

## What is Militant Sunni Islam?

Contemporary Sunni militant Islam is rooted in the two main representatives of [political Islam](#) - the Muslim Brotherhood Movement and the ultra-conservative Salafi ideology.

Since its early days, the Muslim Brotherhood had - in addition to its educational, social and welfare initiatives - a violent, yet confidential terror arm operating under the code name *al-Nizam al-Khass* (the Special Apparatus). Throughout its history, the conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood's vision of the one global [Khalafa \(Caliphate\)](#) ruled according the [Shari'ah law](#), and the model of modern statehood, based on the concept of separate national identities and the independent nation state, inevitably led to collisions – sometimes violent ones - between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government. Egypt was a major stage for that escalating violence:

Muslim Brotherhood activists assassinated the Egyptian Prime Minister, Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi in 1948.

The Muslim Brotherhood made a few attempts to assassinate Egypt's President, Jamal Abd Al-Nasr in the fifties, but failed.

On their part, the Egyptian governments did not hesitate to use violence against the Muslim Brotherhood either:

Hasan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement was allegedly assassinated by Egyptian government agents in 1949.

Leaders and activists of the Muslim Brotherhood movement were arrested, tortured, and some were executed.

One of the targets of Egyptian ire was a man was an Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb. He was an author, an educator, one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the 1950's and 1960's and probably the most influential thinker whose thoughts laid the foundations for contemporary militant Islam. He was a radical thinker and his ideology was seen as a threat to the government. He was hanged by the Egyptians in 1966, convicted of plotting to assassinate Jamal Abd Al-Nasr, Egypt's President.

Sayyid Qutb's essential ideas were:

- The need to create *Shari'ah* rule as the one and only legitimate law.
- The need to topple any regime which does not implement *Shari'ah* law.
- The need to proactively and violently create the *Khalafa*.
- The need to reject and unwaveringly oppose all western values.
- Eliminate the state of Israel and Jews.

The Muslim Brotherhood [political Islam](#) ideology led to the development of terror organizations such as the *Egyptian Jihad*, *al-Jama'ah al-Islamiya* (The Muslim group), *Hamas* (the initials for *Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-'Islāmiyyah* - The Islamic Resistance Movement), the Palestinian Islamist organization which formally defines itself as the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, and the *Ezzedeem Al-Qassam Brigades*, the armed-militant wing of Hamas.

Qutb's concepts, combined with the Salafi ultra-conservative ideology, gave birth to the militant Islam [Salafi-Jihadi](#) ideology of *Al-Qaeda*, *Global Jihad*, *ISIS*, *Islamic Jihad*, *Jabhat al-Nusra*, and dozens of other militant Islam organizations.

Qutb's voice echoes clearly in the messages of the Saudi born, Osama bin Laden, the founder of Al-Qaeda killed in a covert US operation in May 2011; the Egyptian born, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda; the American born, Anwar al-Awlaki, the Al-Qaeda senior leader who was killed by a US drone strike in September 2011; the Iraqi born, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS (as of mid-2017); Ahmad Bin Omar Al Hazimi, a Saudi Salafi-Jihadi preacher advocating what is described as [“a more extreme and brutal version of the ISIS ideology.”](#) and other militant Islam leaders and thinkers.

Al-Qaeda which in Arabic means “the base,” “the foundation,” or “fundamental” – was established by Saudi born, Osama bin Laden in the late 1980's. It is a global Islamist Salafi-Jihadi militant organization. Al-Qaeda is quite an old player in militant Islam, the relatively new player is ISIS, and the newest one is Al-Hazimi.

ISIS - or as it defines itself formally - the Islamic State (IS) is also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) (a-Sham is the Arabic name which for centuries referred to a geographic area consisting of what is today Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria); In Arabic is it known as Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah - the Islamic State; Al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fil-'Irāq wash-Shām - the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham; and it is primarily known by in the Arab world and in Israel by its initials Da'ish / Da'eesh / Daesh. I prefer to use the term ISIS because that is the name most commonly used in the media and in public discourse in the West.

It is not yet clear, what the direction and future of Al-Hazimi will be, but we have seen that, unfortunately, extremism leads to more extremism, militant Islam is here to stay, and totally defeating Militant Islam ideology is a long, long process. In my book [Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth](#) (March 2016) I wrote : “...*Corruption, Illiteracy, lack of civil rights. poverty, violence and other challenges in Muslim societies must be overcome. As long as they exist, Militant Islam will be present.*” (pp. 82)

Exploring the phenomenon of militant Islam cannot be done in one article. The amount of analysis, information, reports, research, and studies on the subject could fill volumes. Therefore, in this article I primarily focus on the evolution of militant Islam, some of its basic concepts and give you an overview of a major stream of militant Islam – the [Salafi-Jihadi ideology](#) - the school of thought which guides, inspires, and motivates many of the major militant Islam groups operating today.

