

The Psychodynamics of Salafi-Jihadism

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Abstract

Objectives: This study sheds light on the psychodynamics underlying the intellectual extremism and violent behavior of four influential Jordanian Salafi-Jihadist figures, namely Abdallah Azzam (a proponent of global Jihadism and the founder of “the Base” in Afghanistan, later named “al-Qaida”), Abu Mohammad Al-Maqdisi (a well-known Jihadi intellectual and a leading theorist of radical Islamic thought), Al-Zarqawi (a former leader of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) whose ideas paved the way for ISIS), and Abu Qatada Al-Felistini (the founder of the logistic and ideological hub in London supporting al-Qaida). The study seeks to analyze the origins, development, dissemination, and impact of their ideologies.

Methods: The study employs a qualitative methodological analysis, drawing on insights from cognitive psychology, motivational psychology, perspectives theory, and behavioral economics.

Results: The findings reveal that Salafi-Jihadist elites play pivotal roles in numerous contemporary intra-state conflicts. Comprehending the violent actions of prominent ideologues requires an understanding of their psychodynamics and the Jihadi narrative. The study shows that their deep-seated feelings, demands, and desires affect their decision-making and shape their strategic narrative. Such understanding is instrumental in countering extremist narratives and elucidating the root causes of violence perpetrated by their followers.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that long-term conflict resolution is impossible without taking into account the religious identity and ideological discourse of Salafi-Jihadist groups, particularly their symbolic leaders. Such knowledge is essential for anticipating the intentions or behaviors of an adversary and implementing effective countermeasures.

Keywords: Psychodynamics, Ideology, Salafi-Jihadism, narrative.

الديناميكا النفسية للفكر السلفي الجهادي

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قسم العلوم السياسية-كلية الأمير الحسين بن عبدالله الثاني للعلوم السياسية والدراسات الدولية، الجامعة الأردنية، عمان، المملكة الأردنية الهاشمية

ملخص

الأهداف: تسلط هذه الورقة الضوء على الديناميكا النفسية الدافعة للتطرف الفكري والسلوك العنيف لأربعة من الرموز والقيادات الأردنية الأكثر تأثيراً في مجال الفكر السلفي الجهادي، وهم كل من: عبدالله عزام، الداعي للجهادية العالمية، وقام بتأسيس مكتب الخدمات أو "قاعدة الجهاد" في أفغانستان وما بات يعرف لاحقاً باسم "القاعدة". أبو محمد المقدسي، وهو من أبرز منظري الفكر الإسلامي الراديكالي في العالم حالياً والمنظر الأول للفكر الجهادي المعاصر. أبو مصعب الزرقاوي، زعيم تنظيم القاعدة في العراق في العام 2004، وانبثق عن فكره لاحقاً ما بات يعرف بتنظيم الدولة الإسلامية أو "داعش". أبو قتادة الفلسطيني، المؤسس للمركز اللوجستي والأيديولوجي في لندن. تهدف هذه الورقة لتفسير أسباب نشوء الفكر المتطرف عند المذكورين وكيفية تطوره وأسباب انتشاره وأبعاده.

المنهجية: اتبع البحث المنهج النوعي المعتمد على علم النفس المعرفي، علم النفس التحفيزي، نظرية الافاق والاقتصاد السلوكي.

النتائج: إن رموز وقيادات الفكر السلفي الجهادي لهم تأثير ملحوظ في الحروب والتزاعات الأهلية والداخلية. استيعاب الفكر الجهادي والديناميكية النفسية لهؤلاء القيايين ضروري لفهم العنف الناتج عنهم. كما أن المشاعر والمطالب والرغبات النفسية لها دور في كيفية اتخاذهم للقرار والمنهجية الاستراتيجية مما يساعد على مكافحة الفكر المتطرف وأسباب ظهور سلوكيات أتباعهم العنيفة.

الخلاصة: إن الوصول إلى حلول طويلة الأمد لا يمكن تحقيقه بدون الحوار مع القيايين ورموز الفكر السلفي الجهادي أو على الأقل أخذ هويتهم وسردهم الديني بعين الاعتبار لأنه من الصعب جدا مكافحة أو قتال عدو غير مفهوم، ومن الأصعب توقع أعماله وتوجهه بدون أخذ دوافعه وتبريراته بالحسبان عند التخطيط لمقاومته أو التعامل معه.

