land of your sojourns." In Chapter 21:12 Abraham's descendants are defined as from Isaac alone: "Because from Isaac will be called my offspring."

Qaradawi asks: Why did the Jews limit Abraham's offspring to just Isaac? Did they forget Abraham's first born son Ishmael? Is it possible that Allah, the just judge, prefers only the Children of Isaac over the Children of Ishmael? Qaradawi explains that the Jews determined that Isaac would be Abraham's heir because

Ishmael was the son of a servant and Isaac was the son of the wife. In the Jewish religion, Qaradawi claims, the son of a servant is worth less than the son of a wife. Qaradawi rebuts this argument with a line of reasoning of his own. According to him, it is well-known that a person's lineage is determined according to the father and not according to the mother. He argues: Do not the children of the father inherit despite who their mothers were? Were not both Isaac and Ishmael prophets?[9]

It is important to note here that when determining relationships, there is a difference between the law today and the law in the days of the Bible. During the Biblical period, genealogical relationships were determined according to the father (as is the custom in Islam) since there was widespread inter-marriage at that time. Talmudic law altered the custom in the 5th century BCE when Ezra the scribe commanded that Jewishness be determined according to the mother. According to this updated law, any children born to a non-Jewish woman were not Jewish.[10] However, when Jewish scholars write about the Biblical period, they do so with the understanding that during that period, it was the Jewishness of the father that was determined the status of the child. Therefore, Qaradawi's argument, which asserts that Jews consider Ishmael to be "lesser" than Isaac due to the modern Jewish preference for matriarchal lineage, is problematic because it is based on a misunderstanding of how Jewish scholars treat Biblical relationships. Indeed, the Jewish tradition agrees that Ishmael and Isaac were equal by birth since they came from the same father. Thus Qaradawi's criticism of the Jewish discrimination against Ishmael is unfounded. In fact, the reason for Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion was due to God's command to Abraham following a conflict between Sarah and Hagar, not because of a discrepancy in status.[11]

Qaradawi continues his argument: Jacob had four wives, Rachel and Leah, who gave their servants Bilha and Zilpah to Jacob so that he could father more sons. Half of the Jewish nation is therefore descended from these servants. Despite this, they are an integral part of the Jewish nation and are not discriminated against.[12]

Also, when examining the rest of the books of the Bible, it is apparent that marriage to concubines was very popular among the Jewish people. For example, King David had 100 wives and 200 concubines.[13] His son Solomon had 300 wives and 700 concubines. There is no doubt that these concubines gave birth to children from David and Solomon and that these children are a part of the Jewish nation. Qaradawi asks: How do the Jews explain the serious discrimination between Ishmael, the son of the servant and the sons of the other servants mentioned in the Bible? He concludes that there is a Jewish double standard in regards to themselves and their relationships with others.[14]

Qaradawi's additional examples to this end do not strengthen his previous ar-

gument and, in fact, achieve the opposite. These examples clearly show that in the Biblical period, there no basis for discrimination against a Jewish individual in regards to the status of their mother. That is because during the Biblical period, a child's lineage is determined by the father. However, Qaradawi interprets this evidence to conclude that Ishmael's expulsion is proof of an ethical double standard, wherein only some children born of servants are considered to be part of the Jewish nation.

This argument is also tendentious. The difference in the Bible between the relationship of Hagar and Sarah and its attitude towards Bilha and Zilpah and their mistresses can be explained by the relationships that existed between Sarah and Hagar on one hand and the relationships among Jacob's wives on the other. Sarah, who was barren, wanted Abraham to have a child, which is why she was willing to give her servant, Hagar, to him as a wife. But Hagar, instead of being grateful for her new improved standing, began to degrade her mistress.[15] In other words, she did not accept Sarah's authority. Hagar's behavior is what ultimately led to her expulsion. On the other hand, Jacob's servants Bilha and Zilpah did not attempt to rebel against their mistresses and instead became an integral part of Jacob's family, which is why their children are considered to be part of the Jewish nation.

Ishmael, Abraham's Spiritual Heir

ACCORDING TO QARADAWI THERE IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR TOTAL JEWISH OWN-ership of the land. Indeed, the fact that Muslim Arabs occupied the land from the period of the Caliph Umar until today, a period of more than 1,400 years, suggests there is another meaning to Genesis (15:18), where God speaks to Abraham and says: "To you I will give this land." It is not Isaac's descendants that will inherit the land, argues Qaradawi, but rather Ishmael's.[16]

Qaradawi maintains that one must test the realization of the godly promise by comparing the length of time that Muslims ruled over the land with how long Jewish rule lasted. According to Qaradawi, Muslims ruled for 1,400 years, beginning in the 7th century and up until the beginning of the 20th century with the fall of the Ottoman Empire.[17] Jewish rule, on the other hand, lasted only 511 years. Qaradawi reaches this conclusion thusly: The rule of the Jewish nation over the land of Israel lasted only for the period of time when the two temples stood in Jerusalem. The period when Abraham and his sons lived in the land is not included in this calculation for two reasons: first, Abraham was not in control of the land when he lived there and second, according to Quran (3:65-67) Abraham was a

Muslim. The period of rule by the Jewish nation over the land can be broken into two main parts: The Kingdoms of Israel and Judea, which existed simultaneously from 1020 BCE until 586 BCE, and the Hasmonean Kingdom, which existed from 140 BCE until 63 BCE. If we add the two, we will find that the total equals 511 years of control by the Jewish nation. If one compares the two periods of rule, one clearly sees that descendants of Ishmael controlled the land for a much longer period. One cannot add the time that Abraham and his sons spent in Canaan as they did not own any land at that time and they did not rule the land in any way.

According to Jewish theology, Isaac was Abraham's chosen son: "From Isaac your offspring will be called" (Genesis 21:12). After him, came his son, Jacob. God had the right to pass on his blessings to whomever he wanted. Thus, God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. What determines continuity is God's choice and not a biological right.

Qaradawi disputes this argument by saying that God's chosen descendants—His "real" descendants, as it were—are those who follow Abraham's practices. Spiritual descendancy is important, indeed priceless, when it comes to prophecy and is much more significant than biological descendancy. One can see from the stories in the Bible that not all of the sons of the prophets continued on their fathers' paths. Qaradawi uses the story in the Quran about Noah and his sons as an example. According to the Bible, Noah had three sons, but the Quran gives him a fourth. This son of Noah, whose name is not mentioned, refused to enter the ark.[18] Noah prayed to Allah to save his son. He was answered that his biological son was no longer considered his son. This unnamed son was a heretic because he refused to heed his father's call to enter the ark.[19] From this story, Qaradawi infers that the question of Abraham's heirs is not just a question of biological inheritance but also one of spiritual inheritance. The Quran (3:68) determines who the real spiritual inheritors of Abraham are:

> Those who are most worthy to inherit from Abraham (*Awla al-Nas bi-Ibrahim*), they are those who followed in his footsteps, this Prophet and his followers. God is the protector of the Believers.

This verse concludes a long argument in the Quran between Muhammad and the People of the Book:

> Verily, you are those who have disputed about that of which you have knowledge. Why do you then dispute concerning that which you have no knowledge? It is Allah who knows, and you know not.

> Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was a true Muslim (*Hanif*) and he was not one of the infidels. Verily, among mankind who have the best claim to be Abraham's heirs are those who followed him, *and this Prophet and those who have believed.* And Allah is the Protector of the believers (Quran 3:66–68).

According to the Quran, as seen in the verses above, Abraham's worthiest descendants, the ones who follow in his path, are Muslims and not Jews or Christians. This verse dates back to the Medina period when there was a dispute between Muhammad and the Jews which led to an abrupt end to the relations between the two religious groups. It is at this time that Abraham became the most ancient religious personality in Islam as he served as an exemplary symbol of subservience and surrender to the word of God and to the message of the Islamic religion, which Muhammad founded anew. He became the most important prophet in Islam and, in essence, its founder.

As noted, Muhammad argued in the Quran (3:65) that, "Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, but a Muslim *Hanif*, and he was not one of the infidels." The concept of a "Muslim" in this verse does not, of course, relate to the Islamic religion, which Muhammad established, but rather refers to the concept that Abraham was dedicated and submissive to God. If so, the logic goes, Abraham was the first actual Muslim before the coming of Muhammad, and Ishmael was his chosen son. An indication of this can be seen in the Quran, where we see Abraham building the Kaba together with Ishmael in Mecca even before the Torah was given to the children of Israel. Mecca later would turn into a central pilgrimage spot for Islam and become the holiest place for Muhammad.[20] Thus, according to the Quran, Islam preceded Judaism and Christianity since Abraham was spiritually the "first Muslim." Quran (3:65) argues against the Jews and the Christians:

> O People of the Book, why debate about Abraham? It was only after him that the Torah and the Gospels were brought down from the heavens. Will you not learn to understand? Muhammad and the Muslims are the descendants of Ishmael and therefore have the right to the land.

The idea of a spiritual inheritance as a replacement even without a biological inheritance (as Ishmael had) exists in both Islam and Christianity. Paul, in his missive to the Romans (9:8), argues that:

It is not the sons of the flesh who are the sons of God but the children of the promise; they are the ones who are considered the offspring.

