

CHEERING FOR OSAMA

HOW JIHADISTS
USE INTERNET
DISCUSSION FORUMS

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Quilliam is the world's first counter-extremism think tank. Located in London, our founders are former leading ideologues of UK-based extremist Islamist organizations. Quilliam aims to generate new thinking through informed and inclusive discussion to counter the Islamist ideology behind terrorism, whilst simultaneously providing evidence-based recommendations to governments for related policy measures. Our strategic communications work involves research projects, training seminars, public events, specialist roundtables and media campaigns to empower civil society to work towards improved national cohesion, Muslim integration through respect for scriptural diversity, and encouragement of political pluralism.

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Cheering for Osama: How Jihadists use Internet Discussion Forums

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Introduction

As is now well known, the Internet, an essential part of modern life for most people, is also an essential tool for modern Islamist groups worldwide. During the last decade Islamist groups, both terroristic and ostensibly non-violent groups, have established a strong Arabic-language web presence. This allows them to directly reach both committed supporters and potential recruits around the world.

Al-Qaeda and other Jihadist terrorist organizations are no exceptions. However, whereas other Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood or Jamaat-e-Islami have largely sought to communicate through official websites, al-Qaeda and its affiliate groups today largely communicate not through dedicated websites but instead through a range of online discussion forums. These Arabic-language forums are now widely recognised as essential hubs for the propaganda, radicalisation and recruitment efforts of al-Qaeda and its supporters.

Bearing in mind the threat that such extremist web forums clearly pose – namely that some of those who visit them will come away more supportive of al-Qaeda and its ideology – Quilliam has produced the following report.

Its key aims are:

- To show how Jihadist movements use web forums to consolidate their existing followers and to recruit new ones
- To illustrate how Jihadists, and their online supporters, use theology and ideology to justify their violent actions
- To suggest how western governments can better challenge the worldview and ideology propagated on these forums

This report – which focuses exclusively on Arabic-language websites – should be understood in the context of three important trends in the Arab world: rapidly rising Internet usage,¹ high levels of youth unemployment,² and the continuing lack of real political change and sufficient peaceable outlets for legitimate political dissent. These factors together create a situation in which Jihadist websites which offer radical, utopian solutions to complex socio-economic and political challenges can easily appeal to young people who are bored, frustrated and lack basic opportunities to live full and productive lives. The potential consequences of al-Qaeda's ideology being adopted by large numbers of young people in the Arab world do not need to be spelt out.

Unlike other reports on online extremism which have tended to focus on the structural, technical or social aspects of extremist websites, this report has chosen to focus more explicitly on their

1 International Telecommunication Union, 'Information Society Statistical Profiles 2009 Arab States', 2009. http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-RPM.AR-2009-R1-PDF-E.pdf.

2 See, for example, Baṭālat al-shabāb al-'Arabī al-a'alā fi al-'ālam, *Al-Jazeera*, 21/12/2009. <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/FC59979D-466E-43E6-ACEB-F53316920CAF.htm>, and International Labour Organisation, 'Global employment Trends – Update', May 2009. http://www.oit.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_elm/trends/documents/publication/wcms_114102.pdf.

content; in other words, to direct attention towards the message rather than the medium. This will not only help policy-makers to more effectively understand the dangers posed by extremist websites, and how to better tackle them, but will also allow a more informed approach to challenging extremism more widely.

Terms used

The following terms have been extensively used throughout this report and although we do not claim that they are universally accepted, readers should be aware that the following definitions reflect what we mean when we use these terms.

Islamism: The belief that Islam is a political ideology. It claims that political sovereignty belongs to God rather than the people. Islamists believe that their reading of *sharī'a* should be state law, and that it is the religious duty of all Muslims to create and pledge allegiance to an 'Islamic state' that reflects these principles.

Jihadism: Non-state violence used in the cause of Islamism. Just as Islamism is the politicization of Islam, Jihadism is the modern politicization of jihad. Jihadists take the traditional concept of jihad and use it as a political tool to achieve a political end.

Salafism: A revivalist Sunni Muslim trend that believes that Muslims should shed traditional theological edicts and instead derive new religious verdicts directly from the sources. Salafism includes the subsets of Wahhabism, Islamism and Salafi-Jihadism.

Wahhabism: A heterodox and obscurantist conservative Sunni revivalist movement, founded by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb in the 18th century. It is popular in Saudi Arabia and retains a socially conservative, austere and vacuous interpretation of Islam.

Salafi-Jihadism: A current within Salafism which regards violence as the only way to spiritual and political self-fulfillment.

Methodology

The research for this report involved surveying a large number of Arabic-language websites frequented by Islamist extremists. These included pro-Jihadist discussion forums, as well as more general blogs, websites and online libraries. The research was conducted over a period lasting more than a year, between January 2009 and May 2010. Gradually, the research focused on the discussions posted on around twenty forums on which Jihadist sympathizers were active during this period. The majority of these sites, however, do not have stable web addresses due to being constantly shut down by various national authorities and instead have various, rapidly-changing mirror sites. The following websites and discussion forums were constantly monitored for this report, although not all were quoted from (some have also since been taken offline):

1. Al-Fallūja (unstable address)
2. Shumūkh al-Islām (unstable address)
3. Al-Taḥaddī (unstable address)
4. Al-Shūrā (taken offline)
5. Ma'ārik Islamic network (unstable address)
6. Al-Lūyūth (unstable address)
7. Al-Mūjāhidīn (unstable address)
8. Anṣār al-Mujāhidīn (unstable address)
9. Medād al-Sūyūf (<http://www.almedad.com/vb/>)
10. Minbar al-Tawḥīd wal Jihād (<http://www.tawhed.ws/>)
11. Muntadyāt Bayt al-Maqdis al-Jihādīyya (<http://www.al-amanh.net/vb/index.php>)
12. Al-Būrāq (<http://alboraq.info/>)
13. Ḥānīn (<http://www.hanein.info/vb/forum.php>)
14. Fursān al-Ḥaq (<http://www.forsanelhaq.com/>)
15. Al-Multaqā (<http://ikhwan.net/vb/index.php>)
16. Shabakat Filasṭīn lil Ḥiwār (<http://www.paldf.net/forum/>)
17. al-Ḥisba (unstable address)
18. Anā al-Muslim (<http://www.muslim.net/vb/>)
19. Shabakat al-Difā' 'An al-Sunna (<http://www.dd-sunnah.net/forum/index.php>)
20. Aljazeeraatalk (<http://www.aljazeeraatalk.net/forum/>)

Chapter One – Overview of Jihadist forums

Jihadists began using the Internet almost as soon as it became accessible to the public in the 1990s.³ As with many other terrorist groups and movements seeking to communicate their cause and demands to a local, regional or global audience, the Internet presented obvious opportunities.⁴ Previously, terrorist groups had relied upon conventional media outlets to report their activities and publicize their grievances and ideology. However, conventional media is not the most efficient tool for a terrorist group's public messaging, especially if governments intervene to prevent reporting about terrorist groups or if the media presents such groups unsympathetically. In addition to offering an uncensored channel of communication, websites can also be maintained from any location that has an Internet connection, they are cheap to run and can be tailored to reach specific audiences. These features, together with perceived anonymity and invulnerability, made the Internet a playground for Jihadists from the late 1990s onwards, becoming in many ways the cyber equivalent of Afghanistan or Yemen; ungoverned, de-territorialised spaces where transnational networks of militants could operate with impunity.

In the early phases of Jihadist involvement in the Internet, Jihadist groups maintained their own, very basic and simple websites. These websites generally contained only a history of the group, their charter, and an archive of their statements. Communication was only in one direction with little or no space for interactivity between the group's active members and its online supporters.⁵ After 9/11, for instance, al-Qaeda relied on a website called Alneda.com as one of its main mediums of communication, using it to post its statements, theological justifications for its actions and other propaganda material.⁶ From even this early stage, however, Jihadist websites were distinguished from those of other terrorist organisations by the fact that while the majority of terrorist organisations highlight the atrocities committed by their enemies against them, with little mention of their own violent actions, Jihadist sites openly celebrated their own acts of violence. On these sites, Jihadist violence is often portrayed as divinely guided victories against an immoral and irreligious enemy who deserves the most severe forms of hatred and humiliation; terrorist violence is depicted as a physical, real-world manifestation of God's anger and omnipotence. Jihadist groups are consistently dedicated to documenting these acts of violence through films or photographs displayed on their sites.⁷ Following the 9-11 attacks, however, Jihadist websites came under attack as various intelligence agencies attempted to disrupt and dismantle the mechanisms of Jihadist communication. In many cases these sites were forced offline. As on the battlefields, Jihadists adapted and responded online. For instance, by creating multiple 'mirror' sites, as back-

3 Steven Coll and Susan B. Glasser, 'Terrorists Turn to Web as Base of Operations', *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2005.

4 In 1998, less than half of the thirty organizations defined as "foreign terrorist organizations" by the US Department of State maintained websites yet by the end of 1999, only a year later, nearly all of them had established a meaningful online presence. Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, United States Institute Of Peace Press, Washington D.C., 2006, p. 15.

5 For example The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) used the following site as their official website <http://web.archive.org/web/20060903182257/http://moonnight9876.com>.

6 Steve Coll and Susan B. Glasser, 'Terrorists Turn to Web as Base of Operations', *The Washington Post*, August 7, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/05/AR2005080501138.html>.

7 Examples of such videos can be found on the GSPC's site: <http://web.archive.org/web/20060902114311/www.moonnight9876.com/pages/vid.html> and Taliban's official site: <http://alemarah.info/movie>.

ups that would safeguard against a total loss of communication. These mirror sites can therefore be seen as the online equivalent of the cell structures that are typically adopted by terrorist organisations to guard against infiltration or discovery.

A further implication of the 'war on terror' was the clampdown on Jihadist groups and their support networks in most European and Middle Eastern countries. This crackdown on real-world activism may well have helped push many Jihadist sympathisers to seek refuge in the anonymous world of the Internet where they believed (sometimes erroneously) that they would still be free to propagate Jihadist ideas. The most common Arabic-language websites for discussion of the wars in Afghanistan and (later) Iraq were general discussion forums specialising in news and views. These soon became hotbeds of pro-Jihadist activity due to the large numbers of Jihadist sympathisers on these sites. Once this shift occurred, it was only a matter of time until Jihadist sympathisers came together to form their own discussion forums, specifically designed to promote Jihadist activity and glorify Jihadist achievements. Soon, these forums evolved from more than simple meeting places of like-minded people to virtual universities of jihadism, where a user could learn everything from the theological justifications for jihadism to bomb making and first aid skills suitable for the battlefield. It is still uncertain to what extent the creators of these sites are actual members of Jihadist organisations or whether they are simply Jihadist enthusiasts. Once a certain Jihadist forum became popular with Jihadist sympathisers, various Jihadist groups would go to it to publish their communiqués. The locus of influence had shifted from the websites of individual Jihadist groups towards pan-Jihadist forums that were rarely, if ever, under the control of a single group. At present, it is these pan-Jihadist forums that dominate the online Jihadist presence and serve as umbrellas for 'global jihad', championing the causes of extremist organisations from the Nigerian Boko Haram to al-Qaeda.

Standard Jihadist discussion forum:

The majority of Jihadist discussion forums share a similar layout in order to minimise confusion and make them easy to navigate. The most important visual features of Jihadist discussion forums are the homepage banners and the various thematically-arranged sections. The homepage banners typically advertise the latest statements and releases of the various Jihadist organisations that the forum supports and link to their download locations. These banners are usually standardised and disseminated to a number of forums which display the statement or media release. Additionally, although not explicitly mentioned in Jihadist releases, forum members are encouraged to copy these releases into other forums and sites to achieve the maximum amount of publicity for the intended message. This is sometimes referred to on Jihadist forums as a 'Jihadist media incursion' (*ghazwat i'lām jihādī*).



Tanzīm qā'idat al-jihād fi jazirat al-'arab [al-Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula]

Urgent: Tanzīm qā'idat al-jihād fi jazirat al-'arab

(a statement refuting the lies of the idols and crusaders)

(Coming soon by the will of Allah) The strategy of the next stage



The latest news and releases:

Look forward to "The Vanguard of Khurāsān" a monthly magazine dealing with the jihad and mujāhidīn in Afghanistan with a gift enclosed

We are happy to receive your correspondence

Homepage banners advertising the latest Jihadist releases

قسم البعثات		
7,850	792	<p>منتدى وزارة الإعلام دولة العراق الإسلامية خاص ببعثات وإصدارات دولة العراق الإسلامية أجزأها الله</p> <p>الأقسام الفرعية: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ترشيح إصدارات الدولة أجزأها الله ترشيح بعثات وتقارير دولة العراق الإسلامية </p> <p>منتدى البعثات والتقارير والإصدارات خاص ببعثات وإصدارات الجماعات المتجاهدة</p> <p>الأقسام الفرعية: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ترشيح البعثات والتقارير ترشيح إصدارات الجماعات المتجاهدة بعثات شعبة الإعلام </p>
62,237	10,999	<p>الإمامة الإمامة: :طلبان / تقمص... الإمامة بواسطة قشون</p> <p>منتدى البعثات والتقارير والإصدارات خاص ببعثات وإصدارات الجماعات المتجاهدة</p> <p>الأقسام الفرعية: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ترشيح البعثات والتقارير ترشيح إصدارات الجماعات المتجاهدة بعثات شعبة الإعلام </p>
قناة شموع الإسلام الجهادية		
834	533	<p>شاشة شموع الإسلام الجهادية / شاشة تأخذك لعنق الشهادة نهدم بطن كل الأعداء السعيبة والفرعية للمتجاهدين ساعة إصدارها مع خدمة المشاهدة المباشرة</p> <p>الأقسام الفرعية: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> مباشرة المتجاهدين ترشيح قناة شموع الإسلام ترشيح أعمدة الجهاد وخدمة الترجمة </p>
قسم المكتوبات العامة		
167,279	24,610	<p>منتدى قضايا الأمة طرح فيه كل ما يخص المتوحدين في سائر الأرض وسفارها</p> <p>الأقسام الفرعية: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> مكتوبى العدة والإعتاد مكتوبى الشهادة والأمرى ترشيح الشيخ أبي سعد الغاملى ترشيح الشيخ أبي محمد العنقسي ترشيح الإقلاع المتجاهدة والمواضع المميزة مكتوبى فتح طراغيت العرب والعجم ومن والأهم </p> <p>أقراص خير قوي : عطايات... بواسطة ليت الطغلبية</p>

Forum sections & subsections taken from Shumūkh al-Islām Jihadist forum

Typical sections:

The homepage will also usually show a list of topical sections and subsections, each of which has a specific function. Jihadist forums usually have a team of dedicated and active moderators who try to ensure that the threads posted in any given section conform to the objective of that section.

- Statement section:

All Jihadist forums have a specific section in which all the latest statements of Jihadist groups are archived. This makes them highly accessible and easy to recover. Some forums categorise statements by source, according to the Jihadist group which issued them – this is most common on al-Qaeda affiliated forums due to the variety of al-Qaeda’s many affiliates.

- Multi-media section:

Multi-media sections archive the media releases of Jihadist groups. Some sites embed the videos into the site, saving users the difficulty of downloading large media files. These sections are not as regularly viewed as other sections due to the home page banners’ greater effectiveness in drawing attention to the latest releases and statements.

- General section:

The general or current affairs section is typically the busiest section in any Internet discussion forum as this is where members are allowed to share news and discuss their views on any topic. On Jihadist forums this section is often highly active as Jihadist sympathisers follow every item of Jihadist related news streaming in from around the world. It is also where many detailed theological discussions take place.

While the sections mentioned above are the most common, other sections that might be found on Jihadist forums include: 'History', 'Muslim family', and private training sections containing information about bomb-making and weapons. Admission into these private sections is strictly privileged and members are required to submit an application to the administrator of the forum to gain access. Increasingly, various forums have started introducing an English section, although so far their content has been largely limited to English translations of Jihadist communiqués – perhaps indicating the failure of Arabic-language Jihadist sites to effectively reach out to English speaking Jihadist-sympathisers.

List of most active/popular forums

The following three forums are Jihadist forums that are considered to be the most trustworthy and reputable amongst Internet Jihadists. They are endorsed by al-Fajr Media Centre which is al-Qaeda's official online logistical network.

Al-Fallūja: The most popular al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadist forum. It has 17,858 registered members.⁸ The title is a reference to the Iraqi Sunni-majority city that was a hotbed of dissent against the American occupation of Iraq, and succeeded in wresting itself from government control between April and November 2004.

Shumūkh al-Islām: The second most popular al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadist forum.

Al-Taḥaddī: The third most popular al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadist forum. It has 5,861 registered members.

Al-Mujāhidīn: An al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadist discussion forum which members of the top three forums consider suspicious.

Medād al-Sūyūf: An al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadist discussion forum operated from the UK. It propagates the ultra-violent rhetoric of 'Neo-Zarqāwi-ists.' It has 4,237 registered members.

Al-JazeeraTalk: A general news and views discussion forum containing various topical sections that are often used by online-Jihadists. It has 18,930 registered members.

Fursān al-Ḥaq: A religious Wahhabi discussion forum mainly consisting of Egyptian Wahhabis. It is regularly targeted by Jihadist sympathizers in an attempt to popularize Jihadism among Wahhabis. It has 107,753 registered members.

Al-Ḥisba: A religious Wahhabi discussion forum with a large constituency of Jihadist sympathizers. It should not be confused with the famous Jihadist discussion forum, with the same name.

8 Membership numbers have been obtained from the site's homepage on 09/07/2010, where the site's statistics are displayed.

Types of forums used by Jihadists

The Internet discussion forums on which Jihadists have a presence are of various types, and have been established to serve both different purposes and audiences. However, what they all have in common is that, to some extent, they either espouse Jihadist ideology or contain a large amount of Jihadist material which is being propagated by sympathisers of Jihadist ideology.

These forums can be divided into the following categories:

a. Al-Qaeda affiliated

Al-Qaeda affiliated forums are sites that propagate al-Qaeda's global Jihadist ideology. They are actively used by al-Qaeda and its affiliates such as 'al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib' (AQIM), 'The Islamic State of Iraq' and the Somali 'al-Shabāb' to disseminate their messages and material. These forums have become the main channel of communication between these terrorist groups and their supporters, as well as the wider global audience, especially since satellite television channels like Al-Jazeera have stopped airing al-Qaeda's communications in full.⁹ These forums' most active users are primarily al-Qaeda's sympathizers and supporters who use the forums to follow the latest developments on the Jihadist landscape, discuss current affairs, and morally and theologically justify Jihadist activities around the world.

There are two main trends within the al-Qaeda affiliated websites that are reflective of the current divisions within al-Qaeda's supporters:

1. *Al-Qaeda traditionalists*. These individuals follow the ideology expressed by al-Qaeda leaders such as al-Zawāhirī and Osama bin Laden and by theorists such as the Jordanian Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī. Although extremely-hardline, the members of this grouping have recognized, largely as a result of al-Qaeda's disastrous experience in Iraq, that al-Qaeda's brutality and recklessness has massively alienated the majority of global Muslim opinion and has been counter-productive. They now argue, if only on narrow strategic grounds, that greater care should be taken to avoid killing ordinary Muslim civilians.
2. *'Neo-Zarqawi-ists'*: A much smaller rival faction also exists which was inspired by the former leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī. This faction believes that strategy is secondary to Jihadists' religious doctrine and that anyone who does not actively support al-Qaeda is a de-facto enemy of God who deserves to be killed. This faction believes that Jihadist thinkers such as Al-Maqdisī, who have attempted to rein-in al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda affiliates are 'sell-outs' and traitors who have compromised their religion.

Until very recently, there has been little hard evidence to suggest that active members of al-Qaeda or its affiliate groups, from either of the two above factions, used these discussion forums. Instead it was believed that al-Qaeda's statements and media releases reached the sites through a number of intermediaries. However, the case of Abū Dujāna al-Khurāsānī,

9 Craig Whitlock, 'al-Qaeda's Growing Online Offensive', *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/23/AR2008062302135.html>.

the Jordanian doctor and suicide bomber, paints a different picture altogether.¹⁰ Al-Khurāsānī, (whose real name was Hammām Khalīl Abū Malal al-Balawī), was a prolific blogger and at one time a moderator on the Jihadist 'al-ḥesbah' Internet forum. He blew himself up, killing seven CIA employees and contractors and a Jordanian intelligence officer, inside a CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan on 30 December 2009.¹¹ This case, although in many regards an atypical one, indicates that some members of Jihadist forums do make the transition from "keyboard to Kalashnikov" and that intelligence agencies do believe that active members of Jihadist organizations use these sites.¹² Separately, senior members of the more 'reputable' Jihadist sites have previously claimed to have had contact with members of al-Qaeda.¹³ These claims are impossible to verify, but at the same time, are not altogether improbable. After all, the Jihadist material that is routinely distributed on these forums (such as martyrdom videos, recordings of terrorist attacks or statements by senior Jihadist leaders) must be the result, at some point, of contacts between forum users and the people responsible for producing the material. For example, As-Sahāb and the Global Islamic Media Front, which act as al-Qaeda's in-house media production outlets, record, edit, and produce video and audio material which is then uploaded onto various sites; the location of the uploaded material is then passed on to these forums.¹⁴

Membership in these al-Qaeda affiliated forums can be high. For instance, the three most popular al-Qaeda affiliated forums among Internet Jihadists have over 10,000 registered members each.¹⁵ The most respected and popular of these sites is al-Fallūjah Islamic Forums that has just over 14,000 registered members followed by Shūmūkh al-Islām (the glory of Islam) with just above 11,000 registered members. It is interesting to note that another al-Qaeda affiliated forum called al-Mujahidīn with approximately 13,600 members, exceeding Shūmūkh al-Islām in numbers, is far less reputable or important amongst Internet Jihadists and is rarely mentioned on threads. Popularity and importance are determined by the perceived credibility of each forum. Both al-Fallujah and Shumūkh al-Islām forums have an advantage over all other Jihadist forums as they have been able to attract the foremost Jihadist theoretician, Abū Muḥammad al-Maqqdisī into becoming a registered, although not an active member of those forums. A further indicator to the importance of a forum among online Jihadists is the possible threat of being

10 Al-Khurāsānī successfully detonated his bomb among CIA agents in a US military base in Afghanistan after convincing Jordanian and US intelligence that he was a double-agent who knew the location of senior al-Qaeda leaders. Sioban Gorman, Anand Gopal, and Yochi J. Dreazen, 'CIA Blast Blamed on Double Agent', *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2010.

11 Sioban Gorman, Anand Gopal, and Yochi J. Dreazen, 'CIA Blast Blamed on Double Agent', *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2010. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB126264256099215443.html>.

12 Vahid Brown, 'CIA Bomber a Jihadi Blogger?', *Jihadica*, January 4, 2010. <http://www.jihadica.com/cia-bomber-a-jihadi-blogger/>.

13 An example is the case of 'asad al-jihādī' a prestigious member of the online Jihadist community who is widely believed to be a member of al-Qaeda. See: Abdul Hameed Bakier, 'al-Qaeda Outlines Its Strategy Seven Years After 9/11', *Terrorism Focus*, Vol.5, Issue 35, October 1, 2008.

