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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

Shiraz Maher

Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, 292 pages, \$29.93, Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0190651121)

Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea deals with one of the most pertinent and complex questions of our times: the appeal and resilience of Salafi-Jihadi movements despite decades of forced repression including domestic repression, civil wars, and the international ‘war on terror’.

The identification of the subject of analysis, the Salafi-Jihadi creed, is indeed not an easy task given the abundance of literature on militant Islam, the vast Islamic jurisprudence that licenses the actions of militant movements, but also the broad array of self-identified Salafi actors and projects across time and space. The author applies Wiktorowicz’s classic categorization of Salafis as purists, politicians and jihadists, but introduces two additional elements -their connection to power and the manner in which they engage with it - to distinguish Salafi groups. Accordingly, Salafi-jihadi movements stand for the violent-rejectionist fraction who 1) embrace violence as a method of change and 2) reject the concept of state and international order, sometimes even civilizational standards. Still, the author notes that there are sharp fault lines within this specific group too, particularly among theorists and practitioners/warriors. Whereas the first one engages on lengthy reflection of related ideas, the second is driven by ‘a real time, ad hoc form of jurisprudence... [furnished by] the exigencies of war. (p. 12)

Theoretically, the analysis of similarities and fault lines that define the Salafi-Jihadi creed is embedded in the discipline of intellectual history, a welcome approach to trace the evolution of specific intellectual trends that inform the jihadi dimension of the Salafi religious tradition. However, how and when the original ideal develops, gains steam and becomes an appealing programme depends on the particular context of time and place. To tease out this context, the

author employs a multidisciplinary analysis that combines theology, political and social theory, and contemporary Middle East studies. As such, the intellectual history of Salafi jihadist ideas that the book offers cuts through timeless theological debates, realities of political turmoil plaguing the Muslim world as well as vehement academic discussions of non-western alternatives to modernity and governance.

Empirically, the book distills the essence of salafi-jihadi creed by focusing on five ideological excesses –*jihad* (fight for Allah), *takfir* (excommunication), *al-wala wa-l-bara* (loyalty and disavowal), *tawhid* (monotheism) and *hakimiyya* (ensuring sovereignty of god). Specifically, *jihad* prescribes the mode of revolution and change; *takfir* delineates Islam against everything else and protects it from insidious corruption from within; *al-wala wa-l-bara* establishes lines of loyalty and disavowal; *tawhid* and *hakimiyya* explain what legitimate authority looks like and to whom it should serve. Each of these concepts is explored in separate chapters, which delve into nuances of the concept as well as key authors, relevant textual sources and historical junctures and events that have helped to shape them.

While all those concepts exist within the broad normative Islamist traditions, they are essential features of the contemporary Salafi-Jihadist movement either because its adherents pay them specific attention or they have interpreted them in unique and original ways. ‘Our creed and methodology’, a declaration of principles released by Al-Qaeda in 2004, for example, exposes the movement’s prioritization of all those concepts. Similarly, key leaders of Al-Qaeda would denounce any interpretation of Muslim scholars who lacked engagement with the five defining features of the Salafi-jihadi project. The analysis

also shows that the first three concepts - *jihad*, *takfir* and, *al-wala wa-l-bara* – are principally concerned with the protection of faith and thus relevant for battlefield-related operations. As such, they are particularly contested among various adherents of the group. The last two concepts, by contrast, are less concerned with fighting than governance and are thus more uniformly shared among movement's adherents.

The book offers a set of important findings that need to be taken up in future research on radical movements and contemporary Islamic movements more broadly. Perhaps the most important and challenging finding, which is often omitted by scholars of religion, is that the Salafi-Jihadi strand is a consolidated ideology theorized by various Islamic scholars and operationalized by active militants. Moreover, it is also grounded in various textual sources. As the author notes, 'For every act of violence they will offer some form of reference to scriptural sources ... to explain these actions (17) ... all is grounded, somewhere, in a particular reading of scripture (p. 20). The extension of that finding is that the behavior of Salafi-Jihadists is neither irrational nor whimsical, nor temporary. Here in lies the main explanation for the resilience and persistence of such networks –they are not related to a specific personality or even a specific movement, but grounded in a powerful legitimizing ideology, which consists of both theoretical precepts and a course of action.

The book also offers important findings about the broad conditions that empower Salafi-Jihadi ideas. To quote the author, Salafi-Jihadists are driven by the 'locomotive' of war and conflict. Specifically, the Salafi Jihadist ideals have seemingly fortified and became pertinent during key historical junctures that mark the rise of militant movement from the Algerian civil war, which gave birth to the term, to Taliban's struggle to the 2003 invasion of Iraq to the rise of Al Qaeda and the sprawling of 'lone wolf' terrorism. Those movements have then reshaped the Salafi-Jihadi doctrine according to the contingencies of war and conflict. Al-Qaeda for example instrumentalised *Jihad* to advocate its en-mass killing doctrine, while the Muslim Brotherhood mainstreamed *Takfir* to confront the state, its rulers, officials and even state supporters.

Another finding that comes out in the analysis is the different reading of those concepts by various theorists and militants. Yet, the analysis pays little attention to why those concepts lend themselves to various and sometimes contradictory interpretations, and maybe the ambiguity of 'dense' Islamic jurisprudence they reside in. Much more can be said also about the flimsy and

slippery details of these readings, which may suffice to mount a critique against the West and its ideas, but remains scarce in outlining a working Islamic model of governance, justice and rule of law. While the jury is out on the consistency of Islamic jurisprudence, and what it lends to, the book's expose of the radical Sunni thought will be a helpful complementary reading for graduate students and policy makers interested in the evolution of Salafi-Jihadi precepts.

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