Thus, inheritance based on biological origin is not important. Spiritual inheritance is. The Jews are no longer Israel. The Christians are the new Israel: "Israel in spirit" as opposed to "Israel of the flesh." At the beginning of Christianity, the Old Testament posed a problem. On one hand, the Jewish Bible was the basis for the whole religious monotheistic understanding of Christianity. On the other hand, the Jewish Bible presented the Jews as God's chosen people. To deal with this problem, Christianity developed the "replacement theory," which Paul created and Augustine refined. This theory is based on the argument that Christianity inherited Judaism. Therefore, there was a need to adapt the Biblical text to the needs of Christianity. The next stage was to adapt Augustine's formula of the "replacement theory" through a new interpretation of the bible that identifies Christianity as the chosen religion of God.[21]

This process is similar to what is took place for Islam, which views itself as the final monotheistic evolution after Christianity—the perfecting of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Qaradawi explains that the Jewish argument for ownership of the land rests on the understanding that the Jews are the Chosen People. The idea of the nation of Israel as a chosen nation is expressed upon receiving the Torah and also upon inheriting the land of Canaan. God promises Abraham that the land of Canaan will be his and his descendants': "And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourns—the whole of the land of Canaan—as an everlasting possession and I shall be a God to them" (Genesis 17:8). God informs Abraham that his wife Sarah will give birth to a son named Isaac. In his heart, Abraham doubts this promise and asks God to keep Ishmael alive. But God tells him firmly that he will keep his covenant with Isaac and his descendants. "And God said, 'Nonetheless your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac and I will fulfill My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him'" (Genesis 17:19). God tells Abraham that he is willing to answer Abraham's request and also bless Ishmael, "But regarding Ishmael, I have heard you, I have blessed him, will make him fruitful and will increase him most exceedingly; he will beget twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 17:20–21). In other words, according to the Bible, Isaac is the son to continue the Abraham's tradition and to receive the land of Canaan.

The idea of choosing the Jewish nation out of all of the nations appears in the Quran (2:122) where it says: "O Children of Israel, remember the benevolence

that I planted for you in my heavens from all those who inhabit the worlds." To take away status from the Jews, their right as the "chosen people," the Quran presents a line of sins that explains the disinheritance of the Jews. Qaradawi explains that this verse was correct in its day when the Jewish nation carried the news of the uniqueness of God with pride and therefore had priority over the idol worshippers of their period. But afterward, their behavior as a nation changed for the worse. They left their God, rebelled against the Torah, forged[22] it, and refused to hear the admonishments of the prophets whom they murdered. Therefore, they were no longer worthy of their status as the chosen nation. The Muslims replaced them, as it says in the Quran (3:110): "You are the best among the nations that were given to people forever."

Qaradawi makes it clear that although the Jews of today are descended from Abraham, they are exploiters, conquerors, and murderers. They occupied Palestine. They expelled its Arabs residents. They are continuously murdering and warring with the Arabs that still remain in the land. Therefore, they no longer have the right to be related to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. One's lineage means nothing if they commit evil deeds, argues Qaradawi. However, one can argue that in making this claim about Jewish lineage, Qaradawi admits that the Jews of today are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If this is so, the Jewish people are not conquerors who stole the land by force from the Palestinians, but are merely exercising their rights that come from being the descendants of Abraham.

Qaradawi goes on to explain that the entire notion of the Jews as a "chosen people" is prejudicial as it places preference on one nation over all the others, and effectively excludes and condemns everyone else. He argues that Islam, on the other hand, allows every believer to come under its wings, regardless of race, color, or nationality.[23] Qaradawi defines Judaism as a racist religion because the Jews believe in a particular God and call Him "the God of Israel." Also, in Jewish law, Jews are commanded to treat non-Jews differently than they would fellow Jews. For example, the Torah prohibits lending money with interest to a Jew but permits it to a non-Jew. The Islamic God, Qaradawi argues, is a universal God who is called the ruler of the universe, ruler of everyone. Although the Jews sometimes use the terminology "the ruler of the universe," Qaradawi dismisses this and claims that their God is not a universal God but rather a God of a specific nation. In reality, this claim is ludicrous, as it is well-established in the Jewish tradition that the Jewish God is the God of all mankind. Even so, Qaradawi claims that the Jews define him exclusively as the "God of Israel."[24] In contrast, he argues, Muslims have a universal God, and it is therefore more appropriate that they should have the spiritual leadership of the world.[25]

Who Is the Son Who Was Sacrificed?

> Please take your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac—and
> go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as an offering upon
> one of the mountains which I shall tell you.

This story is accepted in Jewish tradition as a lofty expression of Abraham's trust in God, so great that he didn't even withhold his son from Him. Isaac was also a full partner to this mission as it is said, "And they both walked together."[26]

    The story of the sacrifice also appears in Quran (37: 99–113). Allah commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, but the identity of the sacrificed son is unclear. The Quran often refers to Abraham's "son" without naming him. There are many explanations for this lack of clarity. There are those who argued that Muhammad did not know the identity of the son who was sacrificed. Others contended that the ambiguous wording is on purpose. On the one hand, when writing the Quran, Muhammad did not want to write that the sacrificed son was Isaac because this would strengthen the idea of choosing Isaac's offspring. On the other hand, he cannot argue that the sacrificed son is Ishmael because the story of the sacrifice of Isaac was already widespread among both Jews and Arabs. This argument would arouse ridicule among the Jews, who already made fun of him. There is a disagreement among the commentators of the Quran regarding the identity of the sacrificed son. The majority of Quranic commentators argue that the son who was to be sacrificed is Isaac, just as it is written in the Biblical story. Only a minority of commentators argue that the son is Ishmael.[27]

    Qaradawi molded the Muslim narrative by asserting that Ishmael was the sacrificed son. The reason for this choice is understandable: Ishmael replaces Isaac as the chosen one and the one who was chosen to be the sacrifice before God. Qaradawi adds this:

> The son who was sacrificed is without doubt Ishmael despite the
> fact that the Quran does not mention his name. All of the proofs
> indicate the fact that it is Ishmael who was sacrificed and that it
> took place in Mecca. What is told in the Torah that the sacrificed
> son is Isaac, "the only," shows the jealousy of the Jews toward the

Arabs and their desire to own the high standing that their forefather Abraham had. Therefore, they acted as if Isaac was the only son of Abraham because they argue that Ishmael was only the son of a servant and according to the Jews, as a son of a servant, he was not equal to the son of the mistress. That is why they added to the Torah to prove that the sacrificed son was Isaac. How is it possible that we are talking about Isaac, as all of the events that took place were in Mecca and Isaac was never in Mecca? The correct narrative is that Abraham went with Ishmael and Hagar to "an unplanted Wally" near the place of the house of Allah in Mecca. Allah repaid Abraham for his faith and his loyalty and thus blessed also Isaac and that from his seed would come righteous men but also sinners.[28]

Muslims occupied the land in the 7th century. From then on, it was considered to be Islamic territory. Muslims argue the occupation of the land bought them the rights of ownership to the land. In contrast, the Jews occupied the land with strength and violence, and therefore they do not have any rights to it. There is a paradox in the words of Qaradawi: The occupation of the land earns the Muslims rights to the land but the occupation of the land by the Jews does *not* earn them rights to the land. This contradiction is resolved if we take into consideration what he has said previously: The Muslims are the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham with legal rights to the land. Therefore, the Muslim military occupation of the land is the actualization of Ishmael's rights. The Jews, on the other hand, have no "forefather" rights to the land. Therefore, their occupation is illegitimate and does not buy them any legal ownership rights to the land. Qaradawi demonizes the Jewish people in his descriptions, calling them cruel and characterizing them as robbers and murderers.

Qaradawi also makes a behavioral argument for Muslim control, citing verses from the Quran and giving them a current explanation. Thus, for example, he quotes Chapter 13:49:

O the people were created male and female and we divided them into nations and tribes in order to be able to see the differences between them. But the most honored among all of you to God is the one who is afraid among you and it is truly the most honorable to God the one who is afraid of God between you.

From this verse we see that Qaradawi wishes to prove that the criteria for inheriting the land is the fear of God and faith. The faithful have the right to the land and inherit it because of their deeds. To strengthen this argument he quotes from the Quran (26:105):

> We have already written in Psalms to say my honest servants will inherit the land.

Qaradawi explains that the words "my honest servants" refer to Muslims, and the word "land" refers to Palestine:

> The understanding of the Quran maintains that Allah bequeathed the land to his servants who do the right thing and not to a specific nation or race. Allah does not relate to people according to their race or their genealogy but only according to their faith, their deeds, and their fear of God. "Those who do the right thing" are those who will inherit them the land from the hands of its infidel residents who are exploiters and who deny the Prophets and who hurt them and who stray from the path of Allah: "And the infidels said to the messengers who were sent to them: 'We will get you out of our land, unless you will return to our religion.' Then their ruler revealed to them saying, 'We will annihilate the wrongdoers and we will return you to the land after they are lost.' This is our recompense for those who fear to stand before me and if my warning will take place" (Quran 14:13–14).[29]

When Qaradawi describes the infidels as exploiters and those who distance themselves from the way of Allah, he is referring to the Jews since that is how the Quran describes Jews. He claims that at the end of days, the Jewish people—the infidels—will be defeated in a great battle by the Islamic nation—that is, the nation that truly has faith in God and fears Him. As proof, Qaradawi quotes the Quranic verse that deals with the heretical nations of the past, though he takes it out of context and applies it to the Jewish people.

Qaradawi summarizes it all when he says:

> We are the ones who are the worthiest for this land from all aspects: From the aspect of the ancient right, as the land is the land of the Arabs and the Canaanites, from the point of view of it being

a land captured by the Muslims as it is their land. The Jews have no rights to it because they captured it due to their own might. The Jews captured it with arms, with iron and fire, with violence and blood. These are the attributes of the Jews: If they have the ability they are not merciful. If they can—they blow up. If they have the ability to act, they act. This is their history, and this is what it says in their Torah: "If you go into a city—kill all the residents by sword." Yes, these are the Jews who claim that they have the rights on Palestine.[30]

Here, Qaradawi quotes a verse from the Bible, apparently without a source, which he claims teaches that the Jewish people destroy all of the residents of the cities of Israel by sword. It is possible that Qaradawi is referring to Deuteronomy (13:13-16) which deals with the laws of a "remote city," a city where its citizens, the Jewish nation, decide to worship idols:

> If in one of your cities that your God gives you in which to dwell, you hear, saying, "Lawless men have emerged from our midst, and they have caused the dwellers of their city to go astray saying, 'Let us go and worship the gods of others, that you have not known'"— you shall seek out and investigate and inquire well and behold! If it is true, the word is correct; this abomination was committed in your midst. You shall smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword; lay it waste and everything that is in it and its animals with the edge of a sword.