*Salaf* means returning to roots, to the origin, and its *core value* - that *Islam* will thrive and flourish again once Islam adopts and applies the Islamic codes, law, norms and values as they were in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors, known in Arabic as *al-Khulafa al-Rashedun* (The Righteous Caliphs Who Lead the Path). The term *Caliph* is in fact part of the term *khalifat rasul-Allah* (The One That Takes the Place of Prophet Muhammad -Allah's Messenger).

Salafi-Jihadi ideology calls for *proactively* and *violently* spreading and implementing the Salafi ideology.

Here are the *values* and *goals* of *Salafi-Jihadi militant Islam*:

1. Establish the *Khalafa*, in which every day life and every aspect of life is conducted according to the most strict orthodoxy of the Islamic religious law, the *Shari'ah*.

Though they share the same vision of *Khalafa*, there is a significant difference between *militant Islam* and [political Islam](#) on that issue. As I explained in the [political Islam post](#), political Islam stands for the concept of *Tamkin* - “to make possible.” Focus *today* on creating the conditions and laying the foundations for a *future—undefined in time—*in which it will be possible to *actualize the vision of the global Khalafa based on the full implementation of the Shari'ah in all aspects of life*

Militant Islam, however, stands for a different approach known as *Takwin*. The term *Takwin* means the “immediate establishment.” Meaning, it is *necessary now* to establish a *Khalafa, based on the full and strict implementation of the strict orthodoxy of Shari'ah in all aspects of life*. The realization of this goal requires *uncompromising ideological rigidity* to the values of militant Islam; and *the goal must be achieved in a short, intensive process wherein you must use all means necessary including – and actually, primarily – the use of violence*.

2. *Overthrow all current political structures in the Muslim and Arab world*, because in the eyes of militant Islam the current governments and rulers in the Muslim and Arab world are illegitimate, because they do not rigidly and strictly apply and enforce the *Shari'ah*.
3. *Violence* is justified for the sake of establishing the *Khalafa*.
4. *Wage war on the West* and its values which threaten the Islamic religion and the Islamic civilization.
5. *Wage war on the Jews*.
6. *Total devotion and commitment of the individual* is needed to achieve these objectives.

Stemming from its rigid ideology and clear goals, militant Islam praises two core values:

- One is *Talb a-Shahadah* – “the Quest for Martyrdom.” In the eyes of militant Islam *life is not the most sacred value*; there is a higher and nobler objective - and that is the *glory of Islam and the establishment of Allah's rule over the human race*. To that end, according to militant Islam, Muslims are expected not only to be *willing* to sacrifice their life; they are expected to *want* to sacrifice their life.

- And the second is *Jihad* translated literally as "an effort." The term Jihad is actually part of a broader concept in Arabic - *Jihad fi Sabil Allah* - translated as "an effort to implement Allah's way."

The term Jihad has evolved and transformed throughout different phases in the history of Islam. In the very early phases of Islam the meaning of *Jihad* was an intensive spiritual effort on the part of Muslims whose aim was to reach a higher degree of inner purity in their belief and to worship Allah purely.

Prophet Muhammad and his first disciples, were persecuted by the powerful Arab tribes and the large families of Mecca who did not like his message. They forbid him to preach and forbid his followers to practice Islam.

In fear of their lives and yearning to practice their religion free of punishment and retribution, Muhammad and his follower's fled his home town, the city of Mecca and found refuge in the city of Yathrib, located some two hundred miles north of Mecca. Shortly after arriving the city's name was changed to *Madinat U-Nabi* ("the City of the Prophet"). The term U-Nabi was soon dropped and ever since the city is known as *Al-Madinah* ("the city") and is one of the three sacred cities of Islam.

The year Muhammad fled was 622 and this is year 0 in the Muslim calendar, known as the *Hijri* or *Hijra* calendar - the term *hijra* means "migration." Due to the persecution and the harsh conditions the first Muslims endured, Jihad evolved to not only be the spiritual effort of the believer, but also the willingness of Muslims to sacrifice materially and physically, and to suffer stressful and uncomfortable conditions in order to follow their faith.

During the seventh century, Muhammad and his followers, through the use of military campaigns, expanded Islam's influence and control throughout the Arab Peninsula and northwards towards Iraq and Syria. This is when a new dimension was added to the concept of Jihad; it became not only about the willingness to die or to be killed while *defending* Islam's and its ideology, laws and values; it was now also about the willingness to die or get killed as an *offensive* act while proactively spreading Islam, expanding its territory, spreading the Islamic religion, and imposing Islamic rule on others.