الكلمات الدالة: الديناميكا النفسية، الأيديولوجيا، السلفية الجهادية، السرد.



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Introduction

Salafism, in general, seeks societal reform by resurrecting and imitating the original pattern of life in which Prophet Mohammad and his companions lived. Salafism can be broken down into three major categories; Quietist Salafism, which advocates non-violent means of reform like education and preaching; Political Salafism, which advocates implementing Salafi principles in the political life of all Islamic societies in order to achieve the envisaged reforms; and Salafi-Jihadism, which perceives contemporary models of governance as heretical or innovative to pure Islam and therefore calls for violent jihad in pursuance of proper implementation of Shari'ah law (the law of Islam). Salafi-Jihadism as defined by Abu Qatada Al-Felistini, who is one of the targeted figures in this paper, is "the ideology of Al-Qaida and like-minded movements, mixing Wahhabi-inspired Sunni fundamentalism (Salafism) with a revolutionary program of overthrowing unjust and un-Islamic regimes in the Muslim world, as well as irredentism aiming at expelling non-Muslim military presence and influences from Muslim lands (Peter, 2013).

Salafi-Jihadism is embraced by numerous militant movements who resort to armed violence to reach their targets including the Islamic State or ISIS, Al-Qaida (AQ), Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Jabhat Al Nusra in Syria, Ansar al Din in Mali, and many more in Chechnya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Although Salafi-Jihadist groups are, in some cases, warring factions with different doctrines and approaches, they predominantly share the same motives, values, and intellectual underpinnings. They place reviving the Islamic caliphate and applying Shari'ah law at the top of their strategic objectives. This ideology resents the status quo in the Arab and Islamic world, and it strives for enforcing structural reforms by resorting to terrorist tactics. It is a movement amongst political Islam and more precisely amongst the Sunni confession. Salafi-Jihadists see themselves as the vanguard of a global Islamic uprising. As a starting point, they aim to overthrow the existing "corrupt and secular" ruling regimes in Muslim countries in order to stop foreign dictations and military interventions. Then they aim to set the foundations of a new Islamic system that adheres to the divine law of God and unifies all factions of the Umma (the Muslim society) under the banner of the caliphate; (the Islamic governing system) (Cheterian, 2015).

The contemporary security environment has been significantly challenged with a dramatic re-emergence of an extreme, violent, and transnational ideology of "Salafi-Jihadism." al-Qaida and ISIS are among numerous organizations that embrace this ideology. These groups impose a security threat to the global community. They are hitting places all over the world, and no place can be immune to this phenomenon. The spectacular growth of their geographical, economic, and military power within a relatively short time, in addition to their brutality and indiscriminate attacks, has attracted the global public opinion.

The importance of this paper stems from the pressing security demand for an effective and comprehensive (short, medium, and long-term) strategy for ending conflicts caused by violent Salafi-jihadist groups. The illusion of states' military efficacy in countering terrorism, as well as the illusion of the ability of terrorist organizations to achieve strategic and political objectives through terrorist tactics, are misleading to both parties (English, 2015). The recent experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria have asserted the need for a strategic narrative within a holistic counter-terrorism approach that addresses moral as well as material assets of such movements. In addition, the paper believes that fulfilling a decisive victory requires a better understanding of the root causes of conflicts as well as their symptoms (Coli, 2002).

Given this challenge, the paper studies Salafi-Jihadist groups by analyzing the conceptual discourse of security narrative for the targeted Jordanian Salafi-Jihadist ideologues. It tackles their philosophies through three different approaches.

The first approach investigates the Cognitive Psychology of these figures toward critical Islamic issues like monotheism, sovereignty of God, and Islamic governance. The second approach addresses their Motivational Psychology toward specific concepts like security and identity from Salafi-Jihadist point of view. The third section builds on the Prospects Theory and Behavioral Economics Approach, and it studies these ideologues by investigating the way they make their decisions based on "Loss-and-Gain Prospects".