If this verse is the source for Qaradawi's quotation, then Qaradawi takes things out of context. The verse in the Bible refers to a city that belongs to the Jewish nation and its destruction is due to their sin of worshipping idols. But Qaradawi attributes this as an order that sanctions an unjustified slaughter of the residents of the land. The purported parallel here between the conquests of the land by the Jewish nation during the period of the Bible and the Zionistic capture of Palestine is clear. In both of them, Qaradawi argues, the Jewish people engaged in cruelty and barbarism.

The Canaanite Myth of the Arabs

IN ADDITION TO THE RIGHT THAT STEMS FROM THOSE WHO CONTINUE IN THE WAY of Abraham, Qaradawi adds another argument: that Arabs have an even older entitlement to the land because they are the "descendants of the Canaanites." The myth that the Arabs are the descendants of the Canaanites and the Jebusites is widespread among the Palestinian population.[31] This myth is a recent construct. In the Islamic theology, Jerusalem is a holy city, due to Muhammad's night journey. Palestinian activists, however, argue that their claim to Jerusalem predates the Muslim conquest, and there is an "uninterrupted continuity" between Canaanites, Jebusites, and the Palestinians. There is no archaeological evidence to support this claim. Experts argue that the origin of modern Palestinians is from other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen.[32]

The purpose of Qaradawi's claim is to trump the Jewish claim for the land of Israel. Jews argue that they are the descendants of Abraham to whom God promised the land. But it is also written in the Bible that when Abraham came to the land, it was already settled by the Canaanites: "Abraham passed into the land as far as the site of Shechem, until the Plain of More and the Canaanite was then in the land."[33] Qaradawi writes about this: "The Arab Jebusites and the Arab Canaanites are those who lived in this land thousands of years before Abraham and his children entered it."[34]

Qaradawi's use of both of these arguments is problematic. On the one hand, he argues for Islamic rights to the land which stem from Abraham's rights as the first monotheist, the first Muslim. On the other hand, he argues for rights to the land that stem from the Palestinian relationship to the Arabian Canaanites, the idol worshipers, the residents in the land before Abraham. In addition to the fact that this kind of a genealogical link is imaginary, from an Islamic theological point of view, there is an additional problem. By adopting the Canaanite roots, he is effectively returning the Muslims to *jahiliyyah,* or an age of pre-Islamic ignorance. In other words, the Islamic nation cannot be descended from both the Arab Canaanites and from Abraham. However, by making both arguments in support for an Arab right to the land of Palestine, Qaradawi reveals an internal contradiction in his logic.

What is interesting is that Qaradawi's writings regularly show such internal contradictions and a lack of continuity. Let us take an additional example: the purchase of the Tomb of the Patriarchs. In a switch from his previous position,

Qaradawi tries to prove that Abraham *lacked* ownership over the land. Qaradawi makes this argument through his explanation of Genesis, Chapter 23, which describes the death of Sarah, wife of Abraham.

The Purchase of the Tomb of the Patriarchs

QARADAWI ARGUES THAT THE JEWS CLAIM THAT THEIR RIGHTS TO THE LAND OF Israel stem from God's promise to Abraham and his offspring and Abraham's purchase of the Tomb of the Patriarchs to bury Sarah. But Qaradawi argues that neither Abraham, Isaac, nor Jacob owned even one centimeter of the land.[35] Abraham bought a cave in Hebron for Sarah, which is known by the name "The Tomb of the Patriarchs." The man from whom Abraham bought the cave wanted to give it to him as a present out of respect for him, but Abraham stubbornly insisted on paying the full price.

A prominent Jewish scholar, Raba, writes in the *Midrash* (a popular source of Jewish commentary):

> Rabbi Yodan says: [There are] three places about which the nations of the world cannot defraud Israel and say that they were stolen in your hands and these are: The Tomb of the Patriarchs, Joseph's grave, and the Holy Temple.[36]

Because these three places were purchased with "full" money, Abraham, Jacob, and David—the Children of Israel—have a "Tabu" [registration with the land registry]. Apparently, Qaradawi is unfamiliar with Raba's commentary, but it is interesting to see how he takes issue with Abraham paying full price for the tomb. He wishes to prove from the act of the purchase that Abraham was *not* one of the owners of the land:

> If this land was his—would he buy it? Is there anybody who would buy his own property? No. A person does not buy his own property. Abraham was never one of the owners of the land, as promised to him by Allah —if this promise is even right at all—Isaac as well was never an owner of the land and neither was Jacob who

even went down to Egypt and lived there for approximately 430 years.[37]

During the lifetimes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the real owners of the land were the Canaanites, the Jebusites, and the rest of the nations of Canaan. According to this story, Abraham wasn't able to buy even a burial place for his own wife. If this is so, Qaradawi claims, God's promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham has gone unfulfilled. Thus, his conclusion is that there is no basis for the Jewish claim for the land of Canaan in respect to God's promise to Abraham, because ultimately this promise was never fulfilled (which, Qaradawi argues, is apparent since Abraham needed to buy land to bury Sarah). As a result of this unfulfilled promise, the sons of Ishmael, not the sons of Isaac, were those who ruled the land for the longest period.

While it is true that the amount of time that the land of Israel was actually ruled by the Jews is comparatively much shorter than when the Muslims had control, it is not necessarily true the right to the land is determined by the group that has been there the longest. Secondly, one can argue that the very fact that the Jews were able to return to the land for the third time and established the State of Israel is a theological proof that God gave them the land. In regards to this point, it is interesting to note that in 1968, an international conference of Muslim scholars was held at al-Azhar University in Cairo to discuss the theological question: how is it possible that the Jews returned to the Land of Israel and have defeated the Muslims in 1948 and in 1967? Sheikh Nadim al-Jisr answered this question by pointing out the Islamic prophecy that in the end of days, there will be a great war between the Jews and the Muslims and the Muslims will defeat the Jews. The reason that Allah brought all of the Jews from around the world to the Land of Israel—at the heart of Muslim nations—is to make it easier for Muslims to destroy the Jews in the end of days.[38]

The Story of the Spies

THE BIBLICAL STORY ABOUT THE SIN OF THE SPIES APPEARS IN NUMBERS 13 AND a version of it appears in Quran (5:21–26). According to God's command, Moses sent twelve spies to check out the Land of Canaan after the exodus from Egypt and before the Nation of Israel entered the land. The exploration lasted 40 days, during which time they traveled from the south to the north. When they returned,

they described the land as being good but ten of the spies said that the Jewish nation would not be able to occupy the land. They spoke ill of the land of Israel, and said Canaan is "a land that devours its inhabitants" (Numbers 13:32). Two spies, Caleb, the son of Jaephunneh, and Joshua, the son of Nun, encouraged the nation to go out and conquer the land. But the children of Israel were convinced by the words of the majority of the spies. Caleb and Joshua tried to convince the nation to heed God's promise that the nation would successfully conquer the land, but the Jewish nation was not convinced. Because of their lack of faith, God wished to destroy the children of Israel and send a plague. He would then create a new nation from Moses. But Moses pleaded for their lives and the punishment was educed. The Nation of Israel was condemned to wander in the desert for 40 years until the whole generation that sinned had died. Only the next generation (and also Joshua and Caleb who did not sin) had the right to enter the land of Israel.

According to the Quran (5:21) Moses said to the Jewish nation: "My people, enter the Holy Land which God has written for you." But the Jewish nation refused to enter into the land because the nations living there were mighty. They were ungrateful to Allah, who promised them that they would enter the land. As a result of their misbehavior, they were no longer worthy of God's promise, and they were punished—by being forced to wander in the desert for 40 years until the sinning generation died. After these 40 years, Joshua ben Nun brought the nation into the land of Israel. Afterward, the kingdoms of David and Solomon were established. They lasted for fewer than 200 years. This period of Jewish rule is incredibly short, says Qaradawi. How, then, can the Jews lay claim to the land when they ruled it for only a fraction of the time that the Islamic nations ruled it?[39]

The Jews argue that God's promise that the land of Israel would belong to the Jewish people is valid for all of eternity. Qaradawi, however, argues that this is not the case. The Torah shows that God's promise is contingent upon the Jews keeping the covenant with God and following his commandments. This they did not do, as can be proved through the stories in the Bible. That is the reason for their exile.[40] As proof, Qaradawi quotes various verses from the book of Deuteronomy. For example, in Chapter 6:18:

> You shall do what is fair and good in the eyes of God, so that it will be good for you and you shall come and possess the good Land that God swore to your forefathers.

According to this verse, inheriting the land is conditional upon good behavior. But did the Nation of Israel act in this way, even according to the words of the

Bible itself? No, says Qaradawi. The Bible is witness to the many sins of the Jewish people. They turned their backs on God and worshipped idols, which is exemplified in the story of the Golden Calf. Moses rebukes the Nation of Israel many times for their lack of faith and obedience toward God. As an example of this, Qaradawi quotes the verses in Deuteronomy (9:24–32) that detail Moses' rebuke to the nation regarding their worship the Golden Calf. God would have destroyed them but for Moses' intervention with God.

In later books, writes Qaradawi, the Prophet Elijah admits that the Jewish nation tried to kill him and that they lack loyalty. He turns to God with these words:

> I have been exceedingly zealous for God, God of Legions, for the Children of Israel have abandoned Your covenant; they have razed Your altars; they have killed Your prophets with the sword, so that I alone have remained and they seek my soul to take it.[41]

Qaradawi cites the book of Joshua and the story of Achan, son of Carmi. Achan lived during the time that the children of Israel entered into the land of Israel as told in the book of Joshua, Chapter 7. At the time of the capture of Jericho, Joshua made a vow that all of the property would be dedicated to God. Achan broke that vow when he took some of the property. As a result of this unfaithful act, the Nation of Israel failed to capture the city of Ai, and many of them were killed. Achan and his family were punished by death from stoning. Here is another proof of the infidelity of the Nation of Israel.