14 Vahid Brown, 'CIA Bomber a Jihadi Blogger?', *Jihadica*, January 4, 2010. www.jihadica.com/cia-bomber-a-jihadi-blogger/.

15 This information is sourced from the websites' own statistics which are usually listed at the bottom of the homepage. It is very difficult to obtain accurate figures about the locations of the users of these sites as their URLs are constantly changing which does not allow for Internet information companies such as www.alexa.com – the most commonly used to obtain such information – to gather sufficient information of about the site to build an accurate profile. Further complicating the availability of location indicators is that the majority of Jihadist forum members use Internet proxies which mask their real IP address with that of the proxy server.

shut down by intelligence agencies. In the case of al-Fallujah and Shumūkh al-Islām, they have been taken off-line numerous times, only to reappear under new web addresses. Thus, Jihadists view forums that are constantly taken off line as being more important than stable ones, as intelligence agencies are unlikely to waste their time attempting to silence mediocre or ineffective forums.

A complicating factor in understanding al-Qaeda affiliated forums is in understanding the extent to which various intelligence agencies are involved in them. For instance, it is widely known by the users of said forums that these forums are constantly observed by members of various intelligence agencies and journalists from around the world. More recently, it has even emerged that the CIA, along with the Saudi intelligence service, were operating a Jihadist web forum as a 'honey pot' site.¹⁶ This site was reportedly set up to lure online Jihadists, and subsequently uncover terrorist plots, confirming the allegations of many online Jihadists that this is a tactic used by the intelligence services. Such initiatives naturally complicate the already difficult task of assessing the importance of these sites – and the veracity and reliability of the material on them.

b. Iraqi insurgency

The Iraqi insurgency forums serve the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. Like the al-Qaeda-linked websites, these also propagate the views of the various Sunni militant groups, for instance, by announcing their latest news and statements. The bulk of the material posted on these forums solely concerns the conflict in Iraq – unlike the al-Qaeda forums which have a much more global agenda. However, as is the case with most other Jihadist (and indeed Islamist) groups, they also regularly include news and views about other conflicts involving Muslims – particularly when these support the self-serving narrative adopted by Iraqi Sunni militants. Despite this, although the majority of the larger Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups are self described Salafi-Jihadists, they do not usually share all parts of al-Qaeda's 'global' Jihadist narrative. Indeed, in recent years, these forums increasingly voiced their opposition to al-Qaeda's involvement in Iraq – although such opposition to al-Qaeda is often due to these groups' negative experiences with al-Qaeda in Iraq, rather than because of any purely ideological reasons. For instance, these forums' opposition to al-Qaeda escalated after the death of Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī in June 2006 and the announcement of the 'Islamic State of Iraq' in October 2006 by al-Qaeda's Iraqi leaders, which demanded the absolute allegiance of all Sunni insurgent groups.¹⁷ Recently however, there have been calls by some insurgent groups to reunite the Sunni Jihadist factions with al-Qaeda to work together towards the common goal of liberating Iraq from the occupiers and their 'Shī'ī collaborators', as the democratically-elected Iraqi government and its employees are often described.¹⁸

16 Ellen Nakashima, 'Dismantling of Saudi-CIA Web site illustrates need for clearer cyberwar policies', *The Washington Post*, 19 March 2010. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/18>.

17 'Deputy chief of Al Qaeda calls for support', *The New York Times*, July 5, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/05/world/africa/05iht-iraq.4.6516228.html>.

18 The Iraqi Jihadist forum al-Ḥanīn issued a statement urging all Jihadist factions operating in Iraq to unite. See: <http://www.hanein.info/monashda.html>.

c. Salafist

The Salafist discussion forums are mainly hardline or highly conservative Wahhabi-influenced religious forums whose primary goal is advancing and propagating the Salafist understanding of Islam. This habitually includes vitriolic attacks on the practices of those they consider to be deviants, such as Sufis and Shī'īs, and so-called 'refutations' of their beliefs. These forums are not primarily concerned with jihad and Jihadist movements, instead they generally focus on rituals and issues of religious practice. Nevertheless, they share many of the same core theological beliefs and reference points as Salafi-Jihadists. Jihadists realize that this high level of theological cross-over makes these forums an ideal place for Jihadist sympathizers to reach out to non-Jihadist Salafists and Wahhabis, with the ultimate aim of converting them to violence by using common religious concepts, language and terminology. Jihadists clearly believe that the Salafist forums, where extremist pro-al-Qaeda material is often tolerated or even praised, host large numbers of people who are likely to be susceptible to radicalisation.

d. Palestinian insurgency

The Palestinian insurgency forums are sites connected to the main armed Palestinian groups and mostly consist of supporters and sympathizers of various Palestinian factions. Some Palestinian forums have among their membership active members of militant Palestinian groups, such as members of al-Qassam and al-Quds brigades, who enjoy relative freedom of activity in the Gaza Strip. The primary focus of these forums is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – although naturally other conflicts and issues are also mentioned from time to time. While the majority of members espouse Palestinian nationalist sentiments, there is a minority of Jihadists and Jihadist sympathizers active on these sites who constantly attempt to convert others to their ideology.

e. Others

There are thousands of general discussion forums on the Arabic blogosphere, not linked with a specific group or cause, which are open to the public and are used by Jihadist sympathizers to defend and propagate global Jihadist ideology.

Although the research for this report included looking at all the above mentioned Jihadist forums, it has given specific attention to the al-Qaeda affiliated forums due to their centrality in the current global Jihadist movement and as a result they pose the most direct threat to the UK and its interests. Most importantly, there are now signs that these sites play a larger role than previously thought in many terrorist plots and attacks. It is essential to better understand how these forums operate, who uses them, what kind of messages and statements are being posted on them, and to understand the role these sites play in both fostering, and preventing, terrorist violence.

SPOTLIGHT – Medād al-Sūyūf forum

Medād al-Sūyūf,¹⁹ is an Internet Jihadist discussion forum that sets itself apart from other Jihadist forums by being operated from the UK. It also propagates the most extreme forms of Jihadist ideology known as “the neo-Zarqawi movement” which vilifies some al-Qaeda supporters and theorists for not being brutal enough. For instance, the administrator and a number of its other key posters, have attacked a number of prominent Jihadist ideologues accusing them of being soft, co-opted by certain governments and not having the necessary credentials to hold positions of influence among Jihadists.²⁰ This has made the site’s followers relatively small in number, but very extreme in their outlook and opinions.²¹

Four of the site’s key members are:

- **‘Al-Miḥḍār’:** ‘Al-Miḥḍār’, Medād’s main administrator, is in fact a British national of Egyptian descent named Walid ElSharkawy. The Medād al-Sūyūf Jihadist web forum is registered to his name and operated from his home in the London Borough of Camden.²²
- **‘Abū Qudāma’:** Another prominent active member of the Medād al-Sūyūf Jihadist forum is Abū Qudāma Ṣāliḥ al-Hāmī, the brother in-law of Abū Muṣ’ab al-Zarqāwī. Abū Qudāma’s real name is Saṭī Qasrāwī. He is a Jordanian pro-Jihadist journalist who worked during the 1980s as a reporter in Afghanistan for ‘Abdullah ‘Azzām’s *Jihad Magazine*.²³ He now lives in his native Jordan.
- **Yasser al-Sirri:**²⁴ A known UK-based Egyptian extremist with links to a large number of prominent Jihadists, al-Sirri is a regular user of Medād al-Sūyūf on which he posts messages about Islamist detainees around the world. He does so in his capacity as the founder of the ‘Islamic Observation Center’, a one-man pro-Jihadist campaign group for detained terrorists. In 2008/9, al-Sirri posted a number of Abū Qatāda’s smuggled statements from Long Lartin prison in the UK on the Medād al-Sūyūf forum, which subsequently found their way to other Jihadist forums.
- **Mohammed al-Massari:**²⁵ A pro-Jihadist Saudi dissident living in the UK, Mohammed al-Massari has run pro-Jihadist websites for at least a decade. Al-Massari has had links to a number of UK-based and foreign extremist organisations

19 <http://www.almedad.com/vb/>

20 Eman al-Qaḥṭānī, ‘sijāl bayn islāmīyī landanistān’, *Al-Arabiya*, 12 February 2009. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2009/02/12/66329.html>.

21 Medād al-Suyūf has just over 4,000 registered members which is a relatively small number when compared to the larger and more popular Jihadist sites which have over 10,000 registered members.

22 See appendix 1.

23 Murad Batal al-Shihani, ‘The Dangerous Ideas of the Neo-Zarqawist Movement’, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2, Issue 9, September 2009.

24 See appendix 2.

25 See appendix 3.

SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED – Medād al-Sūyūf forum

including al-Qaeda and al-Muhajiroun, and was introduced to the UK from Saudi Arabia in 1994 by Hizb ut-Tahrir and its then UK spokesman Farid Kassim. Massari had been a member of HT but resigned soon after this and made the journey that Omar Bakri would later make too, from HT to Salafi-Jihadism.

Together, 'Al-Miḥḍār', Abū Qudāma and others use the forum as the main hub for what has been called "the neo-Zarqawist movement" which "identifies itself as the heirs of Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī's legacy".²⁶ Al-Zarqāwī is famous for orchestrating sectarian violence in Iraq against the country's Shī'ī and Christian population and for popularising video-taped beheadings. Neo-Zarqawists can also be characterised by their deep animosity towards Abū Muḥammad al-Maḥdisī, the influential Jihadist theoretician, who was at one point al-Zarqāwī's mentor. In 2005, however, he wrote a letter to al-Zarqāwī criticising his brutal tactics as having an adverse effect on the Jihadist cause.²⁷ This letter, and the fact that al-Maḥdisī does not have any real battlefield experience, is used by neo-Zarqawists to argue that he has gone soft and is trying to water down the Jihadist ideology.

Another distinctive feature of the neo-Zarqawist movement is that its members assert that Jihadists on the battlefields should not be bound by the opinions of scholars who theorise from the safety of their homes. Put simply, 'al-Miḥḍār' and Abū Qudāma, along with the committed members of the Medād al-Sūyūf forum, believe that Jihadist groups on the front lines should be able to make their own rules as they see fit, without having to refer to a 'scholar' like al-Maḥdisī or to any other religious authority. This hard-line view essentially gives the Jihadist groups a carte blanche to carry out acts of violence and to ignore any criticism or calls for calm – even if this comes from senior pro-Jihadist writers and preachers.

Walid ElSharkawy (al-Miḥḍār), Yasser al-Sirri and Mohammad al-Massari are all based in the UK and operate absolutely freely. ElSharkawy runs his website from his home in the London Borough of Camden as the mouthpiece of the most extreme and bloodthirsty strand of jihadism, while al-Massari and al-Sirri, who on numerous occasions have been investigated by the UK security services, regularly contribute to the site and disseminate extreme material. ElSharkawy has not even attempted to hide the fact that he runs a Jihadist discussion forum, as his name, UK address and telephone number are clearly listed on the site's registration page obtained from www.whois.com.

26 Murad Batal al-Shishani, 'The Dangerous Ideas of the Neo-Zarqawist Movement', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2, Issue 9, September 2009.

27 William McCants, Jarret Brachman and Joseph Felter, *Militant Ideology Atlas*, Combating Terrorism Center, November 2006. www.ctc.usma.edu/atlas/atlas-executivereport.pdf.

Chapter Two – Cyber proselytising and recruitment

This chapter will discuss the ways through which Internet Jihadists seek to spread and consolidate their ideology, both among convicted supporters of al-Qaeda’s ‘jihad’ and to people who may be encountering their message for the first time. As this chapter will show, Jihadists’ approaches to both target audiences vary significantly.

a. On Jihadist websites

Jihadists use the Internet to create a virtual bubble in which they can behave according to what they perceive as the ‘Salafist ideal’, which they are determined to implement in real life. This idealized bubble resembles their interpretation of the concept of the *ummah*: a monolithic community of believers who all share the same religious beliefs, modes of religious practice, and political goals regardless of location, race or any other factor. For them, the ideal religious belief is a puritanical Salafist interpretation of Islam that governs all aspects of human life and which will enable the *ummah* to recreate a presumed ‘golden age’ of Islam, namely the age of the Prophet Moḥammad and his companions.²⁸

To ensure that this ideology is clear and accessible to all, Jihadist websites are replete with theological and juridical articles designed to increase adherence to the Salafist way (*manhaj al-salaf*) and setting out the ‘authentic’ beliefs and practices of a Muslim. Although theological and juridical threads can be found on most sections in Jihadist forums, all Jihadist forums have a specific religious affairs section. The threads found in religious affairs sections can considerably differ from one site to another and topics can range from the ruling of eating horse meat to the Qur’ānic concept of disbelief (*kufri*).²⁹ It is important to note that the vast majority of religious discussions on these sites are informed by the Wahhabi understanding of Islam and it is very rare to find opinions from the Mālikī,³⁰ Ḥanafī,³¹ or Shāfi’ī³² schools of Sunni jurisprudence expressed, which is especially peculiar given that the Salafist and Wahhabi understanding of Islam is not a historically recognised school of Sunni jurisprudence. This practice limits what is seen as authoritative knowledge on religious matters to this small Wahhabi group, based on the belief that they alone have the correct creed and methodology to accurately interpret scripture. Moreover, Jihadists see this minority as possibly the only group of scholars with the necessary integrity to be worthy of being followed as they have not committed the ‘sins’ of other scholars such as appeasing rulers, accepting democratic rule, and attempting to reconcile differences with people of other faiths; all of which are deemed to turn such scholars into ‘scholars of the rulers’ (*‘ulamā*

28 Khaled Abou El Fadl, ‘Islam and the Theology of Power’, *Middle East Report*, No. 221 (Winter, 2001), pp. 28-33.

29 See figure 1.

30 The Mālikī school of Islamic jurisprudence is of the four Sunni schools of thought and derives from the works of Imam Mālik ibn Anas (d.795) and his students.

31 The Ḥanafī school of Islamic jurisprudence is of the four Sunni schools of thought and derives from the works of Imam Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu’mān (d.767) and his students.

32 The Shāfi’ī school of Islamic jurisprudence is one of the four Sunni schools of thought and derives from the works of Imam Muḥammad ibn Idrīs al-Shāfi’ī (d.820) and his students.

al-ṣalāṭīn) at best and out of the fold of Islam at worst.³³

Many of the threads and posts on these forums deal with general topics of religion and life, rather than only with 'Jihadist issues'. As the following posts make clear, this reflects that Jihadists see their use of violence within the context of a larger religious framework for living a correct 'Islamic life':

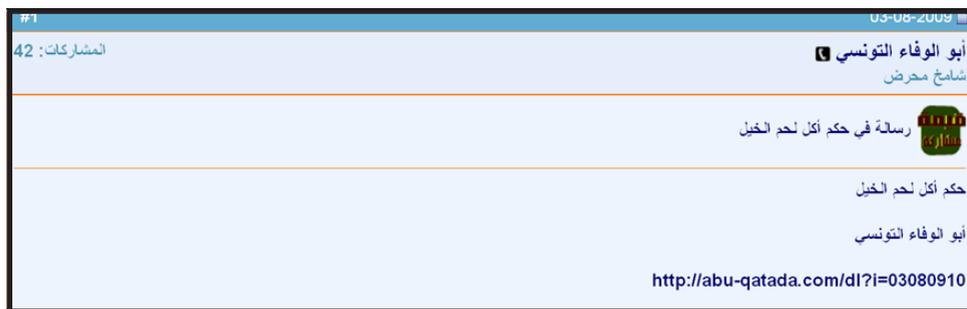


Figure 1 - Abū al-Wafā' al-Tūnisī, "risāla fi ḥukm akl laḥm al-khayl", shūmūkh al-islām, 03/08/2009.

Abū al-Wafā' al-Tūnisī [user pseudonym]

A treatise regarding the ruling of eating horse meat

The ruling regarding eating horse meat

Abū al-Wafā' al-Tūnisī

<http://abu-qatada.com/dl/?i=03080910>

The self-sufficient Jihadist bubble that consequently exists within these sites not only serves as a safe space for like-minded Jihadist interaction, but also serves to safeguard Internet Jihadists against what they see as the many unsavoury or hostile aspects of the Internet, such as anti-Jihadist counter-messaging and news of physical Jihadist defeats on the battlefield.

At the same time, however, online Jihadists are constantly engaged in a struggle to protect themselves and their websites against the infiltration of hostile individuals and ideas. Consequently, on Jihadist sites, moderators and members alike are usually very suspicious of new members posting news or discussing matters to do with the health of Jihadist leaders, strategies of Jihadist groups, or any other sensitive information, including the judicial or theological justifications for Jihadist tactics.³⁴ Threads containing comments which could be perceived to be negative are swiftly removed and repeating offenders usually have their membership revoked. Similarly forums take a hard line on certain news sources which they might designate as tools of "crusaders' propaganda" or as untrustworthy, thus not allowing any news or messages to be posted on their

33 'Scholars of the rulers' (*ulamā al-ṣalāṭīn*) is a very pejorative term used to denote a scholar who employs his religious knowledge to appease and justify a ruler's tyranny.

34 Online forums run by Jihadists are administered in a similar way to regular online forums. Non-members can view most discussions, but membership is required in order to take part and post a comment. To join, a prospective member must contact the administrators, whose permission is required for the applicant to login using a username and password. The administrators often seek new influxes in order to stimulate the discussion, but the forums are not always open to new members. Joining discussion forums occurs amid a background in which administrators frequently emphasise the prospect of infiltration by the Jihadists' antagonists, and some forums are highly selective.

sites which they do not approve of and which do not support their desired narrative.³⁵ At the same time, however, members attempt to present themselves and their Jihadist ideology in the best possible light. As a result, even hostile posters on their forums are dealt with relatively politely and courteously. Through such means, Jihadists clearly aim to win over doubters through presenting themselves as God-fearing and pious people who are living a proper 'Islamic life'.

b. On non-Jihadist websites

In addition to Jihadist websites hosting forums and acting as virtual warehouses for pro-Jihadist literature, recordings and videos, these sites also serve to co-ordinate and inspire Jihadist web-users to take part in a ghazwa (raid or incursion) onto more mainstream websites in order to expose new people to Jihadist ideas.

In most contexts, an incursion usually means posting a statement, video, or other material on non-Jihadist websites and forums, to gather greater support for the Jihadist world view. The following post shows pro-Jihadist users rallying each other to carry out such a 'media jihad':



Figure 2 Al-Maghrib al-Islāmī, “rīlān ‘an inshā’ katā’ib ghazū al-Internet manṭaqat al-maghrib al-islāmī”, shumūkh al-islām, 14/10/2008.³⁶

“I call you from this blessed pulpit [Jihadist forum] to form “Internet Jihadist incursion brigades for the Emirate of the Islamic Maghreb” to support Truth in the age of darkness, so contribute with us in establishing these brigades.”

The writer then goes on to explain what these ‘incursion brigades’ are:

A- Introduction to the Internet Jihadist incursion brigades: it is a large group of dedicated brothers who love the truth and wish to support the religion [of Islam] whose role is to deliver the truth to the sections of the world that do not get the full truth or do not get it in its true form, using the available means or finding new and innovative ones.”

35 At the same time, however, such so-called “crusader propaganda” outlets are not clearly defined and such designations often vary according to each news story. Hence, if a particular story is seen as favourable to Jihadists, that media outlet would be considered trustworthy and vice versa. The only exception however is the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya news network which is consistently portrayed as a Saudi government media tool against Jihadists and is commonly referred to as ‘al-‘ibriyyah’, (the Hebrew), alluding to the Jihadist and general Islamist perception that the network is pro-Israeli and anti-Muslim, along with other state run news agencies.

36 This post, while originally posted on 14/10/2008, continued to be discussed and commented upon during the period for which this report monitored various forums.



Figure 3 Al-Maghrib al-Islāmī, "ʿĪlān 'an inshā' katā'ib ghazū al-Internet manṭaḡat al-maghrib al-islāmī", shumūkh al-islām, 14/10/2008.

"B- The mission of the Internet Jihadist incursion brigade: is to spread truths about the Islamic ummah and the jihad and the mujāhidīn to the widest section of people in the world especially those whom the truth is hidden from.

C- The vision of the Internet Jihadist incursion brigade: our vision is to draw the virtual world map by reaching no less than 85% of Internet users, for example: as we find the Messenger programme [MSN Messenger] in approximately 99.9% of computers used by Internet users. We also hope to create our own Jihadist messenger to enter every household in the world. Shaykh Osāma may God protect him says "the battle is 90% media and the rest is with weapons..." or something to that effect, so pay attention to this opportunity that has presented itself to you and be careful not to miss out on supporting your religion by the easiest means, as after this facilitation you have no excuse not to do so."

The above post demonstrates the willingness of some Internet Jihadists to do whatever it takes to spread the Jihadist message, even though ideas like reaching 85% of all Internet users and launching a Jihadist version of MSN Messenger are less than realistic. More realistic tactics to spread the Jihadist message, which are regularly utilized, include posting Jihadist material on non-Jihadist forums or obtaining email lists and sending them Jihadist material.

One of the easiest places for Internet Jihadists to re-publish their material and garner support is on religious Salafist forums. The Jihadists' appeal to Salafists as targets for recruitment through propaganda stems precisely from the perception that Salafists are an easy target for such recruitment. Accordingly, sharing both a puritanical lifestyle and crucial concepts such as the exclusive righteousness, Jihadists tend to view Salafists as having a largely correct world-view, but an inactive approach to militancy. The work of propaganda geared towards Salafists therefore, is to stoke them towards agitation, in particular through selectively emphasising the endorsements by leading Salafist and Wahhabi ideologues concerning the merits and necessity of jihad.

Sometimes these postings are deleted by the forum administrators although they are generally left online with minimal user interaction. The following example is from a very popular Egyptian-based Salafist forum in which a handful of outspoken Jihadist sympathisers regularly post borrowed material from al-Qaeda affiliated websites. This specific post attempts to make light of enemy causalities by posting a video which shows an American Humvee destroyed by an Improvised Explosive Device.

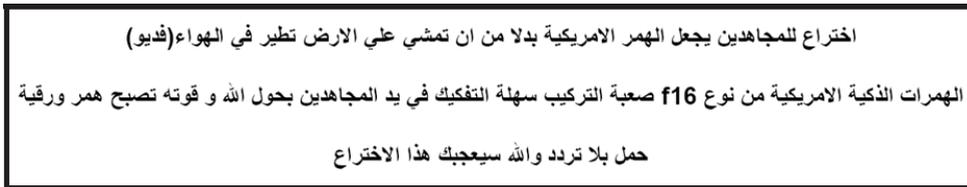


Figure 4 Al-Gharīb11, "ikhtirā' lil mujāhidīn ya'jal al-hummer al-amrīkiyya badalan min an tamshī 'alā al-arḍ taṭīr fi al-hawā' ", fursān al-ḥaq, 28/02/2009.

"An invention by the mujāhidīn which makes the American Hummer fly in the air instead of driving on land (Video). The American F16 smart Hummers are hard to assemble and easy to disassemble at the hands of the mujāhidīn, by the power of Allah, the Hummer turns into paper. Download without hesitation. I swear you will like this invention."

Another example of Jihadist material making its way onto a non-Jihadist web forum is a post containing a series of pictures documenting American casualties and losses in Afghanistan entitled 'Oh soldiers of Obama, this is what awaits you in Afghanistan'. This post has been widely circulated on a number of religious forums and has generally not been removed; the content, while pro-Jihadist in nature, clearly does not trouble the administrators of Salafist forums enough for them to remove it.