Throughout the last third of the 20th century, militant Islam added another aspect that perhaps was not envisioned by Qutb or the Salafi thinkers. An extreme school of thought has evolved within militant Islam ideology called *Takfir* which has taken *violence to even more extreme levels*.

The term *Takfir* relates to a very basic concept in Islam known as *kufir billah* (heresy). Islam argues that the world is divided into two major groups - Muslims who adopt Allah's rule and those who do not. The term *Islam* means the total – emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual willingness of a person to subdue themselves to the concept of monotheism and Allah. A *Muslim* then, is a person who submits willingly and consciously to Allah's rule. All those who do not fully subject themselves to that concept are not Muslims and therefore they are *Kafirun* or *Kuffar* (infidels).

*Takfir* ideology argues there are actually not two kinds of people, there are three kinds of people: Muslims, Infidels, and Muslims who “pretend” to be Muslims but are not “real Muslims,” they are “fake Muslims.”

Those "fake Muslims" are thus even worse than Kuffar (infidels) (*For more on this and an update please read my July 23, 2017 article [Al Hazimi Ideology: Radicalization of Extremism](#)*)

Why?

Because – according to *Takfir* ideology - the Muslim “infidels” are “corrupting” and “contaminating” Islam and its values from within, and as long as Islam is not pure from within, the ultimate vision of establishing Allah's dominion on earth cannot be realized. Therefore, *Takfir* ideology believes that Islam must be “purified” of “Muslim impersonators.”

ISIS theologians argue there are two types of fake Muslims and they differentiate between the two types of fake Muslims:

One type of fake Muslims in the ISIS ideology are Muslims who either, because of laziness and or a lack of religious devotion, knowingly and intentionally do not follow the Shari’ah, and worse – they pretend as if they do. In ISIS’ view these people are destined to, and must be executed because they are contaminating Islam from within.

The second type of fake Muslims, in the eyes of ISIS theologians, are Muslims who out of ignorance do not follow the Shari’ah. The term describing that ignorance is “*Jahiliyyah*” – a term used by Islam to describe the pre-Islamic period, a time that is described in Muslim thought as a period of “Barbarism and Darkness.” Thus, the second kind of Kuffar Muslims are “*Juhhal*” ignorant people, living in darkness. They, therefore should be redirected to see the light – meaning Islam – through education – and if needed, through the use of non-fatal punishments and sanctions – to become “true” Muslims.

A more extreme perspective on the issue of "Fake Muslims" offered by yet another Salafi-Jihadi preacher named Ahmad Bin 'Omar Al Hazimi, who does not differentiate between the types of fake Muslims.

He argues that the Islamist religious ordinance – the Shari’ah, defines very clearly the strict rules according to which a person is considered to be a “Muslim.”

Thus, in his view, if those rules are not fully and strictly met, the person cannot be considered a “Muslim” and therefore can only be “*Kafir*” (also spelled in English *Qafir*) – an Infidel, and as such must be treated according to the Islamic religious law as an Infidel. Al Hazimi also makes it clear that the treatment of a *Kafir* must only be according to the Shari’ah and not any other law (state law, traditional law, civil law, common law, etc). According to Al Hazimi’s beliefs, the Shari’ah law orders the execution of such a person.

*Takfir* distorted ideology is the emergence of militant Islam groups who murder Muslims indiscriminately in the name of Takfir.

The next story illustrates the evolution of radicalism and extremism of militant Islam:

In southern Israel there is a respectful memorial site commemorating Egyptian soldiers who were killed in wars with Israel. At the site is a monument decorated with the Egyptian flag. A famous verse taken from the *Qur'an* - the Muslim's sacred book - is carved in the stone: "*wala Tahsabana lazina kutilu fi sabil Allah amwatah bal ahya inda rabihim yurzakun*" (The Quran, *Surat* (Chapter) Al -'Imran, Verse 169). The translation is: "*Think not of those who are killed in the Way of Allah as dead. Nay, they are alive, with their Lord, and they have provision.*" The original meaning of that verse is meant to offer comfort and solace to people who lose loved ones in battle. However, militant Islam uses that same verse in their marketing, propaganda, recruitment, etc. to encourage people to pursue martyrdom; to kill and get killed.

One way or another, all Salafi-Jihadi groups share the same vision, and this is the very essence of the message that Al-Qaeda, Global Jihad, ISIS, Al-Hazimi, and scores of other groups offer the Muslim world: kill and get killed for the glory of Islam and Allah's rule. Life – either yours, or others – is not the highest and most sacred value; your life - as well as others - is subdued to the fulfillment of militant Islam's vision: imposing Allah's rule on earth. According to Asharq Al-Awsat, Anwar Al-Awlaki, was quoted in the Al-Qaeda magazine Inspire (edition number 9) as saying "that the killing of women and children, as well as the use of weapons of mass destruction, is legitimate and justified."