In addition, Qaradawi quotes the prophet Micah's admonishment regarding the destruction of Jerusalem that resulted from the rampant greed and corruption among the Jewish people: "Zion as a field will be plowed and Jerusalem will no longer be and the Temple Mount to stages in the forest" (Micah 3:12). Qaradawi finishes his criticism with a quote from Jeremiah (3:20) (which he mistakenly cites as a quote from Nehemiah) which describes the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people and compares them to an adulterous woman: "Like a woman who was unfaithful to her mate, you have been unfaithful to Me O House of Israel—the word of God."

Qaradawi concludes his article by saying that there are many additional Biblical quotations that show the Jewish people are no longer worthy of their status as the Chosen Nation because "They do not keep the covenant that was made between God and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[42] Because they are not loyal to God, they are also unworthy of the Promised Land. However, one can argue that the punishments against the Jewish people were temporary, and that God has

forgiven the sins of the Jews. The very fact that the Jewish people rule the land of Israel is proof that God has given the land rights back to the Jews.

Summary

THIS ARTICLE PRESENTS SHEIKH YUSUF QARADAWI'S VIEW ON THE HISTORICAL AND religious background for the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. As the spiritual leader of the Hamas, he believes that the current struggle is a continuation of an historical struggle that began with the sibling rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac over the right to be Abraham's heir. Qaradawi analyzes today's events through a religious prism and uses the Quran to re-explain the Bible in a way that fits his political agenda. From a theological point of view, Qaradawi does not say anything new. According to him, Ishmael was Abraham's real spiritual heir and for that reason today's Muslims, who are Ishmael's descendants, have the right to inherit Palestine. The Jews, the descendants of Isaac, lost their rights to the land as a result of their unfaithfulness to the covenant between God and Abraham, as the Bible itself shows. Thus, today's Israeli-Palestinian conflict stems from an ancient struggle over the birthright and choice. That, at least, is how Qaradawi and his followers perceive the roots of the conflict.

His sentiments may be deeply felt both by him and his followers. But neither the Bible nor the Quran—historical, religious, and political books of the highest magnitude—is a real estate deed. In the end, the issue at hand is the present, and building a road to a better future for both Israeli and Palestinian inhabitants of the land. Ultimately, the answer to this conflict does not lie in the distant past.

NOTES

1. http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4483419,00.html (viewed on 30.4.2014).

2. Mosab Hassan Yousef, *Son of Hamas*, (Ben Shemen: Modan, 2010), p. 7.

3. http://www.palwatch.org.il/main.aspx?fi=485. (viewed on 30.4.2014).

4. See for example: Bettina Graf and Jakob Skovgaard–Petersen (eds.), *Global Mufti: The phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi* (New York, Columbia University Press) 2009, ix.

5. Shaul Bartal, "Sheikh Qaradawi and the Internal Palestinian Struggle Issues Preventing

Reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas and the Influence of the Qaradawi Era over the Struggle between the Organizations," in: *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 4, 2015, pp. 585-599.

6. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds Qadiyyat kul Muslim*, (Beirut: Risalah, 2001), p. 41.

7. Khalid al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab al-Sheikh al-Qaradawi* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 2003), vol. 5, p. 112.

8. See: Quran 2: 125–127; 3:67, 22:26.

9. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol. 5, p. 164, 176. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, pp. 65–66.

10. Shaye, J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 260-276.

11. Genesis (21: 9-14).

12. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol. 5, p. 164, 176. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, pp. 65–66.

13. According the Bible David had six wives and ten concubines. See: Shmuel 2, Chapter 20:3; 3:2.

14. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol. 5, p. 164, 176. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, pp. 65–66.

15. Genesis (16:4): "He consorted with Hagar and she conceived and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her eyes."

16. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol. 5, p. 125.

17. Excluding a short period of about 150 years of war between the Muslims and the Crusaders in Palestine.

18. Quran (11:42–46).

19. On the story of Noah in the Quran see: Bat Sheva Garsiel, *Bible, Midrash and Quran: An Intertextual Study of Common Narrative Materials*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), pp. 69–71, [Hebrew].

20. J.D Levenson, "Abraham among Jews, Christians, and Muslims: Monotheism, Exegesis, and Religious Diversity," *Arc, The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill,* 26, p. 27.

21. Avi Beker, *Who is the Chosen People? The Biggest Struggle of Ideas in History*, (Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2013), 102–134, [Hebrew].

22. The accusation that Jews and Christians falsified their scriptures (*Tahrif*) is the most basic Muslim argument against both old and new testaments. In the Quran, it is a central theme (see for example Q. (2:75, 59), which is used mainly to explain the contradictions between the bible and the Quran. See: Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 19–35.

23. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, p. 96.

24. Ibid. p. 95.

25. Ibid. p. 11.

26. *Genesis*, 22:8.

27. Garsiel, *Bible, Midrash and Quran*, pp. 92–95.

28. http://www.qaradawi.net/component/content/article/46/1981.html (viewed on 1.3.2015).

29. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol 5, p. 125.

30. Ibid, p. 126.

31. Yifrach Zilberman, *The Canaanite Founding Myth of the Palestinian Society*, (Jerusalem, 1993), [Hebrew].

32. David Wenkel, "Palestinians, Jebusites and Evangelicals", *Middle East Quarterly*, 2007, pp. 49–56.

33. Genesis, 12:6.

34. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol 5, p. 125.

35. Ibid. p.126

36. Genesis Rabah, 79, 7.

37. al-Sa'd (ed.), *Khutab*, Vol 5, p. 124–125.

38. D.F. Green (editor), *Arab Theologians on Jews and Israel*, (Geneva: Editions de l`Avenir, 1971), pp. 42–47.

39. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, p. 69–70.

40. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, p. 88–89.

41. Kings (2:19–14). Qaradawi cites this wrongly as Kings (1:9–10). See: al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, p. 71.

42. al-Qaradawi, *al-Quds*, p. 88–89.

Islamism and the State in Morocco

By Mohamed Daadaoui

FOR CENTURIES, ISLAM HAS BEEN THE MAJOR FORCE THAT MOROCCAN monarchs have used to legitimize their authority. King Mohammed VI, a descendant of the dynasty in power since 1631, maintains hegemony over both the spiritual and secular realms. Episodic periods of societal and political tension have not yet demystified the regime's traditional veneer or undermined its authority. The Moroccan monarchy's strength lies in its spiritual authority, which is based on a variety of religious claims about political legitimacy. They include "sharifian" lineage (the king's claim to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), possession of a divine blessing ("Baraka"), and the king's title of commander of the faithful. Throughout the post-independence era, the monarchy has relied on these sources of religious authority and used the rituals surrounding them, which have been codified in the laws and constitution and institutionalized in the Moroccan political system, to set the monarch above the political fray.[1] The resulting political arrangement places the king above all other branches of government, with unlimited political powers anchored in Islam.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, a conflict emerged between the state and a resurgent political Islam that posed a new kind of challenge to the monarchy and its religious authority. The conflict centered on control of the religious and symbolic public space and on the regime's authoritarian control over state institutions. After the 2003 terrorist attacks in Casablanca, the state cracked down on Salafi Islamists. The state also used its exclusive control of traditional media outlets to

reinvigorate the national significance of Sufi mystical Islam and, in effect, to reclaim and secure the spiritual identity of the country. Sufi Islam is at the core of the state's religious narrative and has been instrumental in maintaining the regime's monopoly over national religious identity. Today, the contours of this public space continue to be challenged and redefined, with little to no instances of radical violent Islamism.

The two main Islamist movements in Morocco, *al-ʻAdl wal Ihsane* (Justice and Charity), and *al-ʻAdala wa at-Tanmiya* (the Party of Justice and Development or PJD) for years resorted largely to quietist strategies of activism and opposition. But the tsunami of the Arab uprisings in 2011 presented opportunities for Islamists to assert their presence more forcefully on Morocco's political scene. In fact, an examination of Moroccan Islamists' strategies during and after the Arab uprisings reveals both the limits and the potential areas of success for political Islam in Morocco.

As Moroccans took to the streets under the banner of the February 20 movement, Islamists pursued different trajectories vis-à-vis the state. In particular, each trajectory reflects the rejectionist versus participation dilemma that has faced Moroccan Islamism in the post-independence era. The al-ʻAdl initially joined the protests of the February 20 movement against state corruption, then later retreated to its strategy of rejection, which refused to recognize the legitimacy of the monarchy and of politics. The PJD, in contrast, successfully contested the legislative elections of 2011. It has since led a coalition government on a limited reformist path of political action that aims to bring about a "passive revolution" and overturn the monarchical system by operating within the regime's constitutional rules of the game. The PJD's path illustrates what Asef Bayat terms as a *refo-lution*,[2] which involves incremental societal changes through reforms within the regime's institutions, rather than insurrectionist attacks on the state and society favored by Islamists elsewhere. Each strategy, rejectionist and refolutionary, reflects an approach toward the monarchy born out of an understanding of the Islamists' strength and limitations in Morocco.

Al ʻAdl wal Ihsane

MUCH OF THE SUPPORT OF AL-ʻADL IS ATTRIBUTED TO THE LEADERSHIP OF ITS LATE founder and spiritual leader, Abdessalam Yassine, and his Sufi influences, which focus on moral and spiritual programs. Yassine was an intellectual force and a

prolific Islamic scholar. Between 1975 and 1989, he published 15 works of religious syntheses and commentaries on Sufism, Marxism, secularism, and nationalism. For instance, his *al Minhaj Annabawi* (the Prophetic Way) is a synthesis of Sufism in Islam and an analysis of the ideas of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood founder, Hassan al-Banna, and the militant Islamist ideologue, Sayyid Qutb.