Figure 5 Al-Battār2, "yā junūd obama hathā mā yantazirukum fi afghānistān", fursān al-ḥaq, 11/12/2009.

"Oh soldiers of Obama, this is what awaits you in Afghanistan//Pictures."



Figure 6 Al-Battār2, "yā junūd obama hathā mā yantazirukum fi afghānistān", fursān al-ḥaq, 11/12/2009.

As these fairly typical posts demonstrate, Internet Jihadists will try to gain the support of non-Jihadist Salafists, whom they view as broadly sympathetic by showing the victories of Jihadist

groups over a materially superior enemy force, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan, and directly ascribing these victories to God. The desired implication is that Jihadists are pleasing God who in turn helps them to victory. This is an important connection to make because traditional Islamic doctrine holds that only the 'true' believers will be granted victory by God against all odds. Hence, the effectiveness of propaganda being able to depict victory, as was done so successfully by the Afghan-Mujahidin post Soviet withdrawal.

Another important category of Jihadist posts, placed deliberately on non-Jihadist Salafi forums, aims to directly address and overturn negative perceptions of Jihadist activities. The following post, for instance, provides a link to a Jihadist video which attempts to show Jihadist groups in a good light, as considerate people who go to great lengths not to hurt innocent Muslims:



Figure 7 Sufiyan Abū Anas, "maḥṭa' video yubayyn ḥirṣ al-mujāhidīn 'alā salāmat al-muslimīn", fursān al-ḥaq, 03/07/2008.³⁷

"Watch the care with which the mujāhidīn deal with the lives of their Muslim brethren, contradicting the accusations levied against them that they kill innocent people. Download here."

In contrast to their largely civil language on their own sites, Jihadists active on other sites often make their points very aggressively, with insults aimed at anyone who objects or dissents. Insults like 'jāmī', 'madkhalī',³⁸ and 'murjī',³⁹ are directed at Salafists who oppose global jihadism, denoting that they are not authentic Salafists. Likewise, the Muslim Brotherhood is termed 'al-ikhwān al-mustaslimīn' (the surrendering brotherhood) – a play on words in reference to their frequent about-turns, for instance on the permissibility of violent jihad and on the issue of political participation.

Another tactic used by pro-Jihadist Internet users is to post Jihadist material into even more mainstream, secular, non-Salafist, web forums, many of which dedicate a section to religious discussions in an 'Islamic' section which is used by Salafists and Salafi-Jihadists. By taking advantage of their lax administration of such sites, they have in some cases been able to falsely create the impression that Jihadist ideology enjoys overwhelming support from the majority of Muslims. This situation is often made worse because the ordinary users of these sites are often poorly versed in religious texts and hence are usually unable to refute Jihadist propaganda, which is backed up with scriptural references and quotes from prominent clerical figures. Most attempted

³⁷ This post, while originally posted on 03/07/2008, continued to be discussed and commented upon during the period for which this report monitored various forums.

³⁸ *Jāmī* and *Madkhalī* are a pejorative term used by Jihadists to describe non-Jihadist Salafis, and more specifically the followers of Muḥammad Amān al-Jāmī (d.1996) and Rabī ibn Hādī al-Madkhalī (b. 1933), both of whom are Wahhabi scholars who are proponents of obeying the rulers of the land and not revolting against them even if they have erred.

³⁹ The *murjī'a* were a Muslim theological group who believed that belief is in the heart and does not necessarily have to be reflected by actions. The term is used by Jihadists and Salafists alike as a pejorative term.

refutations to al-Qaeda sympathisers on non-Jihadist sites are political refutations which are mostly ineffective, especially in the face of the many examples of injustices against Muslims that Jihadists can narrate along with a barrage of misinterpreted Qur'ānic verses and prophetic traditions.

Key points:

- Internet Jihadists use their own forums to put out unambiguous defences of jihadism. Posts on these forums are carefully moderated to uphold the Salafist-ideal and new posters are treated with suspicion, but not outright hostility. Material questioning Jihadist actions and ideology, or the Jihadist worldview, is rarely allowed to remain on these forums. Unanimity, rather than discussion, debate or diversity, is the aim of these forums.
- Within their own forums, users try to behave and speak according to the 'Salafist ideal' treating each other, and even the occasional non-Jihadist user, with politeness and courtesy. This 'virtual bubble' nonetheless excludes other understandings of Islam, and Islamist ideology combined with the Wahhabi understanding of Islam, reinforces the idea of both a transnational Muslim Ummah and the idea that the only true understanding of Islam is the narrow Jihadist interpretation.
- In addition, users of Jihadist forums regularly attempt to export their ideology by posting on other forums and use Jihadist forums to co-ordinate such efforts. The forums mainly targeted for such 'incursions' are religious Salafist forums. Jihadists seem to think that it is relatively easy to sway the users of such forums from non-violent Salafism to violent Salafism. In part, this is because Salafi forum members typically share Jihadists' views on many issues of religion, devotion and ritual, and share the same Wahhabi reference points.
- In contrast to their generally civil behaviour on their own websites, pro-Jihadist web-users are generally very aggressive on non-Jihadist sites. Although they doubtlessly view such aggression as a form of jihad, this nonetheless contrasts curiously with their attempts on their own forums to present themselves as the perfect 'Islamic' community of the future.
- Such Jihadist 'incursions' onto non-Jihadist sites often make wide use of videos and pictures that appeal emotionally to many religious Muslims and which portray Jihadists as the only people who are standing up for Muslims around the world. Many of these posts also attempt to counter negative impressions of Jihadists, for instance, by portraying Jihadists as seeking to avoid the deaths of innocent Muslims.
- Both on their own websites and in their incursions onto those of others, Internet Jihadists frequently attempt to discredit news sources whose stories paint Jihadists in a poor light by dismissing them as, for instance, 'crusader propaganda' and as untrustworthy. They might, however, describe the very same news sources as 'trustworthy' where they report news that reflects well on Jihadist groups.
- In terms of challenging Jihadist ideology on Jihadist websites themselves, there are considerable hurdles to doing so effectively – not least that many Jihadists (as will be seen in the following chapter) are inclined to view dissent as possible evidence of heresy. Nonetheless, the superficial atmosphere of civility on such sites can allow productive challenges to take place in this sphere – particularly if such discussions are framed within Jihadist terminology and if such arguments

are couched through reference to Islamic 'scholars' accepted as legitimate by Jihadists.

- Although it is more difficult to engage with Jihadists on a non-Jihadist message board as they will immediately confront and aggressively insult the poster; other viewers who will see such exchanges may be less likely to side with the Jihadists – particularly if the person challenging them can provide religious and scriptural, rather than solely political, arguments against violent Jihadism. These Jihadist media incursions therefore represent an opportunity to discredit the Jihadist ideology in the eyes of those who are not yet convinced of its legitimacy.

Chapter Three – Key Jihadist beliefs

This chapter will examine the three theological concepts that are used repeatedly on Jihadist forums to justify Jihadist violence and the Jihadist worldview. These are The Saved Sect, *ṭāghūt* (false deity) and *al-walā' wal barā'* (allegiance to Muslims alone and rejection of non-Muslims). These three concepts are used by both online Jihadists and their real-world counterparts to legitimise violent Jihadist attacks through defining their Muslim enemies as apostates (*murtaddīn*) who can be legitimately killed.⁴⁰ These concepts also help to bolster Jihadists' belief in their own supremacy while in turn making them more resilient to external interventions and questioning. In most cases, online Jihadists use rulings from prominent traditional and contemporary Wahhabi clerics such as 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Bāz and Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn to bolster support for these concepts.

Takfīr is the act of declaring people or groups who claim to be Muslim as apostates – *murtaddīn* – a ruling which extremists use to justify their murder. In the mainstream Muslim tradition spanning over fourteen centuries, *takfīr* has been used with the utmost caution against those who violate an essential principle of Islam (*al-ma'lūm min al-dīn bil ḍarūra*) such as monotheism, the prophethood of Muḥammad or the obligation of prayer. As such, *takfīr* is reserved for flagrant violations of Islamic belief, and is a public declaration that the violator is no longer Muslim. Muslim scholars and jurists over the centuries have had extensive discussions about what the consequence of apostasy should be, with some arguing that they should be killed and others responding that they should only be killed if after leaving Islam they fight Islam and Muslims.⁴¹ Like all religions, discussions on the rulings of apostasy and heresy evolved with time. The Kharijite sect⁴² were the first group in Muslim history to declare Muslims who committed what they claimed to be serious sins (*kabā'ir*) apostates, as opposed to violations of belief. They used this tactic against their political enemies as religious grounds for their murder, a justification used for the assassination of the fourth Muslim caliph 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib in 661 A.D. *Takfīr* continued to be used by fringe Muslim groups as a weapon against their foes. Such groups made a great deal of additions to the principles of Islamic belief which Muslims are required to believe and when people fell short of the additional requirements they were labelled apostates. This tactic was re-popularised and used extensively by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, the founder of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century who was inspired by the controversial Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Taymīyya (d. 1328). By introducing additional requirements to the doctrine of monotheism, he was able to rally his followers to carry out murderous raids on various communities and sects.⁴³ Only in the modern period did *takfīr* become more widely used when the Wahhabi beliefs combined both with Sayyid Qutb's assertion that most Muslims were living in a state of ignorance and had

40 See: Sayed Saleem Shahzad, 'Takfirism: a messianic ideology', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2007. <http://mondediplo.com/2007/07/03takfirism>.

41 For an overview of the different juridical arguments on the punishment of apostasy see: Rudolph Peters and Gert J. J. De Vries, 'Apostasy in Islam', *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Vol. 17, Issue 1/4 (1976-1977), BRILL, pp. 1-25.

42 Thomas Kenney, *Muslim rebels: Kharijites and the politics of extremism in Egypt*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 34.

43 See: Michael Cook, 'On the Origins of Wahhābism', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, Vol. 2, No. 2 (July, 1992), pp. 191-202, Cambridge University Press.

abandoned true Islam, and with the Muslim Brotherhood's more general depiction of terrorism and assassination as legitimate acts of jihad against Muslims who had 'abandoned their religion'. This compound ideology, now commonly known as Salafi-Jihadism or *takfirism*, was taken to its logical extreme in the 1990's by the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Egyptian al-Jihad group who argued that anyone who supported what they saw as a *kāfir* (infidel) government or ruler by working for it (as a civil servant, for example) or even by voting, were themselves *kuffār* (infidels). The implications of such thinking opened the ideological pathway for al-Qaeda's attacks on other Muslims, including civilians.

It is also worth noting that all discussions on Arabic-language Jihadist forums, whether political or religious, are based on the premise that 'the West' is at war with Islam and Muslims. As such, activism and militancy is portrayed as a reaction of defence. Stemming from this basic narrative is a deeply held conviction that the present conflicts in Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan are all manifestations of the West's age-old hostility to Islam – a hostility previously manifested by the Crusades, European imperialism and dozens of other incidents stretching back to the first decades of Islam.⁴⁴

People

'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Bāz (1909-1999): The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia from 1993 until his death in 1999, whose religious opinions are commonly cited by Internet Jihadists for his hardline views on many topics, even while they criticize his ruling allowing for the presence of American troops on Saudi soil during the first Gulf War.

'Abdullah ibn Jibrīn (1933-2009): An influential Saudi Wahhabi cleric whose religious opinions are commonly cited by Internet Jihadists.

Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (1959-): A well-known and incredibly influential Salafi-Jihadist ideologue and the former mentor of Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī.

Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī (1966- 2006): A Jordanian, al-Zarqāwī was radicalized in prison and became the most prominent Jihadist in the Iraqi insurgency. After swearing allegiance to Osama bin Laden in late 2004, he changed the name of his organization to al Qaeda in Iraq. The scale and intensity of the violence his group was responsible for, and advocated, repulsed even Jihadist ideologues such as his former mentor Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī.

Abū Qatāda (al-Filasṭīnī) (1960-): A Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship currently in jail in the UK. Often described as Al Qaeda's 'spiritual ambassador' in Europe during the 1990s, Abū Qatāda is a heavyweight Jihadist ideologue. One of the most influential ideologues of jihadism, he has championed Islamist violence around the world, and his fatwas and writings are popular downloads from Jihadist websites.

⁴⁴ In some interpretations, this opposition to Islam is traced back to even before Muḥammad's prophethood and is understood as a more general hatred of monotheism of which Islam is the latest (but final) exposition. Western hostility to Islam is thus put in the context of a perceived hostility towards monotheism from pagans, idol-worshippers and polytheists that stretches back to the very dawn of time.

People continued

Ayman al-Ḍawāhirī (1951-): An Egyptian doctor from a prominent family frequently described as al-Qaeda's 'number two'. A lifelong Islamist, al-Ḍawāhirī became involved in Islamist dissent against the Egyptian regime during his teenage years. Imprisoned on several occasions by the regime, al-Ḍawāhirī moved to Afghanistan following his release and has lived in exile ever since. After uniting with Osama bin Laden during the 1990s, and eventually merging their organisations, al-Ḍawāhirī has surpassed Bin Laden over the past decade as the most public face of the al-Qaeda leadership.

Key Belief 1: *The Saved Sect*

Wahhabis and Salafi-Jihadists believe in the concept of *The Saved Sect*. *The Saved Sect* is considered by them to be the only group who have the correct Islamic beliefs. Building on this premise, they believe that all other manifestations of Islam (other than their own, naturally) are deviant and that their followers will be sent to hell. This principle can, when used in tandem with the Jihadist understanding of *takfir*, be used by Jihadists to first identify people as legitimate targets and then to justify the use of violence against them.

The concept of *The Saved Sect* derives from the following narration (ḥadīth) attributed to the Prophet:

“Beware! The People of the Book before (you) were split up into seventy-two sects, and this community will be split up into seventy three, seventy-two of them will go to Hell and one of them will go to Paradise, and it is the majority group (*jamā'a*).”⁴⁵

Wahhabis and Salafi-Jihadists interpret this to mean that their interpretation of Islam is the only correct one and that all other manifestations of Islam are illegitimate and are destined for hell. According to the standard Wahhabi worldview, however, not being Muslim has important implications not only in the next world but also in the present one. Most notably Salafists consider Muslims who have strayed from the ‘straight path’ by joining one of these rival 72 hell-bound sects to potentially be ‘apostates’, as people who knowingly reject the truth. While most Salafists believe that any resulting punishment of such people should mainly be conducted through an ‘Islamic state’, Salafi-Jihadists believe it can be conducted by any true Muslim – i.e. by a member of the self-identifying ‘saved sect’.⁴⁶

Individuals who post on Arabic-language Jihadist Internet forums usually strongly self-identify with the notion of *The Saved Sect* and make repeated references to it. The concept appears to have particular appeal because it creates a sense of exclusivity (a sense that is found frequently on non-religious web forums in all languages) and because it also strengthens the sense of self-righteousness and self-importance that is a characteristic of Jihadist groups and trends.

Online Jihadists often discuss, sometimes in great detail, the types of people who will be among *The Saved Sect*. The following post on one popular Jihadist forum describes the various traits which *The Saved Sect* is presumed to have:



من هم أهل الطائفة المنصورة ؟
 قال البخاري : (هم أهل العلم) .
 وذكر كثير من العلماء أن المقصود بالطائفة المنصورة هم : (أهل الحديث)
 وقال النووي : (ويحتمل أن هذه الطائفة مفرقة بين أنواع المؤمنين : منهم شجعان مقاتلون ، ومنهم فقهاء ، ومنهم محدثون ، ومنهم زهاد ، وأمرون بالمعروف وناهون عن المنكر
 ومنهم أنواع أخرى من الخير .)

Figure 8 Abū Osāma al-Shāmī, “*Awṣāf al-ṭā’ifa al-manṣūra*”, shumūkh al-islām, 10/05/2009.

45 Sunan Abī Dāwūd 3/4580.

46 As the narration also mentions the majority, Salafists and Salafi-Jihadists alike also refer to themselves as the *ahl al-sunna wal jamā'a*, which classically refers to the majority of Muslims who follow the various Sunni schools of thought.

"Who are the saved sect [*al-tā'ifa al-mansūra*]? Al-Bukhārī,⁴⁷ says they are the people of knowledge. Many scholars have mentioned that what is meant by the saved sect is *ahl al-ḥādīth* [the people of narration].⁴⁸ Al-Nawawī,⁴⁹ says: it is possible that this group is divided amongst different believers, some of them brave fighters, some of them jurists, some of them scholars of ḥādīth, some of them ascetics and those who enjoin good and forbid evil and other kinds of good people."

In other words, according to this definition, the membership of *The Saved Sect* includes not just Jihadists actively fighting on the battlefield but also those who provide various forms of support for the jihad, for instance through writing or distributing pro-Jihadist religious rulings.

The following post from a different Jihadist forum takes this concept further by quoting 'Abd al-Qādir bin 'Abd al-'Azīz (better known as as 'Dr. Faḍl' and Sayyed Imam al-Sharīf), the mentor of al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Ḍawāhirī, to argue that the role of *The Saved Sect* is to wage jihad against the rulers of Muslim-majority countries who do not govern according to a hardline Salafi-Jihadist understanding of Islam and the *sharī'a*:⁵⁰

يقول الدكتور عبد القادر بن عبد العزيز -هداه الله إلى الحق- صاحب كتاب (العمدة في إعداد العدة في ختام حديثه عن الطائفة المنصورة) .. من هي وومن تكون ، وكلام أهل العلم فيها . فيقول في صفحة (٨٠)
تحت عنوان " أهم واجبات الطائفة المنصورة في هذا الزمان "
" هذا و إن من أعظم واجبات الطائفة المنصورة في هذا الزمان هو جهاد الحكام المرتدين المبدلين لشرع الله الذين يحكمون المسلمين بالقوانين الوضعية الكفرية ..."

Figure 9 al-Zubair al-Maṣrī, "ṣada'at ḥaḍīdaha allāh bil ḥaḍīq allathī 'ajir 'an al-ṣad' bihi kathīr minman yussamūn bil 'ulamā'", al-fallūja, 06/02/2010.

"Dr. 'Abd al-Qādir bin 'Abd al-'Azīz ... says in the end of his discussion of the saved sect and what scholars have said about it, under the heading "the most important duties of the saved sect in this age", he says: the most important duties of the saved sect in this age is to wage jihad against the apostate rulers who have change the rules of Allāh and who govern Muslims using heretical man-made laws..."

In this instance, Dr Faḍl simultaneously identifies violent Jihadist groups as being part of *The Saved Sect* simply on account of them being violent. This naturally implies that people who do not support such violence are not members of *The Saved Sect*. Hardline Jihadists could easily follow such reasoning to its logical conclusion by arguing that those who are not part of *The Saved Sect* are apostates who should potentially be killed.

47 Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 870) was a famous Muslim scholar who compiled the most important collection of Sunni ḥādīth (prophetic traditions).

48 This refers to a traditional movement in Islam whose scholars were called *ahl al-ḥādīth* as they propagated a reliance on ḥādīth over juristic analogy, as opposed to the school that propagated using analogy between source texts and were called *ahl al-ra'y*.

49 Ḥaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 1278) was a famous Muslim scholar and jurist.

50 It is important to note that Dr Faḍl's earlier pro-Jihadist writings are still widely quoted on Jihadist forums, even though he has since publicly renounced these views, as famously printed in al-Hayat newspaper here: http://www.murajaat.com/dr_fadhel.php.

The following post shows this thought process in action. The poster in this case explicitly moves swiftly from identifying Salafi-Jihadists as *The Saved Sect* to then stating that any Muslim who does not follow precisely the same way of thinking is a 'deviant who will fail':

يتضح جلياً؛ أن السلفية الجهادية هم الطائفة المنصورة التي وعدنا الله ورسوله صلى الله عليه وسلم بالنصر والقهر لعدو الإسلام وعدوها، واتضح أيضاً أن كل من خالف سبيلها، فلم يعتقد بعقيدة السلف الصالح، أو لم يسلك سبيل الجهاد؛ فهو من الضالين المخذولين.

Figure 10 'Yūn al-Zarqāwī, "ilā al-ikhwan al-judud...limāthā al-salafiyya al-jihādiyya?"; al-fallūja, 26/02/2010.

"It becomes clearly apparent that Salafi-Jihadists are the saved sect who has been promised victory against its enemies and the enemies of Islam. It is also apparent that all those who take a different path to this group do not believe in what the righteous predecessors believed, and those who do not take the path of jihād are deviant people who will fail."

For Salafi-Jihadists it is only a small step from such reasoning to arguing that members of *The Saved Sect* have a divine obligation to attack and kill such 'deviants'.

In some cases, posters explicitly equate *The Saved Sect* with al-Qaeda and its affiliated movements. For instance on the prominent 'al-fallūja' forum, one poster may be seen asserting that Osama bin Laden is part of *The Saved Sect* as he is carrying the banner of Islam and is the leader of Jihadists in the present age:

فأهل الجهاد اليوم هم درع الأمة الواقي و حصنها الحصين و ركنها الركين فإن لم يكن أهل التوحيد و الجهاد هم الطائفة المنصورة التي أخبر عنها رسولنا الكريم (صلى الله عليه وسلم) فمن يكون

و قد شرف الله عبده
 *(أسامة بن محمد بن لادن) *.
 -أبي عبد الله -
 بحمل راية الجهاد في هذا الزمان العصيب فهو إمام المجاهدين في الأرض و المطلوب الأول لكل قوى الكفر و الإلحاد و الطغيان في العالم

Figure 11 Arq al-Malāḥim, "muqarana bayn ba'd a'imat al-salaf wa bayn al-Shaykh al-imām 'usāma bin lāden"; al-fallūja, 04/02/2010.

"The people of jihād today are the shield of the ummah and are its protective fortress and its pillar. So if the people of monotheism and jihād are not the saved sect which the Prophet foretold about then who can they possibly be? Allah has blessed his servant Osama bin Muḥammad bin Laden – Abī 'Abdillah – by making him carry the banner of jihad in this difficult age, so he is the Imam of the mujāhidīn on earth and the most wanted man by all forces of disbelief, atheism and tyranny in the world."

Such statements illustrate why tackling Jihadists and their ideology can be so difficult; their ideology is explicitly based both on the assumption that those who are acting as 'the shield of the ummah' by carrying out terrorist attacks are by default members of *The Saved Sect*, and also on

the concept that the more such Jihadists are attacked by 'all the forces of disbelief, atheism and tyranny', the more this proves that they were right all along and that they should continue their struggle.

Such sentiments are also found in the works of Abū Qatāda, the Jordanian-Palestinian preacher, who has written an entire book on the subject of *The Saved Sect* entitled 'The characteristics of the Victorious Party in the Foundation of the State of the Believers'. One statement from this book which is regularly quoted on pro-Jihadist forums states that members of *The Saved Sect* will be "waging jihad, they will be expelled from every area, subjugating their enemies, they do not care about those who oppose them or abandon them."⁵¹

Abū Qatāda's definition of *The Saved Sect* as being people who will be fought against and even 'expelled from every area' is important in explaining the persistence of much contemporary Jihadist violence. Statements which say that *The Saved Sect* will *inevitably* be fought and opposed by the enemies of the truth help to convince Jihadists that the more they are fought against, the more this proves that they are following the correct path. This helps explain why Jihadists often respond to government crackdowns by becoming more violent and more radical – because the government's action has strengthened their self-belief and sense of purpose rather than weakened it.