Cognitive Psychology

People in this approach seek to make sense of phenomena through their own beliefs and perceptions. This section is studying Salafi-Jihadist ideologues by exposing their conceptual encyclopedia and intellectual manifesto. It aims to enrich

knowledge and help comprehend the underlying ideological and religious philosophy of similar jihadi groups. Salafi-Jihadist ideologues believe in a set of ideas and advocate a group of fundamental concepts like Tawhid (monotheism), Taghut (ruling by other than God's law), and (Hakimeyya) Islamic governance. These concepts can be looked at as means or theological weapons through which Salafi-Jihadists seek to restore, empower, and constitutionalize the principles and traditions of "pure" Islam (El-Masri, 1963).

One of the central concepts for Salafi-Jihadism is Tawhid or monotheism; it means worshipping and believing in God alone and disbelieving in all political rulers, democratic governments, and un-Islamic-based institutions and laws (Taghut or Tawaghit). Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada Al-Felistini oppose the Taghut and believe that it contradicts with one of the fundamental underpinnings of Islam, which is the "oneness of God's sovereignty and legislation". They insist that legislation is solely for God and that mankind is not authorized to legislate. Jihad is also espoused with the concepts of monotheism and God's sovereignty; jihad is the practical tool for fulfilling the oneness and sovereignty of God in the perceived secular governments and societies (Kassim, 2015).

The scriptures from the Holy Qur'an and Sunna can be recognized as the primary sources of legitimacy for Salafi-Jihadists' ideological narrative (Al-Tamimi, 2017). In the Islamic system, the authority of legislation belongs exclusively to God alone, as indicated in many verses in the Holy Qur'an like Verse number 60 Chapter number 4, V. 65 Ch. 4, V. 50 Ch. 5, V. 121 Ch. 6, V. 24 Ch. 47, and more explicitly in verse number 44 in chapter five in which God says: "whosoever judges not according to God's revelation—they are the infidels." Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada assert that Shari'ah is a divine law that has supremacy over other secular constitutions or political ideologies. Equally importantly, they believe that governing systems that have been implemented instead of Shari'ah are, in essence, facets of polytheism and infidelity. Therefore, Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada argue that disobeying secular governing systems and existing ruling regimes is an obligation on every true Muslim. Furthermore, they proceed with advocating the necessity of declaring hatred and opposition to all those who work for their secular institutions.

It is worth mentioning here that Al-Maqdisi does not even recognize many other co-religious movements like Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas; he thinks that their ability to compromise and interact with un-Islamic democracies and secular ruling regimes implies that they do not disbelieve in Taghut and subsequently lack in Tawhid (Kassim, 2015).

What this suggests is that the religious philosophy and the conceptual discourse in their narrative are genuinely derived from a confined reading to the question of Tawhid and the oneness of God's sovereignty and legislation. Salafi-Jihadist movements can be seen as part of a historical struggle against un-Islamic life systems. That being the case, they resort to jihad in order to expel existing corrupt governments and enforce the implementation of Shari'ah under the sovereignty of God alone.

Motivational Psychology

The motivational psychology approach helps to explain the radical nature and violent practice of Salafi-Jihadist groups. It explores the deep-seated psychological feelings, demands, and desires of Salafi-Jihadists.

Even though cultural diversity is the common nature of current societies around the world, coexistence is not always the case for Salafi-Jihadist groups. The conceptual discourse of the spiritual Salafi-Jihadist theorists shapes a distinct identity for these groups. The identity in this position can be understood as "perceptions of who we are and how we perceive others," which is also based on a set of norms that are in essence "shared expectations about appropriate or legitimate behavior by actors with a particular identity." The interrelation between identity and behavior is the primary takeaway from these definitions. In other words, the perceived identity of Salafi-Jihadist individuals defines their political and social relationships with states and communities in the international milieu; it is either cooperation if the latter embrace their ideology or, otherwise, opposition and confrontation (Checkel, 1999).

Various Salafi-jihadist groups share common convictions, values, and motivations (Karsh, 2013). Their identity is socially constructed through a distinct interpretation of a set of ideological concepts, predominantly about jihad and monotheism, which shape their perceptions. Therefore, identity in this approach can be seen as a central motivation for Salafi-Jihadists' violent conduct and radical narrative.