From its onset, al-'Adl wal Ihsane espoused an anti-state, rejectionist strategy, which Yassine captured in a famous epistle, "Islam or the Deluge,"[3] that he sent to the late King Hassan II in 1974. In the notorious letter, Yassine questioned the religious legitimacy of the monarchy. He called on the king to repent of his sins, dissolve all political parties, and institute a shura consultative council.[4] Yassine's letter to the king was a bold attempt to challenge the monarchy and its religious authority. It also marked the beginning of Yassine's own long political struggle against the regime and state. A Bouchichi[5] mystic Sufi by background, Yassine advocated religious education and spiritual da'wa, especially after founding *Ousrat al-Jama'a* (Family of the Association) in 1981, as an attempt to unite Moroccan Islamists under one banner. The Association published *al Jama'a* journal around a new clandestine political association by the same name in 1983. The new association sought social activism and fought for political existence, which was repeatedly denied by the state. *Al-Jama'a* was very critical of societal deprivation and corrupt political leaders, charging that:

> In our country, the citizens who respect the time of prayer at work are threatened with dismissal. Now it is the apostates, the sinners and the drunks who govern the country while the real believers are prevented from practicing their religion. The management of politics and the economy is the prerogative of a class of exploiters. The precepts of God are pushed aside.[6]

While critical of society writ large, Yassine rejects Qutb's and other radical Islamists' notion of a Jahili Muslim society, which departs from the principles of the Islamic faith and substitutes human for divine sovereignty. Rather, Yassine suggests that Moroccan society is in a state of *Fitna*[7]:

> We live in a fitna, not in a Jahili era. Even though there are those among us and among our leaders who are apostates, our ummah [Islamic community] is still that of our master Mohammed, its core Islamic beliefs are intact and Jahili beliefs cannot penetrate it.[8]

Building on his rising popularity, Yassine formally established al-'Adl wal Ihsane in 1987 with religious and political goals. The association is largely a protest group that appeals to a wide range of Moroccan people. Its success lies in the social services it provides for thousands of Moroccans in urban and rural areas, including literacy courses and basic welfare in poor urban centers. The association has a strong base among university students and in the main cities. In the suburbs of the big cities, for instance, al-'Adl Wal Ihsane and its associations encourage women to wear the veil by offering better health care than the state. Its charities run blood banks, help people organize funerals, and, on Eid al-Adha, offer lamb to the needy.[9]

The state allowed al-'Adl Wal Ihsane to transform into a political party in 1989, the same year Yassine was put under house arrest. However, the association has refused to take part in the political system. In a press conference after Yassine's release in 2000, the Sufi sheikh stated: "al-'Adl wal Ihsane is a movement focused on spiritual education, not a political party… but we are partly interested in politics."[10] Al-'Adl is, however, informally active through its many offshoot associations. For example, the association's League for the Protection of the Family was one of the principal catalysts behind the famous Casablanca rally in protest of the King's planned reforms of the *Mudawanna* (code of family law in Morocco) in 2000.

Earlier in 2000, al-'Adl issued a public reprimand to the newly enthroned king Muhammad VI. Yassine posted a memorandum to "The King of the Poor." In this memorandum, Justice and Charity broke the taboo on discussion of royal wealth and appealed to Muhammad VI to repatriate his father's alleged multi-billion dollar fortune to pay off the national debt. Yassine struck at the heart of the monarchy's religious capital and criticized the traditional ceremony of allegiance to the king, which he described as a "sacrilegious ceremony in which the king was worshipped."[11] Yassine concluded: "In the end, I wish the young king a lot of courage and resolution and give him a farewell advice: "save your poor father from torment! Restore to the people their legitimate belongings! Redeem yourself! Repent! Fear the King of the kings."[12]

On May 14, 2000, Sheikh Abdessalam Yassine was freed from his house arrest after several appeals from some members of the government, and also after much pressure from international organizations. After his release, Yassine appeared to be less militant in his discourse. Al-'Adl kept a low profile vis-à-vis the state until the start of the Arab uprisings and the Moroccan February 20 protest movement in 2011. Al-'Adl's decision to join the protest movement was hardly surprising since the movement has always championed a confrontational Islamist approach

in Morocco, especially as its rival PJD refused to participate in the protests. As my interviews with PJD officials indicate, they were largely worried about the instability of the regime.

Al-'Adl's decision to join the protests was a calculated one. They wanted to tap into the base of Islamist supporters who wanted to support the anti-monarchy and anti-corruption slogans that al-'Adl had long espoused. Strategically, the decision to march alongside the February 20 movement may have been an attempt to capitalize on the attractiveness of the Arab uprisings in the Arab streets. However, al-'Adl's ability to coexist with a diverse protest movement, especially the secular left, was short-lived. The association made the abrupt decision to leave the protest movement in December 2011. Al-'Adl's spokesperson and Deputy Secretary General, Fath Allah Arsalane, explains that: "It was really a painful decision. We wanted to keep this space open for cooperation and dialogue and to create a new phase of joint, open, and balanced work. But, unfortunately, we faced many problems after this movement has made a tremendous effort by peaceful and legitimate means."[13]

Al-'Adl's official communiqué declaring cessation of participation in the February 20 movement somewhat expands on Arsalane's statement. It is replete with combative rejectionist rhetoric toward the state. It says it is an attack on "those who make their main concern to rein in young people, or spread rumors and poison the atmosphere, or to insist on the imposition of a particular ideology, and constrain them with conditions that moved them from the direction of real change towards venting popular anger, or turn them into a way to settle narrow accounts with imaginary opponents, or attempt to dye this movement with an ideological or political color against the Muslim identity of the Moroccan people."[14]

Much has been made of the withdrawal of al-'Adl from the protest movements in 2011. My own research and interviews with former members of the February 20 movement suggest that al-'Adl withdrew for four main reasons. First, the popular angst sustaining the protests in the streets was waning after the pre-emptive and largely cosmetic constitutional reforms in July 2011. The royal speech brought discursive changes to the relationship between state and society. For instance, it introduced the principle of a "citizen-king," which made the monarchy appear more of a participant in the political system. The new constitution featured several changes to the relationship between regime and state in Morocco as it nominally empowered the Prime Minister in policy-making and appeased the Amazigh movement's quest for recognition of their cultural and identity rights.[15] The monarchy, however, still retains its ubiquitous discretionary powers, which in effect could suspend the law-making function of the legislative body of the parliament. Monarchical prerogative to dissolve the parliament and the government,

albeit with the "consent" of the government, limits the principle of separation of powers. Similarly, the king maintains authority over the military, foreign policy, and Islamic affairs, given his claim to be the commander of the faithful. This royal religious title and the monarchy's claim to sharifian lineage set the monarch as an inviolable figure in Morocco, where lèse-majesté laws prohibit any criticism of the monarchy.

Second, al-'Adl probably realized it was being dragged into a long and costly political fight against the regime alongside a protest movement al-'Adl did not control. Third, the electoral victory of rival PJD in the legislative elections of November 2011 provided al-'Adl with a strategic dilemma: to continue opposing popular cosmetic reforms and a charismatic Islamist prime minister, or to retreat back to its rejectionist strategy, maintain its opposition to the state, and wait for the PJD to lose its popular support as it continues to be hampered by a palace shadow government. Fourth, al-'Adl's withdrawal was a function of the failure of the overall February 20 movement to articulate a coherent strategy toward the regime, especially after the state's constitutional reforms and legislative elections.

A significant fissure appeared within the February 20 movement between those who wanted to continue the protest at the national level and those who sought to shift strategy by appealing to poorer sections of the main cities. As a former member of the movement suggests: "We opted between September 2011 and the parliamentary elections [in November 2011] for a different strategy to revive the movement by taking the fight to the poor areas of the city, to bring down the moment to the average Moroccans, and hence get popular support for the political issues we were defending and save the movement from being "banalized," especially after the new constitution trick...but we failed for a lot of reasons."[16]

Faced with these divisions within the movement, al-'Adl pragmatically withdrew from the protests and retreated to its favored rejectionist position. A year after al-'Adl left the protest movement, Yassine died. The death of the mystic Islamist could usher in new pathways and strategies of dissent beyond rejectionism. Some suggest that there is an internal divide between al-'Adl's two main organizational units: the political *da'ira* (circle) and the religious *da'ira*, with the former contemplating its own entry into the political scene and perhaps even reconciliation with the palace.[17] That is the path that the PJD clearly charted in 1997. It culminated in the party's electoral victory in November 2011 and ascent to the halls of governmental power as a coalition majority party.

The Party of Justice and Development

THE PJD WAS FOUNDED BY MEMBERS OF THE ISLAMIC YOUTH ASSOCIATION AND members of its splinter organization, *Jama'at Al-Islamiyya,* which is led by Morocco's current prime minister and president of the PJD, Abdelilah Benkirane. In 1994, Benkirane's Jama'at regrouped under the banner of the *Harakat al-Tawhid wal-Islah* (Movement for Unification and Reform), which joined forces with Abdelkarim Khatib, a former nationalist leader, to form the PJD. Unlike al-'Adl's wholesale rejection of any rapprochement with the state, the PJD took part in the political system as early as the elections of 1997, winning nine seats in the Moroccan parliament. For more than a decade, the PJD steadily grew in stature and support as an opposition party within the confines of an electoral system in which the monarchy devised electoral districts to benefit its political allies.

The Arab uprisings provided an opportune moment for the PJD to contest the elections of 2011. The PJD won a slight plurality of the votes, but as in past elections, the party's electoral performance was a function of state control of the process. Unfavorable electoral districting and the lack of a strong appeal in rural Morocco, historically due to the prevalence of traditional pro-palace parties and vast patronage networks, have long hampered the PJD. Pro-palace parties such as the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) and the National Rally of Independents (RNI) also managed gains in the elections.

Lacking an outright majority, the PJD formed a coalition government whose parts have little ideological overlap. In fact, the Islamist's nominal opposition take-over of the government is hardly unprecedented in the history of Morocco. In 1997, the late King Hassan II, King Mohammed VI's father, perhaps conscious of his own mortality, invited the then-opposition Socialist Union of Popular Forces Party (USFP) to form the government. It was then, as it is now, a Machiavellian stroke to break the cycle of contention for the February 20 movement, delegitimize the opposition, and tarnish its reputation with Morocco's panoply of socio-political and economic problems. Most Moroccans do not draw enough distinction between the regime, headed by the monarchy and in charge of the entire edifice of the political system, and the state, nominally run by a weak government headed by the Prime Minister. Thus, the coalition government will take the blame for a failure to solve Morocco's host of political and economic development issues. This strategy of delegitimizing the opposition appears to be in use, as the PJD has been a reifying agent of state power in the post-Arab uprisings.