Similarly, the concept of *The Saved Sect* also explains the limited role that former Jihadists such as Dr Faḍl can play in tackling hardline Jihadist ideology – because as soon as such Jihadist figures renounce violence, they are assumed to have left *The Saved Sect* and therefore to have become deviants whose views should be rejected out-of-hand and who perhaps should even actively be fought against.

A further complication in tackling the Jihadist understanding of *The Saved Sect* is that the concept, in various forms, continues to be popularised by Wahhabi-influenced organisations and movements around the world. For example, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d.1792), the founder of Wahhabism, mentions the concept in his treatise entitled '*Aqīdat al-Firqa al-Nājiya* which he wrote in defence of his beliefs. This treatise continues to be produced, circulated and taught from by Wahhabis worldwide. In the same way, Ibn Taymīyya,⁵² a medieval scholar who is one of the authorities most often cited by Wahhabis and Salafi-Jihadists alike, also mentioned *The Saved Sect* in his book *al-'Aqīda al-Wāsiṭiyya*.⁵³ Online Jihadists repeatedly use such references to reinforce their own understanding of the concept and to argue that their interpretation of it is not only correct but is also intrinsic to Islam.

The modern Wahhabi and Salafist emphasis upon such scholars and their writings, therefore helps to lay the ground-work for Salafi-Jihadists who can use such concepts not only to justify their extremist interpretation of who is a member of *The Saved Sect*, but also to identify who the enemies of *The Saved Sect* are. This can then be combined with other extreme concepts such as

51 Abū Qatādah al-Filistīnī, '*Characteristics of the Victorious Party in the Foundation of the State of the Believers* (The Land of Ash-Shām)', p. 21. <http://ia311025.us.archive.org/0/items/characteristics/Characteristics.pdf>.

52 Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Taymīyya (d. 1328) was a puritanical Ḥanbalī theologian and jurist. He is highly influential among Wahhabis and Salafists and other Islamists although he was highly controversial in his day among scholarly peers.

53 Taqīddīn Abū 'Abbās Aḥmad Bin Taymīyya, *al-'Aqīdah al-Wāsiṭiyyah*. <http://www.taimiah.org/Display.asp?f=aqw00001.htm>.

that of *al-walā' wal barā'* (allegiance to Muslims alone and rejections of non-Muslims) to hate such people or even to actively fight physically against them.

Implications:

- The concept of *The Saved Sect* encourages Jihadists to view all other Muslims, at best, as misguided individuals who need to be educated or, at worst, (the most hardline Jihadist interpretation) as people who deliberately reject true Islam and who consequently should be fought against.
- The concept also reinforces Jihadists' self-belief in their sense of mutual solidarity. It also allows them to dismiss opposition to their views or even overwhelming evidence of their own unpopularity, through arguing that such trends are in fact a characteristic of *The Saved Sect*.
- Jihadists who believe that they are 'the saved sect' may consequently be more resistant to interventions from outside forces. Overt opposition to their views, however expressed, can risk making them even more certain that they are indeed 'the saved sect'.
- Continued emphasis by Wahhabis and Salafists on the concept of *The Saved Sect* risks entrenching Jihadist beliefs in the principle (even if these groups dispute who exactly compose the membership of *The Saved Sect* and what action this group should take).

Key belief 2: ṭāghūt

Postings on Salafi-Jihadist websites typically place great emphasis upon justifying violence through the concept of *ṭāghūt*, false deity. The concept of *ṭāghūt* exists in mainstream Islam where it is usually used to refer to the literal false idols, thus rejecting and condemning *ṭāghūt* is not controversial. However, both Wahhabis and Salafi-Jihadists habitually go far beyond this to define *ṭāghūt* as anything at all that is followed or adhered to instead of God or what God has revealed, including constitutions, democracy, and any non-*sharī'a* legal systems. Wahhabis in general believe that true Muslims have an obligation to struggle against *ṭāghūt*, which they typically define as anything not directly derived from their understanding of Islam; for Salafi-Jihadists this can mean fighting physically against states which do not impose their preferred version of the *sharī'a* as state law or against individuals who support such states or facilitate their functioning.

Ṭāghūt is defined by mainstream Muslim scholars and linguists as anything which is worshiped to the exclusion of God – in other words, as the antithesis of Islamic monotheism. However, both violent and non-violent Wahhabis understand *ṭāghūt* to be much more than a false deity. For example, 'Abd al-Majīd bin Moḥammad al-Munī, a leading theoretician for al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia who was killed in Riyadh in 2004, wrote a short treatise entitled 'The Creed of the Saved Sect' which was posted on Jihadist websites just weeks before he was killed – and which is still circulated widely on such forums.

Al-Munī explained that in order to achieve the true monotheism (*tawḥīd*) which is required of every Muslim, one must explicitly reject and disavow *ṭāghūt*, giving the following examples:

"... such as the modern *ṭawāghūt* [plural of *ṭāghūt*] like the legal courts whether there were regional, local or international and the polytheist rulers and the parliaments and the like ... so they are *ṭawāghūt* and the person who adheres to them is a worshipper of *ṭāghūt*."⁵⁴

In other words, anyone who follows rulers, parliaments or courts which are not based on the Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam is a worshipper of false idols, i.e. an apostate – as is anyone who actively supports or even simply 'adheres' to the rulings of such institutions. The following post shows how Jihadists use the concept of *ṭāghūt* to brand Algerian soldiers as 'soldiers of *ṭāghūt*' in order to justify terrorist violence against them.



Figure 12 algo4hm, " 'ājil: 'amalīyatān jadīdatān li-ikhwānik fi maghrib al-islām', al-fallūja, 03/03/2010.

"Our brothers from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb yesterday detonated an improvised explosive device against a convoy of trucks carrying soldiers of the *ṭāghūt* which was heading toward the area of Awlād 'Abdullah which is located between the areas of Sidi

⁵⁴ 'Abd al-Majīd bin Moḥammad al-Munī, 'Aqīdat al-Tā'īfah al-Manṣurah'. See: <http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=3920&x=2cyeazyz>.

Dāwūd and Barj Mnāyil in the governorate of Boumurdas [in Algeria] east of the capital to comb the area. The apostates have conceded that the explosion was severe and accurate even though they claim no soldiers were injured.”

The following Jihadist post, a statement of responsibility by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula for a failed attack on the Saudi deputy interior minister, Prince Moḥammad bin Nayef, demonstrates how the concept of *ṭāghūt* can also be used to justify the assassination of individuals.⁵⁵ The forum user who posted the statement even used the word *ṭāghūt* in the thread’s title to underscore the legitimacy of the attempted assassination:



Figure 13 Murāsil al-Fajr, “*muhim jiddan, tanzīm qā'idat al-jihād fi jazīrat al-'arab/tabannī mūḥāwalat iḡhtiyāl al-ṭāghūt muḥammad bin nāyef*”, shumūkh al-islām, 30/08/2009.

“Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a statement of responsibility for the attempted assassination of the *ṭāghūt* Moḥammad bin Nayef Āl-Saud.”

Definitions of *ṭāghūt* which can be used to justify such violence, whether against groups or individuals, are common on Jihadist websites. For example, in a very long statement posted on various Jihadist forums, a group calling itself ‘*Jamā'at al-Tawḥīd Wal Jihād fi Bayt al-Maqdis*’, a new Jihadist group based in the Gaza Strip, explained in depth what they mean when they use the term *ṭāghūt*:

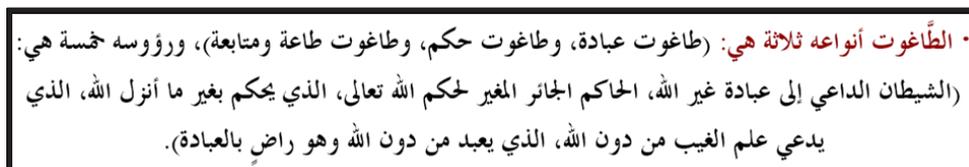


Figure 14 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawḥīdī, “*al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwahidīn*”, shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

“The *ṭāghūt* is of three kinds: (*ṭāghūt* that is worshipped, *ṭāghūt* that legislates and governs, and *ṭāghūt* that is obeyed and followed) and its heads are five: (Satan who calls for the worship of something other than Allah, the oppressive ruler who changes the rulings of Allah,⁵⁶ whoever rules with something other than what Allah has revealed,⁵⁷ whoever claims to have the knowledge of the unseen instead of Allah, whoever is worshipped instead of Allah while he consents).”

55 Sundarsan Raghavan, ‘In Failed Strike on Saudi Prince, a New Fear of Al-Qaeda’s Tactics’, *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/06/AR2009100603711.html>.

56 This is a reference to a ruler that changes the Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *sharī'a* making what Salafi-Jihadists deem as legitimate as illegitimate and vice versa.

57 This is a reference to a ruler who does not rule by the Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *sharī'a* as state law.



Figure 15 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawhīdī, "al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwahidīn", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

"The helpers of the *ṭawāghīt* [plural of *ṭāghūt*] and their supporters are polytheist and *kuffār* in actuality, for the following two reasons:

First: their allegiance to and support for the polytheists.

Second: their allegiance to their own polytheism, disbelief and *ṭāghūt*."

This definition, which explicitly says that anyone who 'supports' such *ṭāghūt* or idol is himself a *kāfir* or apostate, is important because of what the Jihadist author did not feel necessary to add – namely that those who become "polytheist and *kuffār*" by aiding *ṭāghūt* deserve to be killed. Such definitions of *ṭāghūt* are, however, used extensively to justify and legitimize Jihadist violence.

The issue of *ṭāghūt* also illustrates another important feature of pro-Jihadist forums: that, in order to better justify Jihadist attacks, online Jihadists do not just reference their own Salafi-Jihadist writers. Instead, they also quote from more widely-recognised Wahhabi scholars in an attempt to give their ideas additional legitimacy. For example, the following post made in January 2010 on the 'al-fallūja' forum draws users' attention to a video clip of Muḥammad bin Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn (d. 2001), a Saudi Wahhabi scholar who for several decades was very influential in the spread of Wahhabi thought, declaring that rulers who do not implement the *sharī'a* as state law are apostates. The post, which significantly is titled "Allahu Akbar [God is the Greatest], our Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymīn may Allah have mercy upon him declares the *ṭawāghīt* [plural of *ṭāghūt*] rulers as apostates, Allahu Akbar" reads:



Figure 16 Ataynākum bil Thabḥ, "allāhu akbar Shaykhuna al-`uthaymīn yukaffir al-ḥukkām al-ṭawāghīt allāhu akbar"; al-fallūja, 30/01/2010.

"A video clip that shows Shaykh al-`Uthaymīn, may Allah have mercy on him and grant him heaven, talking about the sovereignty of God and the disbelief of rulers who have replaced the rule of Allah in our modern times (i.e. Arab rulers)."

This shows how the users of Jihadist forums use rulings by prominent Wahhabi scholars to reinforce their own Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *ṭāghūt*, namely that rulers who rule by a different version of *sharī'a* than the one they prefer should be considered to be 'idol-worshippers'. Unfortunately, such open-ended statements by senior Wahhabi clerics are common and are widely used by posters on Jihadist forms to justify their own worldview.⁵⁸

Online Jihadists recognise the role that these mainstream Wahhabis have played in empowering Salafi-Jihadists, and as a result regularly use their arguments to strengthen their position and prove to other readers that Salafi-Jihadists are following the correct conception of Islam (even though many of the forums' users would disagree with such scholars on precisely how 'Islamic states' and individuals should confront such *ṭāghūt*). In the following thread, a pro-Jihadist user has posted quotes from a discussion between senior Wahhabi clerics in which Bin Bāz⁵⁹ says that Muslims should 'fight against' any Muslim ruler who does not apply 'the rule of God' as state law (i.e. who is a *ṭāghūt*):⁶⁰

58 A similar definition of *ṭāghūt* is also expressed by other very prominent Saudi Wahhabi scholars such as 'Abdullah Bin Jibrīn (d. 2009) and 'Abd al-'Azīz Bin Bāz who held the position of Chief Mufti, the highest religious office in Saudi Arabia, from 1993 until his death in 1999.

59 Alongside Bin Bāz, the discussion includes Salmān al-'Awda, a Saudi cleric who was supportive of Osama bin Laden's calls for political and religious reform within Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s. He later became critical of Bin Laden and on the sixth anniversary of 9/11 he made a public TV address to al-Qaeda asking them to repent.

60 This particular discussion is additionally used by online Jihadists to show that Bin Bāz originally held views that were almost identical to contemporary Salafi-Jihadist understandings – and to provide evidence that Bin Bāz later backtracked away from such extreme positions, under pressure from the Saudi monarchy.

فقال ابن باز : إذا فعلها مستحلاً لها يكفر وإذا فعلها لتأويل لإرضاء قومه أو لكذا وكذا يكون كفراً دون كفر ، ولكن يجب على المسلمين قتاله إذا كان عندهم قوة حتى يلتزم ، من غير دين الله بالزكاة أو غيرها يقاتل حتى يلتزم .

Figure 17 - Abū Mu'āwiyya al-Shāmī, "naṣ al-munāqasha alātī dārat bayn bin bāz wa bin jibrīn wa al-'awda wa al-qarnī fi al-istiḥlāl", al-taḥaddī, 12/04/2010.

Ibn Bāz said: If he [the ruler] had done it believing it to be permissible, he becomes *kāfir* [disbeliever], and if he has done it for certain other reasons, to please his people for instance that is *kufr dūna kufr* [a position in between where the person has carried out an act of disbelief but it does not expel him from the fold of Islam], it is the obligation of Muslims to fight him if they have the power until he adheres [to the *sharī'a*].

For Jihadists, Bin Bāz's statement that Muslim rulers who do not implement the Wahhabi interpretation of *sharī'a* as state law should be fought against is clearly very useful in demonstrating the legitimacy of their own tactics (not withstanding that many Jihadists also dislike Bin Bāz for later siding with the Saudi monarchy and the US against hardline Wahhabi 'reformists' such as Bin Laden). Bin Bāz's numerous statements that Muslim rulers that do not apply 'the rule of God' as state law (i.e. who are the *tāghūt* and consequently are apostates) should be fought against in fact appear often on Jihadist forums, underscoring how useful Jihadists find the rulings of prominent Saudi Wahhabi clerics in justifying terrorist violence. For example, in a separate instance, one poster on the al-taḥaddī forum has provided an extensive breakdown of Bin Bāz's statements on how Muslims can become *tāghūt* through not following the Salafist understanding of Islam:

1) كان يفتي قديماً بكفر الحاكم بغير ما أنزل الله! فيقول: (لا إيمان لمن اعتقد أن أحكام الناس وأراءهم خير من حكم الله ورسوله، أو تماثلها وتشابهاها، أو تركها وأحل محلها الأحكام الوضعية، والأنظمة البشرية، وإن كان معتقداً أن أحكام الله خير وأكمل وأعدل) اهـ . "وجوب تحكيم شرع الله".

2) وقال: (فمن خضع لله سبحانه وأطاعه وتحاكم إلى وحيه، فهو العابد له، ومن خضع لغيره وتحاكم إلى غير شرعه، فقد عبد الطاغوت وانقاد له، كما قال تعالى: ((الْمَثَرِ إِلَى الَّذِينَ يَرْعُونَ أَنَّهُمْ آمَنُوا بِمَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ يَرِيدُونَ أَنْ يُتَحَاكَمُوا إِلَى الطَّاغُوتِ وَقَدْ أُمِرُوا أَنْ يَكْفُرُوا بِهِ وَيُرِيدُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَنْ يُضِلَّهُمْ ضَلَالًا بَعِيدًا))، العبودية لله وحده والبراء من عبادة الطاغوت والتحاكم إليه من مقتضى شهادة أن لا إله إلا الله وحده لا شريك له وأن محمداً عبده ورسوله) اهـ "وجوب تحكيم شرع الله".

3) يقول ابن باز للدعاة الذين جاءوا لليباحتوه في حكم الحاكم بغير ما أنزل الله: الأصل عدم الكفر حتى يستحل، يكون عاصياً، وأتى كبيرة ويستحق العقاب، كفر دون كفر، حتى يستحل . شريط "الدعة الجازية"

Figure 18 Abūl Khansā' al-Ḥimyarī, "al-bāzīyāt al-muḍalila wal mutanāqiqa lil milla al-ḥanīfiyya al-ibrāhīmīyya" al-taḥaddī. 17/03/2010

"1- He [Bin Bāz] had issued a fatwa saying that the ruler who does not implement the rule of Allah is a disbeliever. He states: whoever believes that the rules of people and their opinions are better than the rule of Allah and his messenger, or believes that the rules of people are equal to or similar to the rule of Allah, and whoever leaves the rules of Allah and installs in its stead man-made laws, and human systems, even if he believed that the rules of Allah

are better and more just and more complete, does not have belief [i.e. is an disbeliever].⁶¹

2- And he [Bin Bāz] said: whoever submits to Allah and obeys him and follows his revelation, he is a worshipper of Allah, and whoever submits to another and does not follow the rules of Allah, he has worshipped *ṭāghūt* and has been towed towards him... servitude to Allah alone and disavowal from the worship of *ṭāghūt* and following its rules are requirements of the declaration of faith that there is no God but Allah and that Muḥammad is his servant and messenger.

3- Bin Bāz tells those who came to discuss the ruling of a ruler who does not implement the rule of Allah [as state law]: the principle is that he is not a disbeliever until he believes it to be permissible, he is a sinner [for not implementing the rule of Allah as state law] who has committed a major sin and deserves punishment, it is an act of disbelief that does not make a person non-Muslim until he believes it to be permissible.”

In conclusion, by using common Wahhabi definitions of *ṭāghūt*, Salafi-Jihadists can accuse any ruler who implements a political system that conflicts with their exact interpretation of Islam as being *ṭāghūt*. From this, also using mainstream Salafist and Wahhabi concepts they can then argue, in the words of Bin Bāz, that true Muslims are obliged to ‘fight’ against such *ṭāghūt*. The concept of *ṭāghūt* is therefore at the heart of the Salafi-Jihadists’ struggle against various regimes in the Middle East and does much to explain the religious rationale behind their terrorist attacks – as can be seen from the statements quoted above from al-Qaeda inspired groups and franchises in Algeria, Gaza and Saudi Arabia.

Unfortunately, because Salafi-Jihadists base their theology on open-ended Wahhabi concepts of *ṭāghūt*, the scope for their violence is potentially limitless. Indeed, using such definitions, Jihadists may consider any political system that is not based on their exact understanding of ‘*sharī‘a*’ to be *ṭāghūt* and as such, that it should potentially be fought against and destroyed in order to create an ‘Islamic system’.

According to this exceptionally broad understanding of *ṭāghūt*, the police, armed forces, judiciary and other departments that work within and with governments to maintain law and order or to generally uphold a particular system of government can be accused by Jihadists of helping and aiding a *ṭāghūt*; thus becoming legitimate targets. The inevitable outcome of this worldview can be seen in regular Jihadist attacks against such government bodies in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Algeria and other many countries.

Implications:

- According to Jihadist ideology, every state, government and ruler that does not apply the Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *sharī‘a* as state law is *ṭāghūt*; a deity worshipped instead of God which should be violently fought and removed. As no Muslim-majority state in the world currently applies the Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of *sharī‘a* as state law, Jihadists may therefore consider them all to be legitimate targets whose governments should be overthrown.
- Muslims who work for, aid or support these states in any way, or who recognise such states as legitimate (for instance, by taking part in their democratic processes or by following their

61 To see Bin Bāz’s full statement on his official website see: ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Bāz, ‘*wājib taḥkīm shar’ allāh wa nabth man khālafah*.’ <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/mat/8747>.

judicial systems) can also be judged as apostates for assisting or not actively rejecting such ṭāghūt.

- Salafi-Jihadist definitions of ṭāghūt depend extensively on religious rulings and fatwas that are issued by mainstream Wahhabi clerics – even though Salafi-Jihadists disagree with such clerics over the implications of such definitions.
- The Salafi-Jihadist understanding of ṭāghūt, i.e. that anyone who does not run a state according to their ideas is an enemy, is clearly strengthened when used in conjunction with the parallel conception of *The Saved Sect* which, as outlined above, can be used to declare all those outside the self-identifying Saved Sect to be apostates.

Key belief 3: Allegiance to Muslims alone and Rejection of non-Muslims (*al-walā' wal barā'*)

The extremist principle of *al-walā' wal barā'* (Allegiance [to Muslims alone] and rejection [of non-Muslims]) is frequently used by the users of pro-Jihadist forums to sustain their worldview and in some instances to justify violence. When combined with *takfīri* ideology, Jihadists may come to consider Muslims who do not abide by their understanding of *al-walā' wal barā'* to be legitimate targets for violence.

The concept of *al-walā' wal barā'* is usually justified by extremists through vacuous references to a number of Qur'ānic verses including one which reads "believers, do not take the Jews and the Christians as your friends and protectors, they are friends of each other" (Quran 5:51-52). The resulting principle of allegiance to Muslims and enmity to non-Muslims, which aims to divide humanity physically, mentally and socially into Muslim and non-Muslims blocs, is central to Wahhabi thinking. One prominent Wahhabi cleric has, for instance, described as 'repugnant' those Muslims who have 'taken the disbelievers as friends while displaying enmity towards many of the believers', before describing the principle of '*al-walā' wa'l barā'* as being 'one of Islam's main foundations' and 'of paramount importance'.⁶²

Wahhabis who believe that this principle is indeed central to being Muslim *and* in Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's concept of *takfīr*, can consequently come to believe that anyone who does not show sufficient levels of *walā'*, or allegiance, to 'true Muslims' or adequate *barā'*, or rejection, of 'non-Muslims', are themselves at risk of committing apostasy and becoming non-Muslims. Salafi-Jihadists add to this concept their own belief that members of *The Saved Sect* have a divine right to judge other people's levels of *walā'* to Muslims (i.e. their allegiance to self-identifying members of *The Saved Sect*, the only true Muslims) and *barā'* of non-Muslims (i.e. rejection of the *kuffār*, *ṭāghūt* etc, as defined by *The Saved Sect*) and to punish them if they are perceived as falling short of the required standards.

Ayman al-Zawāhirī, al-Qaeda's second in command mentions, in the introduction to his book on *al-walā' wal barā'*, his opinion of the importance of this concept by saying "we believe that the greatest challenge facing monotheism and Islamic belief in this age is the threat of deviation from allegiance to believers and animosity of *kuffār*."⁶³

The following excerpts from a long thread posted on the 'al-fallūja' Jihadist forum show how the issue of *al-walā' wal barā'* can be used to declare groups of people to be apostates. In this instance, the post uses the *al-walā' wal barā'* concept to declare that Muslims who serve in the army of a ruler who Jihadists view as being *ṭāghūt*, i.e. un-Islamic, are showing *walā'* (allegiance, loyalty or friendship) to an unbeliever and hence are also non-Muslims:

62 Abdul Razzaq al-Afifi, vice-chairman of Saudi Arabia's Permanent Committee of Research and Fatwa. See his introduction to this publication: <http://www.islamicemirate.com/E-Books/alWalaawalBaraa1.pdf>.