That is the message, inspiration and vision that Osama bin Laden, the founder of Al-Qaeda; his mentor, Sheikh Abdullah Yusuf Azzam, a senior theologian and militant leader of Palestinian origin who is considered to be the founder of global Jihad and the man credited with creating what Osama bin Laden will evolve to be Al-Qaeda; Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the former leader of Egyptian Jihad and the current leader of Al-Qaeda, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, Ahmad Bin 'Omar Al Hazimi, Ahmad Bin Omar Al Hazimi, and others like them, offer the Muslim world.

9/11 - the September 11, 2001 attack on the United States, the biggest terror attack in history, in which 2,996 people were killed, which was conducted by Al-Qaeda, is a painful manifestation of the severe global threat that Salafi-Jihadi militant Islam presents.

There are many militant Islam groups operating all around the world, mostly in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In Australia, Europe, and North America their activity is mostly underground, focusing on spreading militant Islam ideology, recruiting members and supporters and building terror cells.

Today a continuous physical east-west horizontal corridor of Salafi-Jihadi groups stretches from Iraq, through Jordan, the Gaza Strip, Egypt (specifically, the Sinai Peninsula), Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and ends in Morocco in western Africa. And another north-south vertical corridor of Salafi-Jihadi groups stretches from Syria, through Jordan, Saudi Arabia and ends in Yemen, off the shores of the Indian Ocean and a stone's throw from Africa. Two other countries with significant groups should be added to the above mentioned Salafi-Jihadi axes. One is Al-Qaeda's arm in Somalia known as *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (the Movement of the Young Jihadists) who also operate in Kenya, and the other is a group operating in northern Nigeria called Jam'at Ahl al-Sunna l'Id'awah and Jihad (the Sunni group of Indoctrination and Jihad), primarily

known by the name *Boko Haram* (meaning of the name is Western Values are Forbidden) who announced its allegiance to ISIS in March 2015.

These land corridors enable the passage of ammunition, militants, money, terrorists and weapons. The increasing strength and presence of militant Islam and the potential growing threat it poses is exhibited by the reigns of fear and terror in the name of Islam that they have created in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Somalia, Syria, Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip and Yemen.

For more on this issue and the further radicalization of militant Islam please see my July 23, 2017 article - [Al Hazimi Ideology: Radicalization of Extremism](#).

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Avi is a former Israeli Intelligence Official and Senior Official on Arab Affairs. In his decades of public service, Avi - an Israeli Jew who is fluent in Arabic, English and Hebrew, with a unique understanding of Arab society and culture - has held high-risk Government, Senior Advisory, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorist intelligence positions in Arab cities and communities throughout the region – often in very sensitive times - on behalf of the Israeli government agencies.

As an Author, Educator, Strategic Intelligence Analyst, Avi Melamed educates current and future leaders around the world about Israel and the Middle East and trains them to be Media Literate Critical Thinkers who dialogue with reality and don't get sidetracked by concepts, narratives and theories.

He coauthored [Separate and Unequal: Israel's Rule in East Jerusalem](#) in 1999, and he wrote *Ubrusi: The Novel* in 2010. His newest book, Avi's newest book, [Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth](#), (also just released as an audio book) a GPS to help you navigate the dramatically changing Middle East offers a unique insight into the Arab world, challenges widely-accepted perceptions, provides a guide to make sense of the events unfolding in the region, and offers an out of the box idea that could lead to a positive breakthrough in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

He is the Founder and Director of the Eisenhower Institute's "[Inside the Middle East – Intelligence Perspectives](#)" program designed to ensure that the next generation of policy makers and influencers will be knowledgeable about Israel and the Middle East and will apply methods of critical thinking regarding Middle East Affairs.

Avi provides intelligence analysis, briefings and tours to diplomats, Israeli and foreign policy makers, international media outlets and a wide variety of organizations and private clients on a range of Israel and Middle East affairs.

In the private sector Avi facilitates relationships between Israeli and international firms and potential partners in the Arab world.

He is also the founder and creator of Feenjan – Israel speaks Arabic, a non-profit initiative which presents contemporary Israeli society and culture to the Arab world in Arabic, and serves as an online platform for Israelis and Arabs to discover and discuss issues of common interest.

Avi has his finger on the pulse on the Arab world. With a proven record of foreseeing the evolution of events in the Middle East and their impact on a local and regional level.

Through all of his efforts, as an analyst, educator, entrepreneur, and writer, Avi is a bridge builder. He dedicates himself to enhancing the Arabic, English and Hebrew speaking audience's comprehensive understanding of the Middle East and of each other.

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