Initially, the PJD had a rocky start to its new era in government. In 2012, the PJD launched ill-timed and controversial fiscal reforms as it took on the state's subsidy system in a bid to bridge the widening socio-economic gap between the rich and poor. The Benkirane government also unveiled a 20% increase in fuel prices, which angered many in the streets already reeling from high inflation, and increased costs of living. In some major cities during the holy month of Ramadan, protests erupted condemning the government's decisions and its perceived lack of movement toward meaningful socio-economic and political reforms in the country as a whole. Subsequent police brutality only exacerbated the public sense of frustration with both the PJD government and the larger institutional behemoth of the *Makhzen*, which is the complex web of political and religious state institutions that have sustained the monarchical regime for centuries through coercive means, a network of clientelism, and cooptation.

The regime promptly adopted some decisive measures, both institutional and electoral, to stem the public angst and pacify the February 20 movement. The regime convened a blue-ribbon palace commission to adopt a new constitution while promoting the opposition Islamist PJD to positions of nominal power in the November 2011 elections. Within this limited framework, the PJD is slowly working to establish its agenda of incremental reforms. This approach recognizes the PJD's limited power in a regime that is still the only game in town.

To understand the PJD position, I conducted interviews in July 2015 with leading figures in the PJD, including its president and current head of the government, Abdelilah Benkirane. I also analyzed a major PJD electoral breakthrough in the September 2015 local elections. The combination paints a picture of a party engaged in a measured, calibrated strategy to tackle the most pressing social-economic issues by playing within the rules of the game set in the new constitution. The PJD's strategies are vying to reform the state in a Gramscian war of position or "passive revolution."[18] A war of position functions within a circumscribed public and political sphere and involves an incremental change of society and politics through moral and intellectual leadership over civil institutions and processes. It avoids insurrectionist "frontal attacks" on state and society.[19] For the PJD, such a strategy seeks gradual meaningful social reforms within the confines of an authoritarian political structure. This pragmatic strategy meant the PJD did not take part in the street protests in 2011 so as to maintain stability of the regime. According to Benkirane, the party didn't join the February 20 protest movement:

> Because we [PJD] refused to go to the unknown. In Morocco, there
> are issues that are not as they are supposed to be. But monarchy is

a key element in Morocco, and had we taken part in the February 20 protests, that would have destabilized the system, and we don't want to go into the unknown. What are we going to do then? Decision was to preserve the stability of the country and to keep the monarchical order, which is necessary in Morocco. You can change a president of a republic, but if you lose a monarchical regime, then it is difficult to find another monarchical system.[20]

The Passive Revolution and Successes of the PJD

THE ISLAMISTS OF THE PJD TRY TO MITIGATE THE AUTHORITARIAN EFFECTS OF the state on society while pressing for accountability based on Islamic moral teachings for justice and social solidarity. The PJD has engaged in the political system despite its flaws. It hopes to promote change through a calibrated strategy to reform the fundamental barriers to socio-economic development in Morocco. In this context, the PJD has attempted to exert a different, "moral, socially-conscious"[21] leadership once in government within what a PJD official called a "new discourse of honesty and transparency."[22]

This pragmatic strategy and new discourse of honesty have so far paid dividends, notably in the recent local elections in September 2015. The PJD placed third in overall communal seats, but more important, first in city municipal seats, where it defeated incumbents in most of the big cities in Morocco: Casablanca, Marrakech, the capital city of Rabat, Fes, Kenitra, Meknes, Safi, the northern cities of Tangiers and Tetouan, the southern port city of Agadir, and in Mohammedia. In total, the PJD won 25% of the urban municipal seats, besting the PAM's 19% and al-Istiqlal's 17%.

The PJD has changed the political calculus in Morocco, presenting a governance alternative unparalleled in its style and substance in post-independence Morocco. Many Moroccans now speak of hope and change and are less and less cynical about the political scene. The high voter turnout is also in part due to the PJD's grass-roots campaign and the excitement it has generated in big cities, driven partly by the PJD's new discourse of honesty and Benkirane's populist strategy.

In an interview I conducted with Benkirane in July 2015, the jovial statesman showed great confidence in his party's record and its chances in local elections.

According to Benkirane, the other options of rejection and isolation, perhaps in a reference to the Islamists of al-'Adl wal Ihsane, didn't yield meaningful results. Instead, Benkirane is still confident that the PJD made the right choice as early as 1992 when it decided to join the political game:

> It is a challenge that we took because we had three options: rejection and confrontation, which others pursued, but didn't yield any results, and we are still convinced that rejection and confrontation still yield no results. The second option was to isolate and depoliticize completely, staying out of the political system. And there is the option of participation despite the difficulties, which we chose back in 1992. This is our course because of the specificity of the Moroccan people and the Moroccan state that have had a consultative approach for centuries. The Morocco state is not a centralized authority.[23]

The Islamist leader asserts that since leading the coalition government in 2011, the Islamist party has: "left [its] touch in regard to some previously marginalized groups like widows, university students, retirees, and people with disabilities." But more important, the PJD's strategy of positioning functions well within a Moroccan state with a two-level executive branch. According to Benkirane:

> This is a government with two presidents. The original president is the king who presides over everything. I, as the head of the government, am in a lower position than the king. Sometimes there appears to be some policies that originate from the king. There are other policies that come from me, but they have to be approved by the king. We have a government with a president, and we have a council of ministers that includes the government and is headed by the king. It is an executive authority that has two levels: one at the level of his majesty, and the other at my level as the head of the government. I am obligated to take his view on everything, but the king isn't obliged to take my opinion since he is the head of the state, commander of the faithful, in charge of the military, and the justice system.[24]

For the PJD, the goal is to mitigate the authoritarian features of the system while tackling the major socio-economic issues in Morocco. In this, it has had some limited success. PJD acknowledges that the state in Morocco is "based on 'sharifian

lineage' as a source for legitimacy, not as a source of power."[25] The PJD's position is markedly different from the banned al-'Adl, which in the past challenged the religious authority of the monarch. The PJD instead accepts the religious capital of the regime as a key element of the Moroccan system:

> We [PJD] support it [religious authority of the monarchy]. The religious authority is strong, and if it was divided, then it will lead to endless mazes and labyrinths. Religious authority is with his majesty as the commander of the faithful. He has the authority and he has to seek counsel from politicians, and religious scholars. This authority is important to unify the *ummah* (Muslim community) in Morocco, because Moroccans have always feared division. Morocco is perhaps one of the few Muslim countries with one *madhab* (school of Islamic jurisprudence), the Maliki *madhab*. This unity is a key element of our existence as a state.[26]

The PJD's strategy involves not just winning some measure of state power, but also attempting to capture society by institutional, intellectual, and moral means. In this regard, the PJD's strategy is a product of playing "games in multiple arenas," as it simultaneously works within the rules while seeking to modify them.[27]

Morocco is still a carefully engineered political edifice. However, there is a palpable change in the political scene and discourse. The PJD is restoring some popular confidence in the ability of political parties to provide some measured solutions to societal problems, especially among the marginalized and alienated segments of the population in Morocco. The regime is firmly entrenched and shows no signs of deep democratic reforms, but for now, Moroccans, at least those who voted in the 2011 legislative elections and recent local elections, seem to favor good governance, transparency, and social justice discourse over deep democratic institutional reforms.

Conclusion

ISLAMISTS FACE A MONARCHICAL REGIME THAT HAS LARGELY MANAGED TO PACIFY the public through cosmetic reforms and an appeal to a national religious identity. The regime's religious authority has proved difficult to challenge for oppositional

movements, including the protest movement, and the Islamists, especially during the tumultuous early months of the Arab uprisings. Indeed, the monarch's religious status is as formidable as his temporal institutional status. While the "Moroccan Spring" has stalled, the dual challenge of the February 20 movement and al-'Adl have nonetheless managed to demystify the monarchy ever so slightly, making the king a potentially vulnerable subject of criticism. But criticism is not particularly destabilizing, the monarchy has in the past allowed a small space for dissent, and the regime has proved resilient in dealing with different challenges in the post-independence era. The monarchy will continue to guarantee stability and the status quo for a long time, especially amidst challenging regional security issues that have kept a lot of Moroccans at home and not the streets for fear of a Syrian or a Libyan scenario.

Faced with a carefully crafted regime, Islamist movements in Morocco had to adapt their strategies. The results of the referendum and the legislative elections of 2011 have presented the PJD as an opposition and reformist force with the political opportunity to effect socio-economic change, albeit in a limited fashion, and within the confines of an increasingly coercive state. The recent state crackdown on various protests (e.g., the teacher and students demonstration in January 2016), and the general constraints on freedom of the press only serve to tighten the state's grip on civil society. State repression, though not sanctioned by the PJD-led government, but by the palace-controlled Ministry of the Interior, threaten the PJD's popularity and cast it as an accomplice in repression.

Yet the PJD seems to be drawing dividends from its "refo-lutionary" strategy as it continues to work within the system for socio-economic reforms. Al-'Adl is still a prisoner of its own rejectionist paradigm, which presents it with a dilemma: either follow in the footsteps of the PJD and embrace the political system with its known defects or continue to be on the margin of society looking for political opportunities to challenge the regime. For now, al-'Adl has ceded the way to the PJD, which is showing that Islamists can partake in politics and provide a real alternative to change despite constitutional and institutional constraints.

NOTES

1. For more on the monarchy's rituals of power, see Mohamed Daadaoui. *Moroccan Monarchy and the Islamist Challenge: Maintaining Makhzen Power*. New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2011.

2. Asef Bayat, "Revolutions in Bad Times," *New Left Review 80*, (March–April 2013): 53

3. The full text of the memorandum is available at:http://www.yassine.net/ar/document/1868.shtml

4. Darif, Muhammad. *al-Islam al-siyasi fi al-Maghrib:muqarabah wathaqi'yah*, (1992). p.314–317.

5. One of many orders of Sufi Islam, Bouchichi Islam has grown in popularity in recent years in Morocco.

6. *Al-Jama'a*, No.4 (December 1979–January 1980), p.14.