63 Ayman al-Zawāhirī, '*al-walā' wal barā'*; *aqīda manqūla wa wāqī' mafqūd*', available on: <http://www.tawhed.ws/r1?i=1388&x=xota0ud8>.

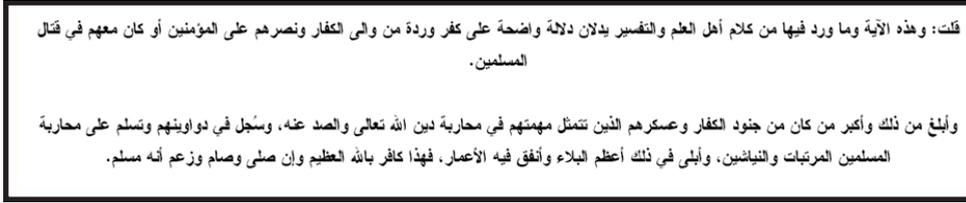


Figure 19 Abū Ḥanḍala al-Asadī, "ḥukm junūd al-ṭawāghīt bil adilla al-shar'iyya", al-fallūja, 24/03/2010.

"...and I say: This passage and the interpretation of the scholars of its meaning clearly indicate to the disbelief and apostasy of those who show allegiance [*walā'*] to the *kuffār* [non-Muslims] and support them against Muslims or whoever helps them in fighting Muslims. And worse than that is whoever was in the army of the *kuffār* [non-Muslims] whose job consists of fighting the religion of Allah and stopping people from adhering to it. Whoever does that and is registered with the army of disbelievers and has received a salary and awards for his services in fighting against Muslims... he is a *kāfir* [disbeliever] in Allah, the most great, even if he prayed and fasted and claimed to be a Muslim."

Thus, having defined the state's ruler as a *kāfir* (on account of his army 'fighting the religion of Allah'), the writer argues that soldiers who are showing him allegiance and helping him are also non-Muslims, i.e. that they too are legitimate targets for Jihadist operations, regardless of whether they observe the usual 'pillars' of the Islamic faith such as praying, fasting and believing themselves to be Muslim. This post is typical of how Jihadists use the Wahhabi doctrine of *al-walā' wal barā'* to justify violence against Muslims through arguing, as do many senior Saudi Wahhabi clerics, that adherence to this doctrine is far more important than observing Islamic rituals such as prayer.

In addition to justifying violence through designating people as apostates, however, Jihadists also use the concept of *walā' wal barā'* to reinforce their Manichean worldview, through dividing the world into good and evil and seeking to impose upon Muslims a 'with us or against us' ultimatum.

The following forum thread, which is a part of a lengthy statement laying out the creed of the Group of Monotheism and Jihad in Jerusalem (*Jamā'at al-Tawḥīd Wal Jihād fi Bayt al-Maqdis*), goes into great detail explaining the actual ways in which *al-walā' wal barā'* should be applied. The statement begins by listing the three categories or 'degrees' to which 'true Muslims' (i.e. *The Saved Sect*) should have allegiance to other Muslims (a group which he does not define):



Figure 20 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawḥīdī, "al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwaḥidīn", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

The degrees of allegiance are three;

First: allegiance to the group of the Muslims.

The first and most general degree of allegiance is therefore to the global Muslim population. However, the author goes on to refine this saying:



Figure 21 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawhīdī, "al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwaḥidīn", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

"Second: allegiance to *ahl al-sunna wal jamā'a* [Sunni denomination of Islam]."

This means that Muslims should ideally then show allegiance to the Sunni denomination of Islam above others. This narrows the circle of allegiance of a true Muslim. However, he then adds a final circle of allegiance:

"Third: allegiance to *The Saved Sect*."

Allegiance to *The Saved Sect* further narrows the circle of allegiance and makes a person's bond towards this final group the strongest. According to this version of *al-walā' wal barā'* one should believe that *The Saved Sect* (Salafi-Jihadists) are the best among all Muslims and, by default, mankind. One should side with and assist them against all their detractors and enemies – including against other Muslims. At the same time, however, he seems to imply that *The Saved Sect* should not rule out showing allegiance to mainstream Muslims (for instance, presumably, if they are under attack from external non-Muslim forces).

However, the same author then lists the types of people that a Muslim should reject:

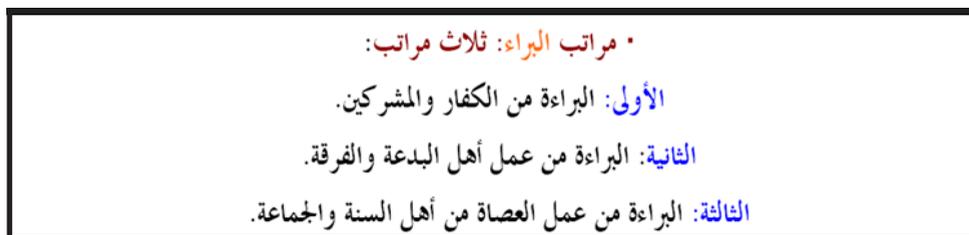


Figure 22 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawhīdī, "al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwaḥidīn", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

The degrees of rejection are three;

First: rejection of *kuffār* [non-believers] and *mushrikīn* [polytheists].

Here the author means that one should completely reject non-Muslims without question – although he does not define who non-Muslims are (Wahhabi and Salafi-Jihadist definitions of this being notoriously loose).

Second: rejection of the acts of the people of aberrations and division.⁶⁴

The "people of aberration and division" are Muslim groups and sects which Salafi-Jihadists do

64 Reference to Shī'īs, Sufis, and other Muslims groups.

not approve of – such as Sufis and Shī'īs. Arguably, according to many current Salafi-Jihadist definitions, this category would therefore include the majority of Muslims around the world who do not follow the Salafi-Jihadist understanding of Islam. The author states that a Muslim must reject their acts, by which he means visiting shrines and tombs of pious people and celebrating the birth of the Prophet, among other acts which Wahhabis and Salafi-Jihadists consider heretical aberrations.

Third: rejection of the acts of the sinners from *ahl al-sunna wal jamā'a* [Sunni Muslims]."

The final form of rejection, which is also the mildest, is the rejection of the sinful acts that may be committed by the Muslims whom Salafi-Jihadists consider to be part of Sunni Islam (the definition of who is a Sunni is left unclear, however).

After outlining the degrees of allegiance to Muslims and rejection of non-Muslims, the author describes the numerous violations of *al-walā' wal barā'* that can make a person an apostate and which therefore could be seen as punishable by death.



Figure 23 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawhīdī, "*al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwaḥidīn*", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

"The kinds of allegiance that make a person an apostate are:

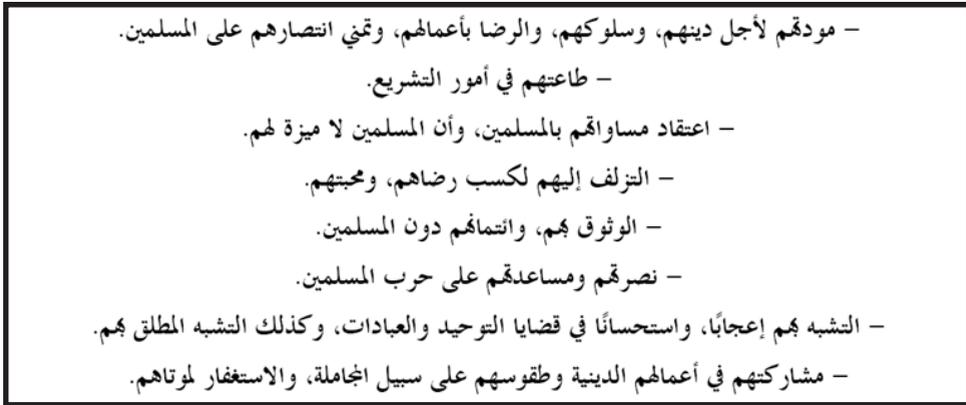


Figure 24 Abū al-Barā' al-Tawhīdī, "*al-mukhtaṣar al-matīn li tuḥfat al-mūwaḥidīn*", shumūkh al-islām, 19/03/2010.

- Complete allegiance [to non-Muslims].
- Loving them for their religion, their manners, agreement with their actions and wishing their victory against Muslims.
- Obeying them in matters of legislation.
- The belief that they are equal to Muslims and that Muslims have no distinction over them.
- Adoration of the *kuffār* [non-Muslims] to please them and gain their love.

- Trusting them and entrusting them instead of the Muslims.
- Supporting them and aiding them in their war against Muslims.
- Imitating them out of admiration and approbation in the matters of *tawhīd* [the doctrine of monotheism] and acts of worship, and likewise their complete imitation.
- Participating in their religious rituals seeking to appease them and asking for forgiveness for their dead.

Although this post does not flesh out all the nuances of these various points, they could be interpreted by hardline Jihadists as saying that anyone who 'imitates' non-Muslims (for instance, celebrating Valentine's day) or 'obeying them in matters of legislation (for instance, observing secular laws) could potentially be judged an apostate. It is this very ambiguity, however, that can give such posts the potential to incite and legitimize extreme violence.

As is the case in Jihadist discussions of *tāghūt*, however, posters of Jihadist forums are not usually content to only quote other Jihadists, as in the instance above, in order to justify their understanding of *al-walā' wal barā'*. In many cases, they also cite mainstream Wahhabi scholars in order to better make their case and increase the legitimacy of their opinions. The following post on the important 'al-fallūja' forum shows online Jihadists using a statement made by the extremist Saudi Wahhabi cleric, 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk to support their view of *al-walā' wal barā'*.⁶⁵

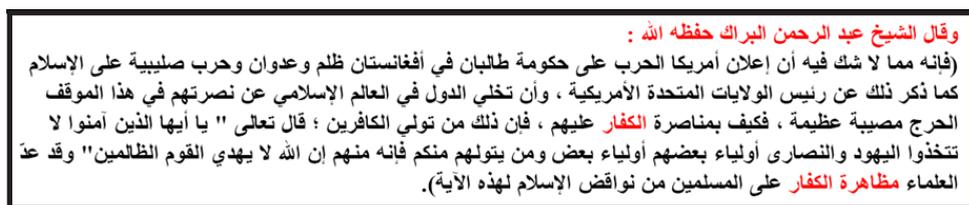


Figure 25 Abū al-Khansā' al-Ḥimyārī, "iqra' wa ḥammil al-risāla: jam' min al-adillah fi kufr man a'ān al-mushrikīn a'dā' al-milla", al-fallūja, 11/02/2010.

"And Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk has said: It is without doubt that America's declaration of war on the government of the Taliban in Afghanistan is an aggression and a crusade against Islam as the president of the United States of America has mentioned. Further, if the very lack of support for the Taliban in this situation by the countries of the Islamic world is in itself a great calamity, the what of their support for non-Muslims against the Taliban! Indeed, that is part of allegiance to non-Muslims...and the scholars have considered the assistance of non-Muslims against Muslims to be among the nullifiers of Islam..."

This statement by a mainstream Wahhabi scholar is clearly useful to online Jihadists because it buttresses their own view that any Muslim who sides with non-Muslims against Muslims is an apostate. In a separate thread on another forum, posters similarly use a statement by 'Abd al-'Azīz

65 Al-Barrāk, who is in his late 70s, is one of the few survivors of what Salafi-Jihadists regard as the classic era of modern Wahhabi scholarship, the 1970s – late 1990s period, when the interests of Salafi-Jihadists and the Saudi official clergy were more closely aligned. Al-Barrāk's official website states that he has been most influenced by 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz, the former Chief Mufti of the Saudi Kingdom as "he benefited from him for more than fifty years." <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/02/24/101355.html> <http://albrak.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1364&Itemid=45>.

bin Bāz in which he rules that Muslims may not seek the help of non-Muslims as it contradicts the concept of *al-walā' wal barā'*:⁶⁶

(1) افتي ابن باز - قبل حرب الخليج الثانية - بمنع الاستعانة بالكفار في "الجهاد"، مستدلا بأيات واحاديث كثيرة، جازما بالحرمة، فقال: (وليس للمسلمين أن يوالوا الكافرين أو يستعينوا بهم على أعدائهم، فإنهم من الأعداء ولا تؤمن غائلتهم وقد حرم الله موالاتهم، ونهى عن اتخاذهم بطانة، وحكم على من تولاهم بأنه منهم، وأخبر أن الجميع من الظالمين... وثبت في

Figure 26 Abūl Khansā' al-Ḥimyarī, "*al-bāzīyāt al-muḍalila wal mutanāqiḍa lil milla al-ḥanīfiyya al-ibrāhīmīyya*" al-taḥaddī, 17/03/2010

"1- Bin Bāz had issued a fatwa [religious edict] before the second Gulf war,⁶⁷ prohibiting seeking help from the *kuffār* in jihad, using verses of the Qur'ān and traditions of the Prophet as evidence, asserting that it is forbidden in Islam, as he said: (and Muslims are not to ally themselves with non-Muslims or seek their assistance against their enemies, as they [non-Muslims] are enemies who cannot be trusted and Allah has forbidden their allegiance, and prohibited Muslims from using them as aides, and Allah ruled that whoever is allied with them is considered to be of them [becomes non-Muslim] ..."

Another Bin Bāz quote used extensively on Jihadist forums comes from a letter which he wrote admonishing Shaykh 'Abdullah Jād al-Ḥaq, the ex-Shaykh of the traditionalist Al-Azhar University, who had advocated befriending and reaching out to non-Muslims. Responding particularly to Jād al-Ḥaq's statement that Islam's relationship with 'other religions and nations' should be based upon 'general peace and cooperation' and his statement that 'it is necessary for Muslims to establish relationships of love and friendship with followers of other religions and non Muslim nations', Bin Bāz wrote in an open letter that:⁶⁸

"it greatly distressed me that your article included sentences and meanings that are contrary to the verses of the Qur'ān and traditions of the Prophet...I am sure you are aware that Allah has made it obligatory upon believers to hate non-Muslims, and to show animosity towards them and not to love them and have allegiance to them."⁶⁹

This statement, as the users of pro-Jihadist forums recognise, Bin Bāz is advocating a form of *al-walā' wal barā'* that is compatible with their own understandings of this concept. Bin Bāz's public opposition to 'peace and cooperation' in favour of 'animosity' and 'hate' clearly helped set the mood music for indiscriminate terrorist attacks against non-Muslims by excluding the possibility

66 Posters on Jihadist forums also often use this ruling to demonstrate Bin Bāz's inconsistency on the issue, contrasting this statement with his later ones which permitted the Saudi Arabian government to work with US and other foreign armies during Operation Desert Storm (1990-1991).

67 i.e. Operation Desert Storm.

68 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Bāz, '*ta'qīb 'alā maqālat al-Shaykh jād al-ḥaq Shaykh al-azhar bi 'inwān: 'ilāqat al-islām bil adyān al-ukhra.*' <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/mat/8591>.

69 Ibid.

of peaceful coexistence.⁷⁰ Once again, statements by mainstream Wahhabi scholars can be seen to play a vital role in shoring-up and justifying both Jihadists' binary worldview and legitimising the use of violence.⁷¹

Implications:

- The doctrine of allegiance to Muslims alone and rejection of non-Muslims is widely used by Jihadists to justify terrorist attacks against civilians and also to support the binary Wahhabi, Salafist and Jihadist 'us and them' worldview.
- The doctrine is particularly potent where it states that Muslims who 'show allegiance' to 'non-Muslim' authorities such as police and security services are outside Islam. Even where this does not directly lead to attacks, it can make Muslims more reluctant to join such organisations that can play a leading role in combating extremism.
- The *al-walā' wal barā'* concept also serves to strongly entrench and re-inforce the parallel concepts of *ṭāghūt* and *The Saved Sect*. All these doctrines are mutually self-supporting, making it hard to challenge each doctrine in isolation.
- Rulings by mainstream Saudi government-sponsored clerics (both living and dead) are widely used on Jihadist forums to justify violence.

70 Another aspect of Bin Bāz's letter which is frequently used on pro-Jihadist websites is his objection to Jād al-Ḥaq's call for Muslims to "look at the followers of Judaism and Christianity as partners in the belief in God [who are] following the divine message which does not differ in its general principles." Bin Bāz responded by writing "as you are aware [this statement] is in direct contradiction to the clear texts which encourage calling the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] to believe in God and his messenger, and naming whoever rejects this call from amongst them as *kuffār*." Pro-Jihadist users also make use of the ending of the letter in which Bin Bāz reiterates his main objections to Jād al-Ḥaq's article by saying "it will be apparent to you that the error in your article is: 1- saying that love and friendship is the basis of Islam's relationship with the other religions and nations. 2- Ruling that the followers of Judaism and Christianity believe in God and the divine revelation which does not differ in its general principles."

71 Further information on the role of *al-walā' wal barā'* in modern Jihadist thought is available in a recent study by Joas Wagemakers. Joas Wagemakers, 'The Transformation of a Radical Concept al-walā' wal-barā' in the Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi', in: Role Meijer (ed), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, Hurst & Company, London, 2009, pp. 81-82.

Chapter Four - Conversational Trends

There are a number of discussion themes that are constantly repeated on Arabic-language Jihadist forums. These recurrent discussions, or conversational trends, whether taking place under different guises or initiated by a variety of events, nonetheless share similar characteristics. For the purpose of this report we will focus on the three most salient trends that can be found across all Jihadist forums or on any forum that Internet Jihadists are active in.

These trends are:

1. Defence of global Jihadist ideology and violence.
2. Exposition of the internal enemies of Islam and Muslims.
3. Exposition of deviant and heretical sects who 'worship manmade laws'.

In many instances a discussion thread would be initially focused on a specific topic, such as the news of a particular bombing, only to develop into one of these conversational trends.

1. Defence of global Jihadist ideology and its violence:

Most threads on pro-Jihadist forums revolve around a ritualised expression of appreciation for Jihadist groups and leaders. Pro-Jihadist forum users do not like to see Jihadist activities and ideologies challenged and hence there is very rarely any real dissent about Jihadist operations from such forum's members. Consequently, despite the devastation that frequently results from Jihadist attacks around the world, it is very rare for a genuine two-way discussion to take place on any al-Qaeda affiliated Internet Jihadist forum regarding the permissibility of such violence. Most posts can be best seen as an exercise in preaching to the Jihadist converted, and reaffirming in the minds of dedicated users that the Jihadist way is the right way.

This emphasis on conformity doubtlessly stems in part from Salafi-Jihadists' understanding of concepts such as *The Saved Sect* and *al-walā' wal barā'*, which mean that any criticism or questioning of Jihadist leaders or ideology can result in classification as an apostate. This often translates into knee-jerk and unquestioning support for the statements and actions of Jihadist groups and individuals. Indeed, so common has the defence of jihadism become on these forums that certain phrases like *al-qāfila tasīr wal kilāb tanbah* (the caravan will continue its journey despite the barking dogs) have emerged as stock responses to any external criticism of Jihadist activities and are used to indicate that Jihadists are above criticism and that all external criticism should be disregarded. In other instances, Jihadists seek to smother any qualms about the consequences of Jihadist attacks (for instance ones that kill large numbers of Muslim civilians) by writing that "if you see people disagree you should follow the *mujāhidīn* and the people on the front lines," meaning that the ultimate authority and trust should be placed in front-line Jihadists.

On non-Jihadist forums, discussions between Jihadists and their opponents are often similarly unproductive. Threads posted on non-Jihadist forums which criticise the Jihadist movement and

its leaders usually end up turning into vigorous exchanges of insults between Jihadist sympathisers and their opponents in which there usually is no clear victor. The following example is a thread posted on a general religious discussion forum in which an anti-Jihadist user begins by posting a message enquiring why al-Qaeda in Afghanistan employs Afghans to carry out suicide bombings while the leadership positions are reserved for Arabs:

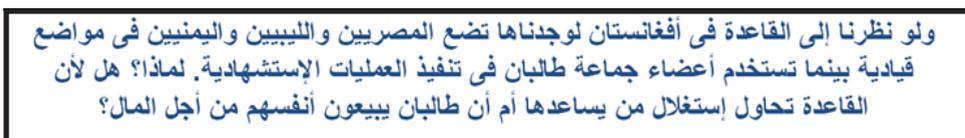


Figure 27 al-Fāris al-Miqdām, "al-qā'ida tad'ū lil intishār wa ṭālibān tad'ū lil intiḥār", al-ḥisba, 25/02/2009.

"If we look at al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, we will find that it places Egyptians, Libyans and Yemenis in leadership positions, while using members of the Taliban to carry out martyrdom operations. Why is that? Is it because al-Qaeda is trying to take advantage of those who help them or are the Taliban selling themselves for money?"

To which a Jihadist sympathiser responded by accusing the poster of the message of either being a member of the intelligence services or not being a believing Muslim:



Figure 28 al-Fārūūq, "al-qā'ida tad'ū lil intishār wa ṭālibān tad'ū lil intiḥār", al-ḥisba, 25/02/2009.

"You must be one of the following, either an agent for an intelligence agency trying to sow discord or a regressive loser who has no share in the religion [not Muslim]."

Another pro-Jihadist user then steps in with even harsher comments:



Figure 29 al-Wāthiq bi Rabih, "al-qā'ida tad'ū lil intishār wa ṭālibān tad'ū lil intiḥār", al-ḥisba, 25/02/2009.

"Oh feeble knight [reference to the original poster's pseudonym Daring Knight (al-Fāris al-Miqdām)] who has prostrated to his American masters, how can someone who loves money sacrifice himself for the sake of Allah.. it is you and your ilk who love money and sell their

religion and conscience and who love life and its adornments...no intelligent person believes that a person would kill himself for money. What is the use of money after death?... Go try another one as your plans have become obvious oh you who has sold his conscience and who has suckled indignity and shame."

Rather than answering this question or discussing the question itself, other posters simply classified the user as a spy for questioning the actions of Jihadists.

Although it is rare on most Jihadist forums to find any real discussion of the permissibility of Jihadist acts of violence, one such discussion took place on the most popular Jihadist discussion forum, 'al-fallūja', regarding al-Qaeda's October 2009 bombings which targeted a number of ministries in Baghdad, killing 155 people and injuring 700 others.⁷² It was perhaps the massive scale of the attacks, the near-complete destruction of the targeted ministries and the huge numbers of civilian casualties that prompted one user to voice his objections:

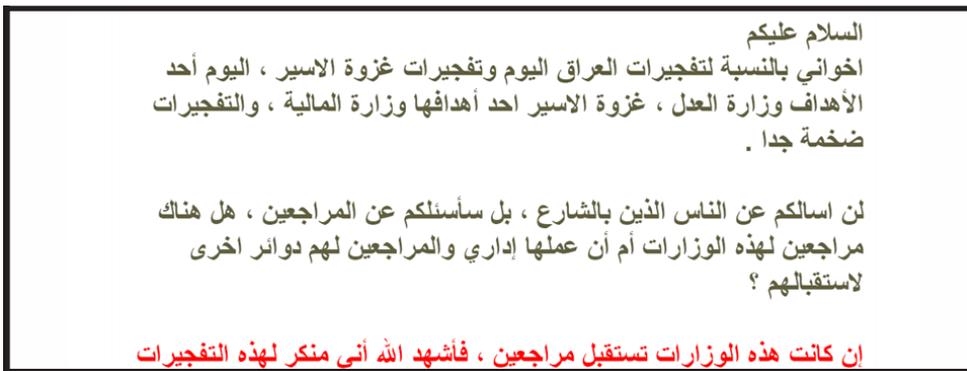


Figure 30 Şuqūr, "al-mawḍū' jād bil nisba li tafjirāt al-'irāq arid shakhṣ yufhimunī", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

"Assalāmu Alaikum. Brothers, regarding today's bombings in Iraq and the al-Asīr [prisoner] incursion,⁷³ one of its targets was the ministry of justice and another target was the ministry of finance and the explosions were huge. I will not ask you about the people who were on the street, however I will ask you about the people who were visiting the ministries to get their paper work done,⁷⁴ or are these ministries more administrative and people go to other offices to get their paperwork done? If these ministries have regular visitors, I make Allah my witness that I am against these bombings."