7. Fitna is difficult to translate from Arabic. It is generally used to describe a period marked by schism, and societal division and disorder.

8. Abdessalam Yassine. 1973. *Al-Islam Ghadan.: Al-'Amal As-Siyasi wa Harakiyat Al-Minhaj al-Nabawi fi Zaman Al-Fitna*. Casablanca: Annajah Al-Jadida. p.470.

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9. Burns, John F. "Morocco's king loosens his grip"; *The New York Times*; June 25, 1999.

10. Pelham, Nick. "Freedom with caveats." *The Middle East International*; June 2, 2000; p. 16.

11. The full text of Yassine's memorandum is available at http://siraj.net/Memorandum-to-him-who-is-Concerned-36.html#.

12. Ibid.

13. Abdessamad Ait Dada, "Political Islam and the Moroccan Arab Spring," accessed on Acade-mia.com: http://www.academia.edu/2766258/Political_Islam_and_the_Moroccan_Arab_Spring.

14. Al 'Adl wal Ihsane's official communiqué, December 2011: http://www.aljamaa.net/ar/document/51003.shtml.

15. The Amazigh refers to the Berber ethnic group; it is estimated that 40% of the Moroccan population speaks Berber.

16 Interview with a former member of the February 20 movement in Rabat, September 2015.

17. Vish Sakthivel, "al-Adl wal-Ihsan: Inside Morocco's Islamist Challenge," The Washington In-stitute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 135, (August 2014).

18. Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. p.106.

19. Ibid. pp.206–08.

20. Interview with Abdelilah Benkirane, leader of the Party of Justice and Development, and current prime minister of Morocco, Rabat, July 2015.

21. Ibid.

22. Interview with a PJD official, Rabat, July 2015.

23. Interview with Abdelilah Benkirane, leader of the Party of Justice and Development, and http://opinion.injo.com/2016/02/253451-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump-with-god-as-my-witness-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump/?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=So-cial&utm_content=floating-sidebar&utm_campaign=Sharingcurrent prime minister of Morocco, Rabat, July 2015.

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. George Tsebelis, Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); see also: Andrea Schedler, "The Nested Game of Democratization by Elections," International Political Science Review 23 (2002):103–122.

The "End of Islamism" and the Future of Tunisia

An Interview with Said Ferjani

I N 1971, 16-YEAR-OLD SAID FERJANI MET RACHID GHANNOUCHI, HIS ARABIC language teacher, for the first time. From that point onward Ferjani's life would be tied to Ghannouchi and the religious and political movement he founded, Ennahdha. Ferjani was present at each juncture in the movement's history, from its growth as an opposition movement in the 70s, its clash with authorities in the 80s, the planned coup of 1987, its exile in the 90s, and Ennahdha's triumphant return to Tunisia following the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011. In the 2011 election, the movement won 89 of the 217 assembly seats and its secretary general, Hamadi Jebali, became prime minister. In January 2014, the party willingly stepped aside in the face of severe criticism to end a political deadlock and enable a technocratic administration to take power. Now, Ennahdha is a vitally important voice in the emerging democracy in Tunisia. In this interview, Ferjani, a prominent leader of Ennahdha, answers questions that delve into the movement's past and look at its future.

CURRENT TRENDS: *In a February 2012 interview with* The New York Times, *you stated history would judge your generation "not on its ability to take power, but rather what it did with power, which has come after four decades of activism." How has Ennahdha fared so far? Are you satisfied with what you have accomplished during your two years in power?*

FERJANI: There is a sense of satisfaction, to a certain extent. On the one hand, in our country, we are part of history in the making. We contributed to transitioning toward democracy and away from a regime that was authoritarian and oppressive. However, we can't deny the pressure to deliver the socioeconomic expectations of our youth in terms of employment. We also face pressure to address the recent threat of terrorism during the transition and to address the attempts to destabilize the state and weaken the country. Without stability, we risk low investment, making it difficult to build our economy.

In that same interview, you told the story of your encounter with Mr. Rachid al-Ghannouchi, your teacher when you were 16 years old. You highlighted Mr. Ghannouchi's questions: "Why are Muslims so backwards? What made them backwards? And whether it was their destiny to be so?" The question of Muslim decline has occupied Muslim scholars since their discovery of that decline with their encounter with the West. It is also the title of Prince Shakib Arslan's book, which continues to influence Muslims until today. What, in your view, are the reasons for Muslim decline?

First of all, the Middle East belongs to an old order. That order, under different names, where Muslims have prevailed, has also suffered under colonization, whereby some Muslims, such as Muslim elites, have questioned the role of Islam itself. But you can't point the fingers at Islam for supposedly being "backwards" or being the instigator of Muslim decline.

We cannot blame our faith for our "backwardness" as some have claimed because those of the Muslim faith were able to lead the world for some time. The Muslim faith allowed Arabs to enter into civilization. Rather, the causes and reasons behind our perceived backwardness are something else. Muslims need to make new choices. We simply have to learn from the West, how they were able to provide security and prosperity without compromising their faiths and values and their philosophies. We have to learn how to reconcile our faith with modernity and with development.

Many argue that the West has compromised its faith in its pursuit of worldly power. How would you respond to that?

First, in my response I've used on purpose both "faith" and "philosophy" because I wanted to note the strong presence of Christianity not only in the church or during Christmas and Easter festivities but also in many aspects in the culture of the

Western peoples, which are present side by side with philosophies such as those *laïcité* was derived from. The Christian democrats in many ways were founding fathers of the modern European project. The role of faith in the U.S. is quite apparent; even the U.S. dollar has the words "In God We Trust." John Locke, the father of liberalism, was clearly informed by his own religious convictions, and there are a myriad of ways that faith influences "secular" Western values. Going beyond the West, in India faith is, in many ways, central to political life. Even in China faith is resurgent and becoming a pressing issue. What has empowered the modern West are its values which are informed by its faith—despite the presence of many faiths, and also of philosophies that negate faith—within a context of fundamental freedoms.

The London that you reached in the 1990s following your escape from Tunisia was the center of Islamist activism with Islamists from across the Muslim world mixing in the city. What did you learn from the experience of other Islamists? You became involved with the Muslim Association of Britain. Did the mixing lead to a feeling of unity and common cause or a discovery of differences?

Yes, both of these simultaneously. The experience in London gave me the opportunity to learn from other Islamists, as well as Western institutions, the UK parliament, and NGOs about the system of democracy. We came to the conclusion that Islamism could be molded to defend the identity of Muslims both intellectually and philosophically, yet might not be very useful in terms of building a flourishing state and prosperous society. It is important to be conscious of different ideologies, but that doesn't mean they are necessarily useful in providing the basis for solid education, medical care, or livelihood to the millions of youth and citizens we are responsible for. Therefore, Islamism has become irrelevant for us, and one could say we are living in the "post-Islamist" era.

Your views on the "End of Islamism" as a useful political category and your use of the term "post-Islamist" to describe the Ennahdha movement are similar to those articulated by the French scholar Olivier Roy. Roy's view, however, seems to contradict those of Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi who in two articles in 2009 and 2013 rejected these political terms and argued instead that the future belongs to Islamism.

These were the views of Sheikh Ghannouchi in 2009, when Ennahdha was in opposition and outside of the Tunisian public sphere and the state. In 2013 [when Ghannouchi also said this] it was a time of high political polarization in Tunisia,

and it was being claimed that the end was near for Ennahdha as an entity and movement. The terms may be inaccurate, but the context in which Mr. Ghannouchi used them needs to be taken into account.

Islamism ended, however, once Ennahdha entered government and shared responsibility for social and economic provision and became accountable to the electorate and to civil society. This is also in line with Mr. Ghannouchi's latest pronouncement describing Ennahdha as Muslim democrats rather than Islamists.

The West has often been portrayed as the "Other" in Islamist writings. You have lived in that West for more than two decades. How have your views about the West changed?

I view the "West" as a partner, rather than an enemy. The West is part of our make up. Bear in mind that geographically speaking Tunisia is not more than 30km away from Italy. So Tunisia is in a unique position to bridge the gap between the "West" and the Muslim "East" on the basis of a win-win formula. The idea that the well-being of one side is only at the expense of the misery of the other leads to nowhere, and so we must flourish and support each other in security, in development, and mutual benefit. Ennahdha has chosen to bridge the two worlds and to reconcile Islam with modernity and democracy.

The question of Muslim populations in Europe and their integration and assimilation as Europeans is again on the front pages of newspapers following the Paris attacks. What has been your experience living in London for more than two decades? What do you see as the major obstacles to integration? How did British society react to you?

The notion of assimilation is dangerous as it proposes the idea that whoever is different from the Westerner must prepare themselves to lose their culture, identity, and values, which only seeks to marginalize individuals and communities. People should embrace the prevailing political values, yet also preserve their faith and culture. British society has embraced me for the most part, since the political and judicial system is what protected me as a former political prisoner of conscience, although the same may not be said for other minorities or migrants who are met with hostility and ignorance. I am able to say that I was fortunate to have spent my exile in Britain and being a minority has allowed me to build networks and understand institutions of democracy.

In the UK, you served as the Chair of the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board. What, in your experience, has been the root cause of radicalization among European Muslim youth?

My answer would be alienation. When individuals feel they are facing injustice, be it at home or abroad, and are only ignored by their societies, they become susceptible to radicalization. You cannot divorce radicalization from the social realities of those who often face discrimination for being different. Belonging to a minority can make you vulnerable and so it's important to provide a safe and inclusive space for all people. Our youth in Tunisia in particular must be taken care of, listened to, engaged with, and actively involved in producing suitable solutions for peace and stability.

In the 1970s, as the young Islamists of Tunisia were discovering their own religion and looking for guidance, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood became a source of emulation and bay'a was given. How has Ennahdha's relationship with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood evolved, and where does it stand today?

Among the different Islamist groups, the Muslim Brotherhood was reasonably progressive when compared to other Islamist groups. However, they don't have a common political entity for the state, nor the same political interests, so you'll notice some members were working with the US government in the form Hizb Islami in Iraq, while other groups, such as Hamas, were not very warm toward the US. Therefore, the Muslim Brotherhood does not have a cohesive approach to creating a modern democratic state that delivers security, peace, and prosperity for its individual countries, within the framework of the prevailing world order and regional orders. That's why there is no other choice but to look beyond Islamism, due to its problems and limitations, particularly when dealing with states. Having said that, it's important to understand that Islamism is one thing, Islam is another.

The relationship between Da'wa—religious proselytization—and politics has posed a challenging set of questions for Islamist movements. In Egypt, despite calls from Abdel Monem Aboul Fetouh and others, the Muslim Brotherhood rejected this separation, while in Morocco the Justice and Development Party separated from its da'wa organization since its entry into party politics. Today, this dilemma remains a source of discussion among Ennahdha leadership and membership. How has Ennahdha's thinking developed throughout the years on that question, and why is there a move today to separate Da'wa from the party?

The dynamics of Da'wa that belong to the sphere of faith is very different from the dynamics of politics and the sphere of party politics. Within a democratic system, Da'wa may belong to the space of civil society, whereas party politics is different, and so mixing the two together may harm both. This could potentially destroy the party system. Thus identifying a distinction between the two and separating them is a must. In Ennahdha, after wide-ranging debate, there is already consensus among all of the movement's intellectual trends that Da'wa and the party must be fully separated because Da'wa is not in tune with the nature of a modern political party as Ennahdha should be.

For much of its history, Ennahdha has been the only Islamist current in Tunisia. President Bourguiba broke the official religious establishment, Tabligh had no political agenda, and Hmida Ennaifer's Progressive Islamist movement failed to attract followers. Today, the situation is different. The Islamist scene in Tunisia is quite diverse—with currents from Madkhali Salafis to activist Salafis to Jihadis and ISIS. How does Ennahdha attempt to deal with this diverse Islamist scene? Do you view Salafis as natural political allies who have gone astray or as possible electoral competitors should they decide to compete in politics?

First of all, I must say I recall that before the October 24th election, some Tunisian Salafis approached Ennahdha, stating that both Ennahdha and the Salafis are sticking to the faith of Islam and therefore must be allies for the first democratic elections. Ennahdha's answer was straight forward: if the elections were about the Muslim faith only, we could be in one camp. But since the election is about different political parties and politics in the country, we feel that the leftists, including those who are anti-faith or atheists, are closer to Ennahdha than those who lack an acceptance of the political discourse. Mr. Ali Larayyedh (an Ennahdha leader) was the first to put forward the initiative in calling Ansar Al Sharia a terrorist organization. Right now, ISIS is the main source of instability in Tunisia and North Africa, and we have to fight them together with our Western allies to defeat them and put an end to their bloody atrocities. In short, we believe people can have their own personal views, but citizens must be a source of peace and stability to their fellow citizens.

What lesson should other Islamists learn from the Tunisian experience? Is the experience of Tunisia transferable to other countries or does it remain unique to Tunisia?

We want our country to succeed. And if anyone thinks that our experience is useful, we are ready to help.

Many people say that Ennahdha is a civil Islamic party, but some in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood say that Ennahdha is an example of an Islamist movement that has failed. The Brotherhood says that Ennahdha abandoned key positions that Islamists widely see as non-negotiable while being forced out of power through elections. How do you respond to this criticism that you have betrayed your principles while gaining nothing in return?

First, we prefer to stick to the pillars of Islam as Muslims, rather than considering Islamism as a dogma and interacting toward it as though it rests on the unchangeable pillars of the Islamism of the Brotherhood or similar groups. Our interests are in serving the people without contradicting the great value of our identity and our religion. The Prophet PBUH said: the most beloved to Allah, are those who most benefit the people [Muslim and non-Muslim alike]. This is an important principle of Islam that we will always stick to, rather than any other dogmatic ideologies.

In a 2013 article in Al-Monitor, *you were quoted as saying: "The Ennahdha party refused to be labeled as 'Islamist' according to the Western connotation of Islamism," adding that it has not called for the implementation of Sharia. If Ennahdha is not an Islamist party, what is it then?*

It is a Muslim Democratic party. We bear responsibility for the social and political reality of Tunisia, as Muslims.

Despite the Ben Ali regime's heavy crackdown on Ennahdha, the minute the regime fell, the party emerged once again as the leading political party in the country. How was Ennahdha able to maintain its base despite the regime control of the media, its arrest and torture of Ennahdha leaders and members, and many of the group's leaders living in exile? Did the group use new technologies and social media to remain in the hearts and minds of Tunisians?

Despite the catalogue of cruelties perpetrated against Ennahdha, it has not reacted with violence because we don't believe that violence should be used, even against dictatorial regimes, even if they were repressive. That is the difference between Tunisia and Algeria. Our approach was to avoid any violent reaction and

embrace as much as we can the techniques of peaceful resistance. We have relied on human rights groups and the international media, along with patience, and we have focused on serving our people and membership. This includes financial support for many of our youth members for their education outside the country. The election of Ennahdha by the people of Tunisia is a reflection of their appreciation of Ennahdha's actions during its suppression under Ben Ali.

During our campaign we did not use victimhood to gain support, but rather presented a sustainable vision for the future of Tunisia, politically, socially, and economically. When we chose to leave power, it was a pragmatic decision to further entrench the democratic system, rather than hold onto power for the sake of it. Ennahdha believes that power is a means to achieving the aspiration of Tunisians in democracy, prosperity, and development, rather than for selfish means. We always try to think strategically and pragmatically for the best interests of our country as opposed to being short sighted and only relying on the arithmetic of our success at the polls.

You once plotted a coup acting as the go-between from Salah Karkar to Ennahdha's military wing. Tell us a bit about the background of that military wing. When and why was it formed? What drove you early on to choose a path that would have inevitably resulted in some blood being spilled? How have Ennahdha's views on political violence changed since then?

Well first of all, the entire question is an amalgamation of inaccurate descriptions of what happened. In 1987, Bourguiba and Ben Ali (who was the Minister of Interior at the time) conducted an intense crackdown on activism that resulted in tens of thousands of arrests, and Bourguiba in his last days was preparing to unlawfully retry (in a special security court) the leadership of MTI (Islamic Tendency Movement) to inflict capital punishment upon them. If that had occurred, then civil war would have broken out.

Mr. Qasid Farshishi, Mr. Moncef Bensalem, and I decided to talk to the people that we knew within the army, the security forces, and the civilian population, to facilitate a *coup d'etat* on the 8th of November. Despite Ben Ali being Bourguiba's right-hand man and fighting the grassroots phenomenon of MTI that later became the Ennahdha Party, we decided alone, without any link to any official institution of the MTI, to abort the coup due to the suspension of the security court (as our aim was not power in itself) so that we could prevent a civil war. Violence has never been part of the political-make up of MTI.

From the day of Ennahdha's founding, and even when it was still the Islamic Tendency Movement, Rachid al-Ghannouchi has played an enormous role in the movement's past and present, acting as both a founder, leader, theoretician, and organizer. What is the future of Ennahdha after Ghannouchi?

Ghannouchi is one of its great leaders, however, in Ennahdha, since its first official conference in 1979, there have been 20 leaders, including Mr. Hammadi Jabali, Mr. Fahedl Baldi, and others. Ennahdha survived when Mr. Ghannouchi was in jail between 1981–84 and survived between 1988–92 when Mr. Ghannouchi was not the leader. Certainly, Mr. Ghannouchi has played an instrumental role in Ennahdha, but the movement and the party is not defined by him.

The tyranny of Ben Ali has left Tunisian society deeply fragmented and divided. What is Ennahdha's vision and plan for helping Tunisia to overcome this legacy, to build trust, and to form a new national compact?

Through democracy and consensus we aim to bring Tunisians together. After reasonable political success, we are now focusing on the economy and social success to avoid fragmentation and divisions among the elites and different regions in the country.

What kind of country do Tunisians aspire to live in, and what is Ennahdha's plan to help the Tunisian people achieve this?

Tunisians aspire to live in a country that respects its citizens, delivers economic and social development, and brings stability without compromising their freedoms. Ennahdha's plan is to deliver new laws that are compatible with a new constitution and eliminate the old ones to deliver economic reforms. Our main concern is making Tunisians less reliant on state subsidies, giving them control over their lives by allowing SMEs [small and medium enterprises] to flourish, and cutting red tape so that investors find Tunisia attractive. That will create jobs and grow the economy. We believe that cutting tariffs and red tape will automatically create a windfall in tackling poverty, corruption, and contraband. By reducing the space for state corruption to occur and creating more jobs for the jobless in Tunisia, we can free capital that would have gone to bribes or barred investment and trade due to tariffs or regulation. Education and industry must help Tunisia move up the value chain, and Tunisia's regulatory environment must be continuously made more amenable to investors and private enterprise. This is why Ennahdha and its allies

in parliament were able to vote through the Public-Private Partnership Law and the new investment laws that ease previous restrictions. Freedom and prosperity should not be at odds.

What can the U.S. and other Western countries do to better support the Tunisian people and their transition to a prosperous and robust civil democracy in the years ahead?

One of the best ways that Tunisia can be helped is through trade. Trade reduces unemployment and tackles state reform by enlarging the non-state space and helping Tunisia's SMEs develop and access international markets. This will have a dual effect of making Tunisians more independent and prosperous. Financing for infrastructure and projects especially in the interior regions, where profits are more difficult to realize, and where most acute socioeconomic problems occur, is another urgent matter. Prosperity and democracy go hand in hand. Tunisians are not looking for simple handouts, but for jobs and an opportunity to prosper. These suggestions I believe will go a long way in providing them. On an apolitical level, encouraging greater consensus and engagement between different parties, regardless of their views, remains important. Tunisia has not come out of its transition yet, and the consensual framework is essential for the foreseeable future in Tunisia.

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