The first response to this enquiry is very generic and probably demonstrates that the respondent himself does not have an adequate answer to the question of civilian casualties. He mentions in passing the idea of *al-tatarrus*, a historic reference used to permit the killing of innocent civilians in cases of extreme necessity and which modern Jihadists argue sanctions the killing of Muslims who are, for instance, being used by non-Muslim armies as human shields or are killed through being in

72 Haroon Siddique and agencies, 'Al-Qaida claims responsibility for Baghdad suicide bombings', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/oct/27/al-qaida-baghdad-bombings>.

73 'The Islamic state of Iraq' initiated a campaign of bombings that targeted government buildings in the heart of Baghdad which it called 'al-Asīr incursion'.

74 It is common in the Arab world to visit ministry buildings to submit applications, renew licences and so on.

the vicinity of a Jihadist attack on non-Muslims.⁷⁵ The poster then blames the victims themselves for not obeying the Jihadist leaders' instructions to avoid government buildings and ministries, arguing that everyone needs to 'bear the burden of jihad', whether they want to or not.



Figure 31 Mumtad al-'Azam, "al-mawḍū' jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-'irāq arīd shakhṣ yufhimunī", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

"Jihad is *farḍ 'ayn* [an individual obligation] upon everyone who is capable, and it is the destiny of the ummah. From this we understand that everyone has to bear the burden of jihad and the mujāhidīn have asked people many times not to go near these places. So everyone has to enter the terminology of jihad and not go near these places even if their daily affairs were stopped, and the mujāhidīn are not to blame if people disobey. As for those who were passing by, they are included in the concept of *al-tatarrus*. If the mujāhidīn were to give consideration to those whom do not pay attention to the words of the mujāhidīn, we will never be victorious, not even centuries from now. So those who are not taking part in jihad should keep themselves away from the targets of the mujāhidīn, and the previous bombings took place in Baghdad and whoever did not learn from that will never learn. I ask the rest of the brothers to respond to this issue so we can be done with it."

The original user, clearly dissatisfied that the dead civilians should effectively be blamed for their own deaths, once again asks whether someone who has important business that obliges him to visit one of these ministries deserves to die as a result.⁷⁶ Furthermore, he questions the validity of using the concept of *al-tatarrus* in this case where the visitors to the ministries targeted probably out-numbered the actual civil servants working in them. The user also questions the choice of

75 For how al-Qaeda use *al-tatarrus* see: Jarret Brachman and Abdullah Warius, 'Abu Yahya al-Libi's "Human Shields in Modern Jihad"', *CTC Sentinel*, May 2008, Vol. 1, Issue 6.

76 In the Arab world, where government bureaucracies are frequently large, archaic and highly inefficient, visits to ministries by ordinary people in order to get paperwork signed etc are far more common than in Europe or the US.

targets, a question which is usually viewed as highly offensive by other pro-Jihadist users of these forums who typically believe that only Jihadists on the front line know the local situation and thus questioning their choice of targets amounts to questioning their legitimacy and judgement.



Figure 32 Şuqūr, "al-mawḏū` jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-`irāq arīd shakḥş yufhimunī", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

"Brother Mumtad al-'Azm [pseudonym of first respondent], may Allah bless you. Suppose that I have an important issue that requires me to visit one of these departments, do I deserve to be killed? What I know is that the visitors of these departments outnumber the employees, so how can we call all of this *tatarus*? Quote: "and the mujāhidīn are not to blame if people disobey" does that legitimise their blood? Meaning would it not have been better of our esteemed mujāhidīn to choose another target that does not have as much contact with civilians, as these operations will lose them popular support."

Another response placed under the pseudonym *mumtad al-'azm*, repeats the same arguments mentioned in the first response and adds that the enquirer should not listen to false media allegations, insinuating that the number of civilian casualties has been trumped up by government-aligned media outlets.



Figure 33 Mumtad al-'Azm, "al-mawḏū` jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-`irāq arīd shakḥş yufhimunī", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

Mumtad al-'Azm [pseudonym of user]:

"Brother Şuqūr, does that mean that the mujāhidīn have to stop their operation because of your procedural issue? Is it not an obligation upon you not to go to those places as a sort of jihad. And the mujāhidīn did not mean to target those people so they will be treated according to their intentions on the Day of Judgment. As my brother Sahm said, I hope you do not believe the news of the deceitful media."

The original enquirer, writing under the pseudonym *ṣuqūr*, once again reiterates his objections to the logic employed by the respondents to justify the killing of innocent civilians.

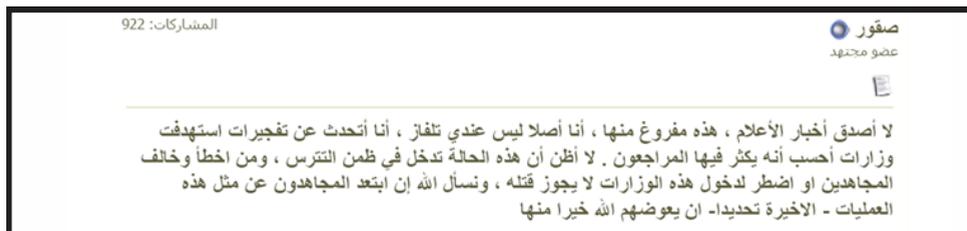


Figure 34 Ṣuqūr, "*al-mawḍū' jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-'irāq arīd shakḥṣ yufhimunī*", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

Ṣuqūr [pseudonym of user]:

"I do not believe the news of the media. That has been established, I do not even have a television, I am talking about bombings that have targeted ministries which I believe have many visitors. I do not think that this case is covered by *al-tatarrus*, and it is not legitimate to kill whoever makes a mistake and disobeys the mujāhidīn or was compelled to go into their ministries. We ask Allah to recompense the mujāhidīn if they were to leave this sort of operations, specifically the most recent one."

Another user writing under the pseudonym *al-mutafā'il*, attempts to sound authoritative by indirectly invoking a prophetic tradition (ḥadīth) in which early Muslim armies were permitted to use a mangonel, a type of catapult, against cities even though these weapons could not distinguish between a city's Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants.



Figure 35 al-Mutafā'il, "*al-mawḍū' jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-'irāq arīd shakḥṣ yufhimunī*", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

Al-Mutafā'il [pseudonym of user]:

"Brother, you will never be able to hit these ministries in any other way!! The mujāhidīn asked people to stay away from all the occupation entities and their agents... tell me by God, in offensive jihad is it legitimate to attack a fortress of *kuffār* that has Muslims in it with catapults that do not distinguish between a Muslim and a *kāfir*??"

The original questioner, however, remains dissatisfied and hits back again:



Figure 36 Şuqūr, "al-mawḏū' jād bil nisba li tafjīrāt al-'irāq arid shakḥş yufhimunī", al-fallūja, 26/10/2009.

Şuqūr [pseudonym of user]:

Quote: "brother, you will never be able to hit these ministries in any other way!!"

Then, there is no need to attack them. The jihad will not be hindered if some targets were avoided.

Quote: "The mujāhidīn asked people to stay away from all the occupation entities and their agents."

And those who disobey them remain innocents whose blood is preserved.

Quote: "Tell me by God, in offensive jihad is it legitimate to attack a fortress of kuffār that has Muslims in it with catapults that do not distinguish between a Muslim and a kāfir??"

If there was another solution, it is not legitimate."

What is significant about this discussion, which ended without a clear resolution, is that after 45 responses, not one single user was able to give a detailed religious justification for the deaths of over 100 Iraqi civilians in a Jihadist attack. Amongst all the responses, two users posted links to Jihadist books dealing with the issue of collateral damage and the loss of civilian life. This discussion seems to indicate either that the majority of users on Jihadist discussion forums do not have the detailed religious knowledge to defend their beliefs or that those forum members who do possess such detailed knowledge will avoid controversial discussions, or at least discussions in which their views might be challenged.

Such debates are very rare, however. Even though Jihadist forums are called discussion forums, online Jihadist culture does not generally encourage debate and discussion – conformity and unanimity are seen as the objective instead, and individual opinions are neither wanted, expected,

nor appreciated. Similarly, on the subject of whether Jihadist groups are doing the right thing, the views and actions of Jihadist leaders (particularly those in the field) are usually seen as beyond reproach, even if they cannot be explained or defended by forum users. Another factor that stifles free discussion on the forums is that even debates initiated by well known pro-Jihadist posters can be easily shut down by suspicions and accusations of spying or ill-intent – or by the forum administrator closing down the discussion for fear it will undermine the forum's *raison d'être* or its carefully constructed appearance of unity. In the case of the bombing of the Iraqi ministries, however, the forum administrators may have decided to allow such a post to remain on the forum and be debated because they realised that, on some occasions at least, there needs to be at least some relatively open discussion of Jihadist attacks which clearly do not differentiate between friend and foe.

2. Exposition of the internal enemies of Islam and Muslims:

Jihadist websites also dedicate a large amount of space to attacking people who they see as internal enemies of Islam; a category which includes both Muslims who openly seek to attack and discredit Jihadist thinking and Muslims who follow versions of Islam that are perceived as weakening the religion as a whole.

a. Criticism of anti-Jihadist Salafists

Online Jihadists put most effort into seeking to expose former jihadists and extremist preachers and leaders who, despite being popular among extremists in some regards, have seemed to question Jihadist methods – which Jihadists regard as tantamount to treachery or as evidence of possible apostasy. The exposure of such borderline figures is deemed to be more important than attacking mainstream Muslim figures – presumably because Jihadists feel that such ambiguous figures are more likely to lead Jihadists away from ‘the straight-path’ than more mainstream figures.

For example, in early 2010 one thread on the ‘al-fallūja’ forum sought to warn online Jihadists not to be deceived by Muḥammad al-‘Urayfī, a Saudi cleric and Wahhabi televangelist. Al-‘Urayfī had initially become popular among Jihadists (and Wahhabis in general) after he described Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistānī, the supreme spiritual authority for the majority of Shī‘ī Muslims as “atheist and debauched” during a Friday sermon in January 2010.⁷⁷ This led some Jihadist forum users to describe al-‘Urayfī as *al-‘ālim al-‘āmil*, a scholar who acts according to his knowledge, a prestigious title denoting sincerity, dedication and steadfastness. As a result, when al-‘Urayfī was discovered to be critical of al-Qaeda’s understanding of jihad, pro-Jihadist forum users launched a sustained attack on his beliefs and his character, clearly concerned that his standing with Jihadist users, gained due to his previous attack on al-Sistānī, could also give weight to his anti-Jihadist criticisms.



Figure 37 Muḥib Abī Dujāna al-Khurāsānī, “*ilā kul akh khudī‘at nafsuḥu bil mad‘ū al-‘urayfī*”, al-fallūja, 07/02/2010.

77 ‘Saudi insult to Ayatollah Sistani outrages Iraq’, *Press TV*, 5 January 2010. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=115415§ionid=351020201>.

"In the Name of Allah...

Assalāmu 'Alaikum Wa Raḥmatullah Wa Barakātuh

Many a time do we see on what are deceitfully called Islamic satellite channels some of those who give religious lessons and lecture about prayer or alms-giving or pilgrimage to Mecca among other topics, and we cannot deny that some of them have a very exciting and enjoyable way of addressing issues, however as soon as we research them on the Internet to benefit from their knowledge, we find that their websites are filled with lessons about terrorism and extremism ... And from amongst those so called preachers/ Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-'Urayfī who has taken the path of his teachers like al-Qarnī,⁷⁸ and al-'Ubaykān,⁷⁹ and others.. and I do not hide my shock when I saw his sermon on one of these alleged channels, while he was yelling in his thick voice about terrorism and the disasters of terrorism and security and the state and the effort of the brothers in the Ministry of Interior! So no one has the right to come and tell me I should not be insulting and defaming him.. as some do!

One user responded to this post saying that he was not surprised that a cleric such as 'Urayfī, who he describes as a "story teller", would attack Jihadists when even more influential Wahhbai clerics have also revised their beliefs, describing their revisions as 'earthquakes':

إننا يا أخي لم نصدم بالعريفي فهو مجرد قصاص، فلقد أعتدنا على زلازل انتجتها تراجع أكابر العلماء وارتكاسهم وانتكاسهم، وما سلمان وسفر عنكم ببعيد! فمن باب أولى من دونهم!

Figure 38 Tilmīth al-Maqdisī, "ilā kul akh khudī'at nafsuhu bil mad'ū al-'urayfī", al-fallūja, 07/02/2010.

"Brother we are not shocked by al-'Urayfī as he is merely a story teller. We have become accustomed to earthquakes produced by the most esteemed scholars' revisions and relapses, as you all remember Salmān, and Safar.⁸⁰ It should be expected that their juniors do the same."

Further echoing the same sentiment, another respondent calls clerics who have revised their previously pro-Jihadist stance "*mashāyikh al-sultān*" (scholars of the court), in reference to the Jihadist view that they have been co-opted by the government. He also mentions the revisions made by some Jihadists such as Sayyed Imam al-Sharif, the mentor of Ayman al-Zawāhirī and the revisions of the Egyptian al-Gamā'a al-Islāmīyya.

78 'Ā'īd al-Qarnī is a Saudi cleric and televangelist who was arrested in the early 1990s for his outspoken opposition to American military presence in Saudi Arabia. He currently presents himself as a moderate and even wrote an article praising Barack Obama's famous Cairo speech in June 2009.

79 'Abd al-Muḥsin bin Nāṣir al-'Ubaykān is a high ranking Saudi cleric who was appointed as advisor to the King's council in 2009.

80 Reference to Salmān al-'Awda and Safar al-Ḥawālī both of whom were pro-Jihadist clerics who revised their beliefs and are now critical of terrorists.



Figure 39 al-Zubayr al-Maṣrī, "ilā kul akh khudī'at nafsuhu bil mad'ū al-'urayfī", al-fallūja, 07/02/2010.

"Those who conceal the clear Signs We have sent down, and the Guidance, after We have made it clear for the people in the Book, -on them shall be Allah's curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse. (The Cow:159)

God curse the scholars of evil and the scholars of the court...

... and as the brother said this man is merely a story teller and it is no surprise that he would say that. There you have the revisions of Sayyed Imam and many members of al-Gamā'a al-Islāmiyya and many members of Gamā'at al-Gihād [Egyptian Islamic Jihad] and many others."

As a counter-point to the bluster that can dominate Arabic-language Jihadist forums, the above posts demonstrate that as much as Jihadists would like to ignore any external criticism, they cannot escape the reality that criticism affects their morale and puts the possibility of winning new recruits at risk. This perhaps partly explains their constant efforts to silence debate and criticism on their own forums. Thus, while users might personally reject such revisions, it is much harder for them to deny the impact of these revisions on the Jihadist movement as a whole.

Summary:

- Online Jihadists do not hesitate in engaging in prolonged insult matches with their cyber rivals in an attempt to silence their criticism of Jihadists.
- Meaningful debates on theological and juridical issues (such as the permissiveness of killing Muslim civilians) rarely take place on Jihadist forums.
- Most members of Jihadist forums do not apparently have the depth of religious knowledge needed to engage in meaningful discussions.
- The majority of Internet Jihadists rarely question the motives and actions of Jihadists on the front lines as this is seen as taboo.
- Muslim personalities are judged almost solely in relation to their position toward Jihadist groups. If they contradict these Jihadist groups, they are dismissed as traitors, impostors or possible apostates by forum users.
- At the same time, however, Jihadist users cannot deny the impact that external criticism, and particularly the 'revisions' of former Jihadists, has had on the overall movement.

b. Criticism of the Shī'a

The majority of al-Qaeda affiliated forums have a specific section dedicated to attacking Shī'is and their beliefs. Jihadist animosity towards Shī'is is informed by a Wahhabi view which regards Shī'i beliefs and practices as heretical, thereby posing a threat to the purity of Islam.

A typical Wahhabi narrative attacking Shī'ism is that the sect was established by Jews who became Muslims in the formative period of Islam only to attempt to sabotage the new religion from within.⁸¹ Historical events such as the Mongols' sacking of Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, in 1258 are alleged to be a direct result of Shī'i treachery to Muslims and a demonstration of their evil intentions. In modern times, the brutal suppression of Sunni Islamists in the 1980s in Syria by the Alawite-dominated government is similarly used as another example of Shī'ism's hostility to Islam.⁸² For Jihadists, Shī'is are in the category of "close enemies" who should be fought.⁸³

The following post, which contains statements from major Sunni and Wahhabi scholars regarding Shī'is, first appeared in a popular Jihadist forum, 'Shumūkh al-Islām'. Here it was used to justify the Jihadist stance towards Shī'is on the grounds that they are non-Muslims. The post is entitled 'the statements of ancient and modern scholars (from Abū Ḥanīfa to Ibn Jibrīn) regarding the infidel rejectionists'.⁸⁴



Figure 40 al-Ḥāfiḍ ibn Qaṭṭūbaghā, "aqwāl al-'ulamā' al-mutaqaddimīn wal muta'akhirīn (min abī ḥanīfa ilā ibn jibrīn) fil rawāfiḍ al-kāfirīn"; shumūkh al-islām, 01/12/2009.

- 81 In Arabic historiography, a long-standing motif among certain authors over the centuries has been to portray Shī'is as treacherous. In this way, individual Shī'is can serve a function of a scapegoat in such accounts, and the source of acts of betrayal. A similar function in classical polemic literature would be the attribution of Jewish ancestry or parentage in order to discredit someone.
- 82 Alawites are a minority religious group mainly found in Syria who describe themselves as a Shī'i sect, although mainstream Shī'is may not consider them as Shī'is. The most prominent members of the Syrian ruling Ba'th party belong to this sect including the ruling al-Assad family.
- 83 Al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri has identified two main types of enemy; the close enemy which is represented by tyrant rulers who do not implement the legislation of God and their supporters, and the far enemy who is represented by America whose goal is to destroy Islam by supporting tyrant rulers in Muslim lands. Al-Zawahiri's own view of Shī'as is negative, but as a Jihadist it is tactically more sophisticated than that of al-Zarqāwī. Whereas the latter endorsed a nihilistic campaign of violence towards Iraq's Shī'is and endorsed tactics such as videotaped beheadings that revolted many who would otherwise have been supportive of the insurgency, al-Zawahiri has consistently favoured a more populist approach. In this way, whilst al-Zarqāwī sought to carve a divide between Sunnis and Shī'is, al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden have consistently downplayed any frontiers within Islam. Instead, they seek to portray al-Qaeda's thought as an ideology shared by Muslims around the world and the Islamic community as a homogenous whole.
- 84 Shī'is are called rejectionists (*rāfiḍa*) by Wahhabis, Salafists, and Jihadists to denote their rejection of the authority of the first three caliphs of Islam.

"The statements of the ancient and modern scholars (from Abū Ḥanīfa to Ibn Jibrīn) regarding the infidel rejectionists.

Assalāmu Alaikum...

These are the statement of the scholars of Ahlul Sunnah regarding the *kufir* of the *rawāfiḍ*

Abū Ḥanīfa may Allah have mercy upon him: "whoever doubts the *kufir* of those people 'meaning the *rāfiḍa'* is *kāfir* like them""



Figure 41 al-Ḥāfiḍ ibn Qaṭṭūbaghā, "aqwāl al-'ulamā' al-mutaqaddimīn wal muta'khirīn (min abī ḥanīfa ilā ibn jibrīn) fil rawāfiḍ al-kāfirīn", shumūkh al-islām, 01/12/2009.

"Al-Awzā'ī may Allah have mercy upon him: "He who insults Abū Bakr,⁸⁵ may God be pleased with him, has committed apostasy and made his blood legitimate""

The post continues with the statements of many other scholars throughout the centuries and concludes with the statements of contemporary scholars regarding the Shī'īs, for instance citing the Saudi government's most important religious body, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa:



Figure 42 al-Ḥāfiḍ ibn Qaṭṭūbaghā, "aqwāl al-'ulamā' al-mutaqaddimīn wal muta'khirīn (min abī ḥanīfa ilā ibn jibrīn) fil rawāfiḍ al-kāfirīn", shumūkh al-islām, 01/12/2009.

"The Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa

Question: Do we refrain from eating the slaughtered meat [that has been prepared according to Islamic slaughter rituals] of a group that follow the Ja'farī sect who supplicate to 'Alī, Ḥassan, Ḥussain,⁸⁶ and all of their leaders in hardship and in ease?

Answer: If the case is like the enquirer mentioned, that this group of Ja'farīs [Shī'īs] that he is dealing with supplicate to 'Alī, Ḥassan, Ḥussain and their leaders, they are polytheists and apostates from Islam."

85 Abū Bakr 'Abdullah bin Abī Quḥāfa (d. 634) was a companion of the prophet Muḥammad and the first Muslim caliph.

86 Reference to 'Alī bin Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) the fourth Muslim caliph who is considered as the first Shī'ī Imam, and his sons Ḥassan bin 'Alī (d. 670) and Ḥussain bin 'Alī (d.680) who are considered to be the second and third Shī'ī Imams, respectively.



Figure 43 al-Ḥāfiḍ ibn Qaṭlūbaghā, "aqwāl al-'ulamā' al-mutaqaddimīn wal muta'khirīn (min abī ḥanīfa ilā ibn jibrīn) fil rawāfiḍ al-kāfirīn", shumūkh al-islām, 01/12/2009.

The post also went on to cite Ibn Bāz, the most influential Saudi government cleric of the late 20th century:

"Ibn Bāz:

He said, may Allah have mercy upon him: 'The group of rejectionist Khomeinist Twelvers, has elements of major polytheism, like appealing for the assistance of the Prophet's household, and believing that they know the unseen, especially the twelve Imams as they claim. Further because they excommunicate and insult the majority of the Prophet's companions like Abū Bakr and 'Umar may Allah be pleased with them both. We ask Allah to keep us safe from their [Shī'īs] falsehood.'"

It also cited Ibn Jibrīn, another prominent Saudi government cleric, who died in 2009:



Figure 44 al-Ḥāfiḍ ibn Qaṭlūbaghā, "aqwāl al-'ulamā' al-mutaqaddimīn wal muta'khirīn (min abī ḥanīfa ilā ibn jibrīn) fil rawāfiḍ al-kāfirīn", shumūkh al-islām, 01/12/2009.

"The esteemed Ibn Jibrīn may Allah protect him said: We excommunicate [declare as non-Muslim] their lay folk for three reasons; 1- Their slander of the Qur'ān, as they say that the companions of the prophet have omitted more than a third of it and have distorted it. 2- Their slander of the companions of the prophet and the authentic traditions of the prophet, as they do not accept the ḥadīths that are contained in the two authentic canons,⁸⁷ and they do not accept the ḥadīths of the companions of the prophet as they consider them to be infidels. 3- Extremism which has led them to worship 'Alī and Ḥusain, and to constantly supplicate to them. None of them [Shī'ī lay folk] have an excuse in these times, because Sunnism has become famous and its books have been published."

Given the view of Shī'īs as infidels who pose a threat to true and authentic Islam, online Jihadists see it as their religious duty to warn others, who might have been deceived by them, of their perceived treachery. The following example shows a Jihadist forum user doing just that, by encouraging other users on the 'al-fallūja' forum to disseminate anti Shī'ī publications which prove that the Shī'īs are infidels. The user also describes them as being more severe a threat to Muslims than Christians and Jews.

87 Reference to the ḥadīth collections of Bukhārī and Muslim.

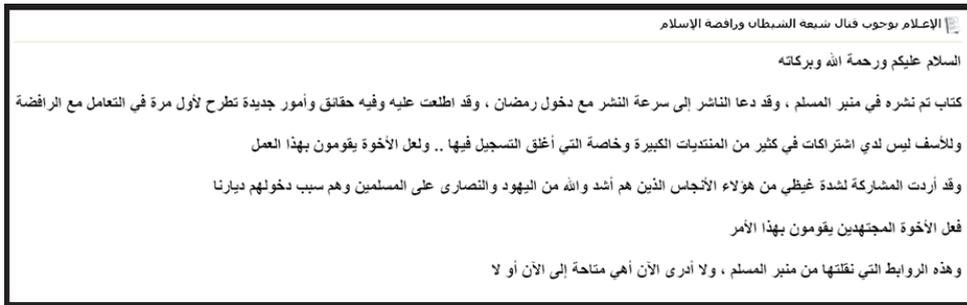


Figure 45 Mutābī, "al-I'lām bi wūjūb qītāl shī'at al-shayṭān wa rāfiḍat al-islām", al-fallūja, 09/09/2007.⁸⁸

"The information regarding the necessity of fighting the Shī'īs of Satan and the *rāfiḍa* [rejectionists] of Islam

Assalamu Alaikum...

This is a book that was published on Minbar al-Muslim⁸⁹, and the author has asked that it be publicized very quickly before the month of Ramadan starts, and I have looked at it and it contains facts and issues that have been discussed for the first time when dealing with the *rāfiḍa*. Unfortunately I do not have many memberships on the big forums especially those in which registration has been closed, and I hope the brothers can do this job [of posting this book in other forums]. I wanted to take part because of my anger towards those filthy people who are worse than the Jews and the Christians upon the Muslims and they are the reason the Jews and Christians were able to enter our lands. So I hope the brothers could help with this matter. Below are the links that I have copied from Minbar al-Muslim but I do not know if they are still active..."

The above anti-Shī'ī sentiments are particularly significant in the context of Iraq, where since 2003 Jihadists have carried out a large amount of violence against the country's Shī'ī population, targeting particularly its religious leaders, mosques and festivals. Although some secular or Arab nationalist Sunni Arabs might resent the Iraqi Shī'a clergy's cooperation with foreign forces (such as Iran and the US), for al-Qaeda in Iraq and its supporters on Jihadist forums the religious aspects of Shī'ism are more than enough to justify attacks on all representations of Shī'a Islam.⁹⁰ Illustrating this point, is the following post, which praises the al-Qaeda members of the 'Islamic state of Iraq' for destroying Shī'ī tombs (and which is accompanied by photographs of them using bulldozers to do this), and asks God to strengthen al-Qaeda in Iraq as a reward for their destruction of Shī'a shrines. It is worth noting that making a display of publically challenging and

88 Although originally posted on 09/09/2007, this post continued to be discussed in the period in which forums were monitored for this report.

89 A pro-Jihadist discussion forum.

90 A much-publicised 6,000 word letter reportedly sent by Ayman al-Zawāhirī to Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī was intercepted by American forces in Iraq in July 2005. In it, al-Zawāhirī criticised al-Zarqāwī's tactic of organising attacks in Iraq that maximised Shī'ī civilian casualties. The private criticism was born of differing views on tactics, rather than any warmth towards the Shī'a on al-Zawāhirī's part. Instead, he expressed the view that al-Zarqāwī's targeting of Muslim civilians, albeit those he considered heretics himself, was alienating potential supporters of the insurgency and giving Jihadists bad public relations. The letter indicates a variation in tactics between two committed Jihadists.

opposing the Shī'a is deemed tactically necessary to gain recruits from anti-Shī'a Wahhabis. Salafi-Jihadists can seek to show themselves as the only real opposition, not just to non-Muslims, but also to 'deviancy', thus earning kudos for being the 'doers' rather than just the 'sayers'.

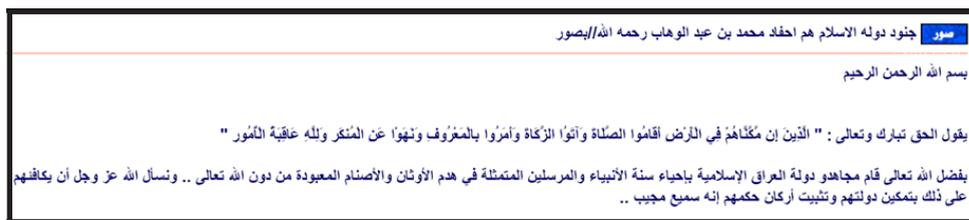


Figure 46 Bashtūn al-Mu'tadil, "*junūd dawlat al-islām hum aḥfād muḥammad bin 'abd al-wahhāb raḥimahuallāh bi ṣūwar*", shumūkh al-islām, 11/07/2009.

In the name of Allah...

By the grace of Allah, the mujāhidīn of the Islamic state of Iraq have revived the tradition of prophets and messengers represented by destroying the idols that are worshiped instead of Allah.. we ask Allah to reward them for their efforts by enabling them to stabilize the rule of their state..



Figure 47 Bashtūn al-Mu'tadil, "*junūd dawlat al-islām hum aḥfād muḥammad bin 'abd al-wahhāb raḥimahuallāh bi ṣūwar*", shumūkh al-islām, 11/07/2009.

Look oh lovers of monotheism, these are the descendants of Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhāb may Allah have mercy upon him, in Mesopotamia, these are the soldiers of the Islamic state destroying the polytheistic idols and tombs.

It is noteworthy that the user who posted this thread titled it as 'The soldiers of the Islamic state are the descendants of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb' in reference to the founder of Wahhabism who attacked and desecrated the Shī'a shrines in Iraq in the early 19th century.

Wahhabi ideology, whether expressed through historical references to Wahhabism's founder or

through quoting modern-day Wahhabis such as Bin Bāz and Ibn Jibrīn, thus can play a role in enabling terrorist violence and even for terrorists explicitly engaging in sectarian violence to impress not-yet-joined Wahhabis. Wahhabism's depictions of Shī'a Muslims as 'apostates', 'polytheists and 'rejectionists' (among other things), are echoed repeatedly on Jihadist forums. They repeatedly use such de-humanising language to justify random terrorist attacks against Shī'is:

الروافض في العراق طائفة ردة ونفاق تحارب المسلمين و ليس فيهم عوام ولا خواص
كلهم في الهوى سوى
و لذلك فإن أمير الإستشهاديين أبي مصعب الزرقاوي رحمه الله لم يتوانا في قتلهم و التكتيل بهم
لأنه لا يردعهم غير ذلك فمناطقهم تضرب بالمفخخات م العيونات و لا يهمن الحي و المات
و كذلك الدولة الإسلامية ماضيت على هذا وهو إستهداف الروافض

Figure 48 Abū 'Abdullah al-Battār, "mā hūa mawqif dawlat al-'irāq al-islāmiyya min 'awām al-shī'a", al-fallūja, 10/04/2010.

The rejectionists [i.e. Shī'a] in Iraq are a sect of apostates and hypocrites who fight the Muslims and they are not divided into lay folk and non-lay folk. They are all the same. That is why the prince of martyrs Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī, may Allah have mercy upon him, did not hesitate in killing and humiliating them because that is the only way to stop them. So their areas are targeted by mortars and IEDs and we are not concerned with who lives or dies among them. The Islamic state of Iraq is on the same path of targeting the rejectionists.

It is such rhetoric and ideology that explains the motive behind many violent Islamist attacks on Shī'i Muslims in countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Summary:

- The Jihadist animosity toward Shī'ism is informed and justified through reference to the mainstream Wahhabi view of Shī'i beliefs and actions as heretical.
- Anti-Shī'i statements made by mainstream Wahhabi scholars (and even by Saudi government bodies) are used by online Jihadists to justify their animosity towards Shī'is. Jihadists are willing to overlook their differences with the Saudi religious establishment in order to justify their hatred of Shī'i Muslims.

3. Exposition of 'deviant' and heretical sects who 'worship manmade laws':

Islamists, both Jihadist and ostensibly non-violent ones, routinely condemn what they describe as 'non-Islamic' methods of governance in Muslim-majority countries. Throughout such condemnations run the constant Islamist belief that anyone who does not share their exact vision of an 'Islamic state' is potentially an apostate. Jihadists, however, go further and also argue that anyone who differs with them on which *method* that a state should be established is also potentially an apostate.

Posters on pro-Jihadist forums make a particular point of exposing the 'deviancy' of groups and governments who follow, for instance, secular laws or decisions made by elected governments. In many cases, behind these accusation is the implication that such impiety can justify attacks against such bodies. In many instances, online Jihadists' primary target for criticism is the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world's largest Islamist movement, whose members have stood in elections and served in parliaments in various Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco – and who now largely believe in gaining power through elections or political manoeuvrings, rather than through overt terrorist violence.

Online Jihadists' verbal attacks on the Brotherhood are borne out of the belief that the group has betrayed founding Islamist principles and that they have accepted the idol (*tāghūt*) of 'manmade legislation' – which of course, according to Jihadists, potentially makes them apostates. The response from Muslim Brotherhood supporters is usually that *sharī'a* should be applied in society in stages and that this imposition depends on many variables which include the readiness of society to accept their *sharī'a* as a system and the power of Islamist groups to implement it – in other words that the end goal of establishing *sharī'a* as a state is more important than how that goal is reached. For Jihadists, however, such pragmatism represents a deviation from the divine plan.

In addition to these generalised criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood, Internet Jihadists specifically criticise Hamas, the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch. One of their main objections is that Hamas did not declare the Gaza Strip an 'Islamic state', as they were widely expected to, when they took control of it in 2007, and instead continued to (mainly) enforce secular (i.e. 'man-made') laws.⁹¹ In forum posts criticising Hamas, online Jihadists constantly refer to the group with derogatory names such as "worshippers of manmade law" and "worshippers of democracy", with the implication that Hamas have become *mushrikīn*, or idol-worshippers. Criticism of Hamas intensified further amongst Internet Jihadists after the end of Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, when the Hamas leadership again denied that they intend to implement *sharī'a* and turn Gaza into an Islamic state, while also agreeing to a truce with Israel and a halt to rocket attacks against Israeli towns.⁹² In an interview with *The New York Times*, The head of Hamas, Khalid Meshal, "urged outsiders to ignore the Hamas charter, which calls for the obliteration of Israel through jihad."⁹³ This interview was heavily cited on various Jihadist forums.

91 Ian Black and Mark Tran, 'Hamas take control of Gaza', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2007. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jun/15/israel4>.

92 Taghreed El-Khodary and Ethan Bronner, 'Addressing the U.S., Hamas Says it Grounded Rockets', *The New York Times*, 4 May 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/world/middleeast/05meshal.html>.

93 Ibid.

It is also very common to find posts on Jihadist forums which deal with the way in which Hamas have enforced 'manmade' law instead of the *sharī'a*. In one thread entitled "we will continue to expose you oh worshipers of democracy" posted on the 'al-Mujāhidīn' Jihadist forum, the user explains his anti-Hamas views as follows:

وانا هنا علي استعداد ان ابين لك ان حماس قد اتت الضلال من كل ابوابه ومن اوسعها
فحماس لا خلاف في انها حركة خانت الملة والدين كما قال امير دولة العراق الاسلامية حفظه
الله حاشا المخلصين من ابناء القسام
واعلم اخي اننا لا نكره حماس الا لانها اتبعت الضلال وخانت المجاهدين وقتلتهم وتغيب حكم
شرع الله وووووو

Figure 49 Mu'taz Dughmush, "sanastamir bi faḍhikum yā 'abīd al-dimōqraṭiyya maṣādir falaṣṭīniyya takshif ana al-zahhār zār swīsrā sirran", al-mujāhidīn, 07/03/2009.

I am willing to show to you that Hamas has committed all kinds of aberrances. There is no doubt that it has betrayed the Muslims and the religion as the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq has said, with the exception of the sincere members of the Qassam Brigades⁹⁴. My brother, you should know that we only hate Hamas because it has followed misguidance, betrayed the mujāhidīn and killed them, and it dismisses the rule of the *sharī'a* and the list goes on.

Despite such stridency, however, the Hamas issue is one of the most divisive issues on the Jihadist forums. While most users agree that Hamas has seriously erred in not establishing an Islamic state, not enforcing a version of *sharī'a* as law and for declaring a truce with Israel, they are divided on the theo-religious implications of this.

For instance, while many on the Jihadist forums openly describe Hamas an infidel group, others believe that while Hamas has made a serious error by entering into elections, not implementing a version of *sharī'a* as law, and banning other Jihadist groups from firing rockets at Israeli towns, they are not outright infidels – and consequently they should not be fought by Jihadists.⁹⁵

Many debates on the forums have consequently taken place on how best to deal with Hamas and whether the organisation has apostatised. The following thread, for example, which began as a question about the permissibility of working as a member of Hamas's security forces, soon evolves into a conversation dealing with the implications of Hamas's refusal to implement a version of *sharī'a* as law:

94 The Qassam Brigades are Hamas paramilitary force which most Jihadists and Jihadist sympathisers believe consists of Salafists of a 'sound creed' i.e. Salafi-Jihadists.

95 This issue came to a head when a Gazan group of Salafi-Jihadists calling themselves Jund Anṣār Allah led by Abū al-Nūr al-Maqdisī had a brutal armed confrontation Hamas forces in August 2009. See: 'Profile: Jund Ansar Allah', BBC News, 15, August, 2009. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8203239.stm.

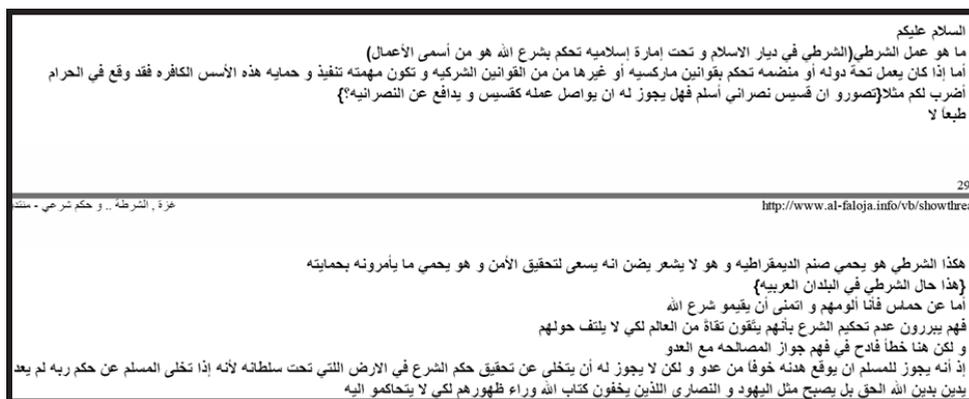


Figure 50 Walā' wa Barā', "ghazza al-shurṭa wa ḥukum sharī", al-fallūja, 28/04/2009.

What is the role of a police officer (In the land of Islam and under an Islamic state which governs by the *sharī'a*, the role of a police officer is one of the most honourable jobs), whoever works for a state or an organisation that governs by Marxist rules or any other polytheistic rules, and his job is to implement and protect these infidel foundations, he will have committed something impermissible. For example, imagine if a Christian priest becomes Muslim, is it permissible for him to continue his work as a priest and defend Christianity? Certainly it will not be permissible. A police officer protects the idol of democracy without him knowing it, thinking that he is working to maintain law and order (this is the situation of police in Arab countries). As for Hamas, I admonish them and wish that they would implement the legislation of Allah. They justify not implementing the *sharī'a* by saying they are afraid that the rest of the world would gang up on them, but this is a grave error in understanding the permissibility of a truce with the enemy. It is permissible for a Muslim to sign a truce with an enemy that he fears would neutralise him, but it is not permissible to abandon the achievement of *sharī'a* laws in the area that is under that Muslim's control. This is because if he abandons the legislation of his lord [God], he no longer adheres to the true religion and becomes like the Jews and the Christians who hide the book of Allah behind their backs so that it does not govern them.

Another forum member responds to the question of being a member of the Hamas security forces by equating those security forces with the soldiers of idols (*ṭāghūt*). This is a term that is used by Jihadists to refer to government forces in Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia and elsewhere on the grounds that they do not implement a version of *sharī'a* as law:

أخي الكريم - أعلم أنّ هؤلاء هم جند للطاغوت وهم سدنته ودعائمه ويده التي يبطش بها بسهرون الليل لحماية الكفر وأهله مثلهم مثل باقي جنود الدول العربية الأخرى فهم كفار كغيرهم ولا أعرف وجهاً للتفريق بينهم وبين غيرهم البتة.

Figure 51 al-Rājī Raḥmat Rabih, "ghazza al-shurṭa wa ḥukum sharī", al-fallūja, 28/04/2009.

My noble brother, you should know that those people are the soldiers of idols; they are their servants and supporters. Further they are the idol's forceful hands, who stand guard through the night to protect *kufir* and its people. They are like all soldiers in other Arab countries, so they are infidels like the others, and I do not know a way in which they are different.

The dislike that online Jihadists express towards Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood can hardly be underestimated. Indeed, in their attempts to expose the governments and groups that do not implement *shari'a* as state law, online Jihadists often direct more resources towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas than against the overtly secular governments of many Middle Eastern countries.

This negative attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood is clearly the result of Jihadists feeling betrayed by an Islamist group whose founder and leading ideologues have been immensely influential upon the outlook and ideology of Jihadists. This has provoked a feeling that the group has not held on to its founding principles and beliefs – particularly their belief in using violence in order to establish an 'Islamic state'. Salafi-Jihadists have not shied away from translating their violent rhetoric to violent actions against the Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq and Hamas in Gaza.⁹⁶

Summary:

- Salafi-Jihadists believe that parliamentary elections, constitutions and any form of human legislation is a form of polytheism because this gives authority to something besides God's law. They also believe that taking part in and upholding a man made system makes any person an apostate.
- Jihadists, or at least the online ones, do not believe that core Islamist principles (such as establishing an 'Islamic state' and implementing *shari'a* 'law') should be delayed for the sake of realpolitik; nor do they believe that these goals can be achieved through non-violent means.
- Internet Jihadists therefore believe that Hamas should 'implement' the 'full' *shari'a* regardless of the damage that this might cause to their overall cause – and that their failure to do so potentially turns them into apostates. Groups like Hamas that are radical by liberal standards, are often not seen as fully Islamic by Salafi-Jihadists.

96 See: 'Fatal car bombing in Falluja targets Sunni Arab group', *France 24*, 25, July, 2009. <http://www.france24.com/en/20090725-fallujah-car-bombing-kills-injures-iraq-sunni-terrorists> & 'Jihadists challenge Hams in Gaza', *Rueters*, 27, May, 2009. <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/LDE64P139.htm>.

Conclusions

The findings of this report give fresh insights into the workings of Arabic-language pro-Jihadist websites. In particular, they shed new light on the ideologies, recruitment strategies and social dynamics of these forums, in addition to adding to existing knowledge about the role that these websites play in distributing Jihadist texts, videos and statements.

Key findings include:

Primary concern is attacking other Muslims

The primary concern of forum users is to identify traitors and enemies to the Jihadist cause. As it goes without saying on Jihadist forums that the US, the UK, Israel and other western countries are enemies, much of the forum is focused on identifying enemies among people who are outwardly Muslims, for instance, those who support *tāghūt*, those who recognize or facilitate 'un-Islamic systems', those who have 'abandoned their religion' etc.

Attempted recruitment of Salafists

Users of pro-Jihadist forums clearly think that Salafists and Wahhabis are highly susceptible towards being recruited into jihadism on account of them sharing many of the same core beliefs, rites and jurisprudential reference points as Jihadists. For this reason they regularly conduct online '*ghazwāt*', or raids, onto Salafist forums and websites to post Jihadist material there.

Absence of real debate

Compared to general English-language web-forums, Arabic-language Jihadist forums are notable for their lack of real debate. Instead there is a clear and deliberate attempt to create an impression of unanimity, with regular dissenters being kicked off the sites and barred. This makes it very difficult for mainstream Muslims to use the forums to challenge supporters of Jihadist ideologies.

Lack of scriptural knowledge

Most users of Jihadist forums appear to lack any depth of scriptural knowledge and are frequently unable to articulate their beliefs in their own words. Instead there is a tendency to merely paste the rulings of recognized clerics, both Jihadist and Wahhabi, and likewise to fall back on platitudes (for instance, 'those on the battlefield know best'). This may partly explain the lack of debate on the forums.

Attacks on Hamas

Users of Jihadist forums are almost unanimous in their intense dislike of Hamas (and other Muslim Brotherhood organizations). Hamas is usually regarded by the forum users as an 'apostate' organization that has knowingly betrayed its founding principles. Some forum users believe that it is consequently acceptable for them to fight Hamas.

Continuing use of works by 're-canted' Jihadists

Perhaps surprisingly, users of Jihadist forums continue to cite pro-Jihadist texts produced by individuals who have since loudly and publicly retracted these earlier works. For instance, Dr Fadl's earlier pro-Jihadist work continues to be reproduced and cited on forums in order to justify violence – even though he has since retracted and critiqued these works. This selectivity could be due to a real lack of alternative pro-Jihadist literature.

Continuing role of 'Londonistan'

The discovery of a hardline Jihadist forum operated from Camden by the Egyptian Walid ElSharkawy illustrates that London remains an important global hub for pro-Jihadist propaganda. Even more disturbing is that this forum is also used by other well-known London extremists including Yasser al-Sirri and Mohammed al-Massari to actively distribute material which arguably glorifies and encourages terrorism.

In addition to these points, one of the most important findings of this report is the overlap between Wahhabi and Jihadist ideologies. In order to justify their violent beliefs, Jihadists repeatedly cite the rulings and statements of Saudi government-funded Wahhabi clerics, both living and dead, such as 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Bāz, 'Abdullah ibn Jibrīn or 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Barrāk to argue for their interpretation of jihad. Simultaneously, however, the same online Jihadists reserve much of their vitriol for mainstream Saudi Wahhabi clerics, and particularly publicly recanted Salafi-Jihadist clerics such as Salmān al-'Awda, who they often seem to see as posing the greatest threat to Jihadist ideology. Such contradictions are probably irreconcilable: Jihadists are opportunists who will cite any source that supports their cause at any given moment – indeed the same forums will routinely criticize individual Wahhabi clerics as apostates and then shamelessly cite their rulings when it suits them. However, understanding that Jihadists see their version of Islam as overlapping substantially with that of prominent Wahhabis has important consequences for international efforts to counter extremism and violent jihadism. For instance, Jihadists clearly regard those who subscribe to the Wahhabi view on jihad (i.e. that religious violence against 'non-believers' is permissible but that it must be sanctioned by an authentic 'Islamic state') to be only a few degrees away from jihadism (i.e. that such religious violence can be conducted by any true Muslims in the absence of any suitably authentic 'Islamic state'). At the same time, though, Jihadists realise that this same ideological closeness means that Wahhabi clerics, primarily using ideological reference points and sources that are respected by Jihadists, may be similarly able to convince Jihadists that their violence against 'non-believers' and 'apostates' is best conducted through an 'Islamic state' rather than by non-state actors. In terms of counter-terrorism work, this may mean that while some Wahhabi clerics may be able to very effectively challenge some aspects of Jihadist ideology, any popularizing of Wahhabism more generally risks only enlarging the pool of people who are potentially highly receptive to Jihadist thinking. With this in mind, it seems logical that de-radicalisation of Jihadists into Wahhabis should only ever be a half-way step, given the ease with which Wahhabis (and Salafists in general) can slip back into jihadism (as has indeed happened multiple times with the graduates of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi-run de-radicalisation centres).⁹⁷

97 Prominent cases include Muhammad Al-Awfi and Said Ali al-Shihri who joined al-Qaeda in Yemen after leaving a Saudi de-radicalisation centre. See, 'Al-Oufi, Al-Shihri betrayed our trust: Families, friends', *Saudi Gazette*, 29 January 2009. <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2009012927911>.

Finally, with further important implications for counter-terrorism efforts, this report has shown Jihadist ideology, as manifested on Arabic-language web forums, to be a complex set of interlocking ideas and narratives. The three key concepts of the '*The Saved Sect*', *ṭāghūt*, and *al-walā' wal barā'* respectively allow Jihadists to dismiss all non-Jihadists as apostates, to dismiss anyone working with any government that does not apply their version of *sharī'a* as law as idolaters, and to reject anyone who is from outside their own ideological circle. Jihadists use these three self-supporting and mutually reinforcing concepts to justify a very broad range of violent activities. In practice these concepts essentially give Jihadists a carte blanche to conduct violent actions against anyone outside of their own specific social, organizational or ideological grouping. Moreover, with further implications for counter-terrorism efforts, a person who believes in all these three doctrines will naturally be highly resistant to external attempts to influence him or to question his beliefs, particularly if this intervention comes from anyone associated with government. These beliefs therefore do much to explain why Jihadist groups and individuals can often appear so resistant to attempts to challenge their ideology – because anyone who seeks to do so automatically becomes an apostate and an enemy of God. Ironically therefore the sharply polarized 'us and them' Wahhabi worldview which is found in concepts such as '*The Saved Sect*', *ṭāghūt*, and *al-walā' wal barā'*, and which has been adopted and adapted by Jihadists, severely limits the ability of Wahhabis, and others, to effectively challenge such Jihadists. This is not to say, however, that people who subscribe to such an ideology cannot be reached or influenced, only that the concepts that underline their ideology are conducive to a further entrenchment of their position, rather than making them receptive to debate. Therefore, to effectively combat Jihadism it is essential to start with addressing the doctrines that constitute the backbone of all Jihadist activity.

Recommendations

The challenge of tackling online extremists is considerable. Fortunately there are a variety of tools that can be used to tackle online extremists, both through the Jihadist forums directly and through offline techniques. In doing so it is important to remember that forums are not only a cause of extremism but are also a symptom of it – a fact that underscores the importance of tackling extremism more generally.

In addition, there should be a clear distinction made between attempting to de-radicalise existing extremists and preventing new generations from adopting such ideologies in the first place. Strategies that might be relatively effective at de-radicalising existing extremists may be counter-productive in preventing other individuals from adopting extremism in the future. Indeed, if deployed against those who are not extremists, some such strategies may even have the reverse effect through making non-Jihadist individuals more susceptible to Jihadist ideology than they were previously.

Legal:

In general there is little practical role for the law in tackling Arabic-language websites, particularly ones run from foreign servers by individuals based in the Middle East. There are, however, a number of legal actions that can be taken against extremists who run pro-Jihadist websites from the UK.

- **Prosecution of extremists in the UK** - UK-based individuals who actively distribute material that glorifies and encourages terrorist actions on Jihadist discussion forums should be prosecuted under the 2006 Terrorism Act.⁹⁸ Another law that should be deployed is the Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006,⁹⁹ which proscribes actions that use threatening words or behaviour intending to incite racial hatred. Individuals such as Walid ElSharkawy have clearly violated both laws by running a Jihadist discussion forum which regularly praises suicide bombing, the death of British and NATO soldiers and incites hatred and violence against Iraqi Shi'is, Jews and Westerners.
- **Internet restrictions for known extremists** - Individuals who have been convicted of promoting violence or inciting racial and religious hatred could have their Internet usage and their ability to interact with young people within the community restricted if they are believed to be at high risk of propagating extremism online.¹⁰⁰ The model for this should be the actions taken against convicted paedophiles.

98 'Terrorism Act 2006', Office of Public sector Information. http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/pdf/ukpga_20060011_en.pdf.

99 'Public Order Act 1986', The UK Statute Law Database. <http://www.statutelaw.gov.uk/content.aspx?activeTextDocId=2236942>.

100 Sentencing Council. <http://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/professional/guidelines/sexual-offences/pornography.htm>.

Challenging ideology:

Challenging the ideology, rhetoric and worldview of pro-Jihadists forums should take place in both the 'cyber' and the 'real' worlds. This two-pronged strategy would limit the effectiveness of these forums and undermine the rationale for people seeking out these websites to begin with.

Online challenges:

Online challenges should focus on directly challenging extremist ideology through exposing the fallacies, contradictions and harmful effects of Jihadist concepts and actions, while also helping to expose ordinary Muslims to counter-Jihadist messages and to mainstream theological readings of Islam, both in order to inoculate them against extremism and to give them the tools to challenge extremism themselves.

- **Support direct online challenges.** Specialised staff should be employed and trained by Britain and other friendly governments to directly challenge the users of Arabic language Jihadist forums, for instance, to discuss the religious justifications for Jihadist violence and debate with them directly over the validity of these actions. While this may not change the minds of hard-core users, it will have an impact on those who are new to the websites or unsure about the ideology.
- **Make better use of the BBC.** The BBC's Arabic Service (which is funded by the FCO) should develop its website to reach young people in the Arab world more effectively by prominently featuring scholars discussing issues of radicalism and violence – as well as drawing greater attention to the 'refutations' issued by Jihadist groups.
- **Make counter-Jihadist literature available.** Existing anti-Jihadist literature and materials should be made electronically available and easily accessible and free to download (which it is often not at present). If necessary, the British government should work with mainstream religious institutions and organisations to achieve this.

Offline challenges:

Offline engagement should centre on undermining the narrative 'Islam and the West are at war' that the online-Jihadists advance. This will make it more difficult for extremists to paint the two as diametrically opposed and to advance their ideology on the back of such false narratives.

- **Improved public diplomacy.** The UK government should increase public diplomacy in the Arab world through relatively cost-effective projects like the FCO's 'Projecting British Muslims'. Such programmes can demonstrate that Muslims are an integral part of 'the West' who enjoy more religious freedoms than their coreligionists in most Muslim-majority countries and thus break down negative stereotypes of the West. In particular, such projects should not shy away from difficult discussions of foreign policy, and should make more effort to reach out to Islamist-leaning publications and opinion-formers, not to 'engage' with them for their own sake, but to undermine some of their pre-conceptions and ideology.
- **Increase awareness of DFID's work.** With the UK's large foreign aid budget currently 'ring-fenced' against cuts, it is important that the UK government ensures that this money works more effectively to address negative opinions of the UK held by those living overseas.

In countries with significant problems of Jihadist extremism, such as Yemen and Jordan, increased awareness of DFID's work can provide people with concrete evidence of the UK helping Muslims. This should be done in other Arab and Muslim-majority countries to counter extremist narratives.

- **Work with traditional Islamic scholars of all denominations.** The UK government, whilst taking care not to favour one sect over another, should make better use of its close relations with Muslim-majority countries that house important centres of religious learning, such as Egypt which houses al-Azhar University. Al-Azhar has a long history of traditional Islamic scholarship that is able to challenge *both* the pro-Jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda and the intolerant extremism of Wahhabism.
- **Translation and awareness raising of 'refutations'.** Increased attention should be given to Muslim scholars' refutations of Jihadist ideology and tactics, and these refutations should be translated into English and disseminated among the segments of British Muslim society that are considered to be the most at risk of radicalisation. Speaking tours of the UK by such former radicals could also be arranged – although speakers would have to be chosen carefully to ensure that they can preach a message that is *fully* appropriate to the UK's diverse, secular and multi-faith society.
- **Challenge Saudi support for Wahhabi ideology.** As this report has shown, the rulings of senior Wahhabi clerics who are part of the Saudi government are central to sustaining the modern Jihadist world-view and ideology. The FCO, where possible with foreign governments, should emphasise this problem to the Saudi government at every opportunity, pointing out that the repeated legitimisation of extremist and violent ideologies by Wahhabi clerics threatens the stability of the Saudi government, as well as its allies regionally and globally.
- **Limit the role of Wahhabism in counter-radicalisation strategies.** Although some Wahhabi clerics may be able to play a limited role in *de*-radicalising existing Jihadists, Wahhabis should be excluded from preventative *counter*-radicalisation efforts aimed at making individuals and communities resilient to Jihadist ideologies. Involving Wahhabis in counter-radicalisation efforts may well attract more individuals to Wahhabism and thus bring them closer to the Jihadist ideologies and thus more susceptible to Jihadist recruitment.

Glossary

TERMS

Ahl al-sunna wal jamā'a: The Sunni school of Islam.

Da'wah: The call to and propagation of the faith.

Farḍ 'aīn: An individual religious duty incumbent on every Muslim.

Fatwa: Religious edict, often issued by a religious authority in response to a question seeking clarification of Muslim doctrine.

Ḥadīth: Purported sayings of the prophet Muḥammad.

Ikhwān(ī): Relating to the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in Ismā'īlyya in Egypt in 1928 by school teacher Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949), the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn) is considered to be the oldest Islamist organisation. With different branches in nations around the world, the organisation has won support in urban centres whilst often providing the most vocal dissent against ruling regimes. The Brotherhood has come to reject violence directed against fellow Muslims, and agitates in favour of participating in elections in the Arab world.

Islamism: The belief that Islam is a political ideology. It claims that political sovereignty belongs to God rather than the people. Islamists believe that their reading of *sharī'a* should be state law, and that it is the religious duty of all Muslims to create and pledge allegiance to an Islamic state that reflects these principles.

Jihadism: Non-state violence used in the cause of Islamism. Just as Islamism is the politicization of Islam, Jihadism is the modern politicization of jihad. Jihadists take the traditional concept of jihad and use it as a political tool to achieve a political end.

Kāfir/Kuffār: Unbeliever, non-Muslim.

Kufr: Unbelief.

Mujāhidīn: Fighters in religious war. According to Salafi-Jihadists, it is the highest form of activism.

Mushrikīn: Polytheists, those who practice *shirk* (association). People who give associates with God, worship more than one God and deny monotheism.

Murtaddīn: Apostates.

Rāfiḍa: Rejectionists. A derogatory term used by Wahhabis, Salafists and Salafi-Jihadists to describe Shī'īs.

Salafism/ Salafist: A revivalist Sunni Muslim trend that believes that Muslims should shed traditional theological edicts and instead derive new religious verdicts directly from the sources. Salafism includes the subsets of Wahhabism, Islamism and Salafi-Jihadism.

Salafi-Jihadism/Salafi-Jihadist: A current within Salafism which regards violence as the only way to spiritual and political self-fulfillment.

Shari'a: The heterogenous body of Islamic religious codes and ethics derived from the Qur'an and ḥadīth.

Shi'i/Shi'is/Shi'a: The second largest current within Islam. They differ from Sunnis in their belief that 'Ali bin Abī Ṭālib is the rightful successor to the Prophet, a matter that has reflected itself upon matters of doctrine and practice.

Shirk: Associating any being or thing with God, and thus comparing it to God. A practice that is condemned by all trends of Muslim orthodoxy as an assault on God's transcendence.

Sunna: Literally means 'usual practice' but in Islam refers to the examples of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Sunni/Sunnis: The largest current within Islam, differing from Shi'is in their understanding of the Sunna and their acceptance of the first three caliphs as legitimate heirs to the Prophet. The four classical schools of Sunni jurisprudence are the Mālikī, Ḥanafī, Ḥanbalī, and Shāfi'i schools.

Tawḥīd: Belief in the oneness of God, monotheism. A tenet of Islamic orthodoxy shared by all Muslims, the emphasis on the radical oneness of God by Salafists is the doctrinal counterpart to a vigorous condemnation of shirk.

Ummah: Community of Muslims.

Wahhabi/Wahhabism: A heterodox and obscurantist conservative Sunni revivalist movement, founded by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb in the 18th century. It is popular in Saudi Arabia and retains a socially conservative, austere and vacuous interpretation of Islam.

Appendix

Appendix 1:

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Domain Name: ALMEDAD.COM

Created on.....: 2006-08-21 17:30:32 GMT
Expires on.....: 2011-08-21 17:30:32 GMT
Last modified on.....: 2009-09-02 23:42:36 GMT

Registrant Info: (FAST-13231449)

Walid ElSharkawy
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] London, none NW1 [REDACTED]
United Kingdom
Phone: [REDACTED]
Fax.:
Email: [REDACTED]@gmail.com
Last modified: 2008-08-18 21:25:00 GMT

Administrative Info: (FAST-13231449)

Walid ElSharkawy

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Figure 52 Screenshot of whois.com showing registration information for almedad.com taken on 08/01/2010.

Appendix 2:

FACT BOX: Yasser al-Sirri

Yasser al-Sirri is an Egyptian Jihadist living in London who has been convicted in absentia for his role in terrorist attacks organised by Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) group. Al-Sirri has achieved a level of fame on Jihadist websites as a reliable source of information on Jihadist leaders and personalities (particularly those held in prison).

Born in Egypt in 1962, Yasser al-Sirri first became involved in jihadism in the 1980s when he joined the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group (EIJ) which aimed to overthrow Egypt's government and replace it with an Islamic state. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Islamic Jihad carried out a series of violent attacks in Egypt including bombings and attempts to assassinate government officials. As a result of his involvement in the group, al-Sirri was reportedly arrested and tortured on a number of occasions.¹⁰¹

In 1993 the group attempted to assassinate Egypt's Prime Minister Atef Sedki using a car-bomb. The attack, carried out outside a girls' school, failed but killed a young girl.¹⁰² In 1994, al-Sirri was sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court for

¹⁰¹ Al-Sirri v Secretary of State for the Home Department & Anor, Court of Appeal - Civil Division, March 18, 2009, [2009] EWCA Civ 222.

¹⁰² Lawrence Wight, 'The Man Behind Bin Laden', *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002. http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/09/16/020916fa_fact2.

FACT BOX CONTINUED: Yasser al-Sirri

his role in the attack.¹⁰³ Al-Sirri, who was living in Sudan at the time of the attack, claimed he took no direct part in the operation. In 1996, he told the *Guardian* that he was innocent of the attack but also said that Egyptians had a right to “revolt” against the government:

“There has to be rule by sharia [Koranic law] and the people must decide. If they can’t do that through elections, they must obviously revolt against the government.”¹⁰⁴

In 1994, al-Sirri left Sudan and arrived in the UK where he was detained for travelling on a false passport. He claimed asylum but was turned down. Despite this, he has lived in the UK ever since. Once established in London, al-Sirri continued to work for the Jihadist cause. For instance, in 1996 *The Guardian* reported that a press release from Islamic Jihad had been faxed from al-Sirri’s telephone number. In 1999, Al-Sirri was briefly arrested by British anti-terrorism officers in relation to concerns about UK-based Jihadists linked to Abū Hamza travelling to Yemen.¹⁰⁵ In 2001, he used his website to issue exclusive statements from al-Qaeda, including a statement from Mohammed Atef, al-Qaeda’s military commander.

In late October 2001, al-Sirri was arrested again on suspicion of helping to organise the 9 September 2001 killing of Ahmed Shah Massood, the head of Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance.¹⁰⁶ Massood’s assassins, both members of al-Qaeda, had gained access to their victim by posing as journalists and carrying letters accrediting them to al-Sirri’s ‘Islamic Observation Centre’. Al-Sirri was acquitted of these charges on the grounds that he did not know that the men were going to murder Massood.

On his release from prison, Al-Sirri was re-arrested in relation to US accusations that al-Sirri had ‘facilitated [Gamaa al-Islamiya] communications worldwide and provided material support and resources, including financial support’ to the group.¹⁰⁷ Sirri was specifically accused of using his organisation’s website to distribute statements from Omar Abdel Rahman, the spiritual leader of Gamaa Islamiya who was jailed for his role in the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing. One statement rejected Gamaa al-Islamiya’s ceasefire with the Egyptian government. Charges against Sirri were dropped when it became clear that he would not be extradited from the UK.

103 ‘Yasser al-Sirri and Secretary of State for the Home Department’, Neutral Citation Number: [2009] EWCA Civ 222, Case No: C5/2007/2372, In the Supreme Court of the Judicature, Court of Appeal (Civil Division, AA/10668/2006

104 ‘Egypt’s quiet militant protests his innocence’, *The Guardian*, 19 January 1996

105 Richard Norton Taylor and Ian Black, ‘Police hold Islam cleric ‘in fishing expedition’, *The Guardian*, 16 March 1999. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/1999/mar/16/yemen.islam>.

106 ‘Man charged over dead rebel leader’, *BBC News website*, 30 October 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1627881.stm>.

107 ‘United States of America against Ahmed Abdel Sattar, Yassir Al-Sirri, Lyne Stewart and Mohammed Yousry/ United States District, Court Southern Distict of New York. <http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/terrorism/ussattar72203opn.pdf>.

FACT BOX CONTINUED: Yasser al-Sirri

In 2008, al-Sirri was photographed with Abu Qatada while the latter was briefly released from prison while on a control order. Al-Sirri was reportedly using his mobile phone to pass on messages from Abu Qatada to a third party (Abu Qatada's bail conditions prevented him from owning his own mobile phone).¹⁰⁸ In 2009, several of Abu Qatada's fatwas and statements from prison were released online by al-Sirri through his 'Islamic Observation Centre' website.

Appendix 3:**FACT BOX: Muhammad Al-Massari**

Muhammad Al-Massari is a Saudi-born physicist who has lived in exile in London since 1994 after being invited to the UK by Hizb ut-Tahrir to speak at the 1994 'Khilafah' conference in Wembley Arena. Since coming to London he has been involved in a number of radical Islamist groups ranging from HT to Al-Muhajiroun. He has also run a range of pro-Jihadist websites, the most prominent of which is al-Tajdid.¹⁰⁹

*Born in 1946, Muhammad Al-Massari was brought up in Saudi Arabia, but educated partly in the US, including at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was a postgraduate physics student. After returning to Saudi Arabia he taught at the King Saud University in Riyadh where he became involved in hardline Wahhabi-Islamist opposition movements which wished to replace the Saudi government with a more ideological Islamist state. During this time Al-Massari made contact with Osama bin Laden, at that time merely a prominent Saudi dissident. Al-Massari had previously been a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, whose Saudi branch he helped to establish alongside Omar Bakri Muhammad, who was later to set up al-Muhajiroun, an off-shoot of the British branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir.*¹¹⁰

After coming to London in 1994, Al-Massari, together with his fellow exile Dr Saad Al-Faqih, ran the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) organisation which became a focus for opposition to the Saudi royal family. Over time, however, the momentum of their movement faded as the group lost touch with its grass-roots followers in Saudi Arabia and the Saudi government imprisoned or co-opted

108 James Slack, 'Hate preacher Abu Qatada's bail conditions under review after his meeting with car-bomb extremist', *Daily Mail*, 4 September, 2008. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1051873/Hate-preacher-Abu-Qatadas-bail-conditions-review-meeting-car-bomb-extremist.html>.

109 <http://www.tajdeed.net/>.

110 Mahan Abedin, 'A Saudi Oppositionist's View: An Interview with Dr. Muhammad Al-Massari', *Terrorism Monitor* Volume 1; Issue 7, December 4, 2003. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=26182&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=178&no_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=26182&tx_ttnews[backPid]=178&no_cache=1); Glenn Frankel, 'Exiled Saudi Is Dissident to Some, Terrorist to Others', *Washington Post Foreign Service*, July 7, 2004. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A29641-2004Jul5_2.html.

FACT BOX CONTINUED: Muhammad Al-Massari

key opposition leaders within the kingdom. Simultaneously, however, Al-Massari became involved in UK-focused radical Islamist groups such as al-Muhajiroun, while also starting to pay more attention to global Islamist organisations like the emerging al-Qaeda.

During the mid-1990s period, al-Massari shared an office with Khalid al-Fawwaz, Bin Laden's media representative in London, and at one point also arranged for a satellite telephone to be sent to Bin Laden. Al-Massari later said that Bin Laden had personally called him in London to thank him for this. During the late-1990s al-Massari gradually became estranged from al-Faqih while the British government also attempted (unsuccessfully) to deport him.¹¹¹ He also became involved with groups like al-Muhajiroun which had a similar global Islamist outlook, while also gaining his own following. In 1999, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the 'Global Fund for Jihad' run by al-Massari, was raising funds for Jihadist groups abroad, including those in Chechnya. Over the coming years, a number of al-Massari's followers were to become actively involved in al-Qaeda terrorism.¹¹² For instance, in May 2004, Mustafa Abdel-Qader Abed al-Ansari, a member of the CDLR who had lived in the UK for two years beginning in 1994, died after taking part in an al-Qaeda attack on the Saudi oil port of Yanbu which killed 7 people.¹¹³

Al-Massari was quick to realise the power of the Internet and began running pro-Jihadist websites early on.¹¹⁴ This has repeatedly brought him to the attention of UK politicians and media, who have drawn attention to his websites' distribution of videos of attacks on British troops in Iraq,¹¹⁵ giving advice on training for urban warfare¹¹⁶ and glorifying Jihadist attacks in Jordan.¹¹⁷

111 'Controversial Imams', *The Daily Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1400034/Controversial-imams.html>.

112 'British Muslims Monthly Survey' for November 1999: [http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/bmms/1999/11November99.asp#Yemen detainee "overjoyed" to be home](http://artsweb.bham.ac.uk/bmms/1999/11November99.asp#Yemen%20detainee%20%22overjoyed%22%20to%20be%20home)

113 Jenny Boothe, 'London link to Saudi massacre', *The Sunday Times*, May 4, 2004. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/article850721.ece>.

114 Michael Moss and Souad Mekhennet, 'An Internet Jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers', *The New York Times*, October 15, 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/15/us/15net.html>.

115 Nicholas Rufford and Abul Taher, 'London Muslim puts film of Black Watch deaths on net', *The Sunday Times*, November 14, 2004. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article391150.ece>.

116 Dipesh Gadhur and Hala Jaber, 'Saudi exile runs urban warfare website in UK', *The Sunday Times*, August 14, 2005. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article555069.ece>.

117 Abul Taher, 'Blair's ban fails to silence Muslim preachers of hate', *The Sunday Times*, November 20, 2005 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article592245.ece>.