Understanding Salafi-Jihadists' perception of security through the approach of motivational psychology is much contested, however; the concept of security, per se, can be understood as "the preservation of a groups' core values," or it can be interpreted by reflecting the idea of emancipation that implies removing all restraints that prevent people from making their own decisions freely (Peoples, C& Williams, N.2015). In this context, Shari'ah law, in principle, is represented by Muslims as a set of values and underpinnings that regulates peoples' life. Salafi-Jihadists believe that they must defend their religious values (Turner, 2010). For example, justice and freedom are critical values in this respect, and Salafi-Jihadists do not believe that social justice can be achieved without struggling against the existing un-Islamic governments until enforcing Zakat or charity. In the same manner, they do not believe that emancipation and freedom under authoritarian systems or foreign occupation can be achieved without armed resistance. It, therefore, seems, in both examples, that Salafi-Jihadist ideologues believe in Shari'ah law as being the only working life system that can fulfill the required conditions for keeping core Islamic values and, subsequently, the envisaged broad concept of security (Dunning, 2015). They believe that achieving emancipation can only occur by taking up arms and declaring jihad against disbelieving regimes, polytheistic democracies, and infidel aggressors (Peoples, C& Williams, N.2015).

Having discussed the concepts of identity and security with relation to Salafi-Jihadist's narrative, in the following part, the paper will highlight some conceptual underpinnings for Salafi-Jihadism that help to understand their ideology. Salafi-Jihadism adheres to a set of ideological interpretations that formulates its conceptual discourse, such as Takfir (naming of infidels), Al-Wala' Wal-Bara' (loyalty to monotheism and disavowal of polytheism), Dar al-Islam (House of Islam), Dar al-Harb (House of War), and the Victorious Sect (Shiraz, 2016).

Takfir is a vital impetus for Salafi-Jihadists to conduct terrorism and indiscriminate violence. It is a concept in which individuals or communities are decided to be infidels (out of Islam). Takfir imposes a robust distinction between groups under Salafi-Jihadism on the one hand and, on the other hand, "other" communities that disagree with Salafi-Jihadist intellectual philosophy (Kirro, 2013). Paradoxically, there is no confusion in calling non-Muslims infidels; however; the most controversial debate in the Islamic scholar community is having Muslims called infidels too.

Takfir mainly targets governments that rule by other than God's laws, including by human-made constitutions and legislation, secular democracies, governmental institutions, and, even more, Muslims who work for or accept to engage with any of these bureaucracies. Hence the terrorist attacks on Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike (Kassim,2015).

Takfir leads to 'Al-Wala' Wal-Bara' which is another crucial ideological underpinning of Salafi-Jihadism. From their point of view, real Muslims are loyal to believers who embrace and apply their ideological instructions, whereas they disavow those who go against them and call them infidels (Shavit, 2014). Disavowal is a manifestation of a distinct identity that rejects Tawaghit and opposes un-Islamic political rulers as well as their regimes and institutions. It demands to perform Hijrah (migration, i.e. Afghanistan) in preparation for conducting jihad against these opponents.

In this context, Salafi-Jihadists tend to isolate themselves from other communities and, furthermore, some of them categorize the world to either house of Islam (Dar al-Islam) or house of war (Dar al-Harb). In other words, states that are governed by Shari'ah are houses of Islam, whereas states that are governed by other than God's law are houses of war. Building on that, Salafi-Jihadist ideologues approve waging jihad and conducting terrorist attacks indiscriminately on countries that do not implement the law of God.

It is worth mentioning that these groups' sense of distinction and tendency to alienation from others who live in the house of war has religious roots - as discussed in chapter two. This sense is derived from a belief of being the so-called "Victorious Sect" or "Islamic survivor band." This belief finds its roots in the interpretations of the sayings (Hadith) of Prophet Muhammad when stated that "My Ummah (the Islamic Community) is an Ummah [that] carries out the commands of Allaah (God); those who let them down or differ from them do not harm them, and they will keep adhering to this path until the Day of Judgment." In another place, he also said, "A group of Ummah will remain victorious over the people until the decree of Allah reaches them" (Al-Athari, 2003). These words imply that prophet Muhammad had predicted that Muslims will be divided into different sects and factions. Not all of these sects will be on the right path of Islam, but only one sect, which will keep practicing jihad for the sake of God and on behalf of the Islamic community. The Salafi-Jihadists'

belief that they are the victorious sect caused them to imagine that they are the vanguards of original Islam and the revivers of the demised Caliphate (Al Shobaki & Al Barawi, 2008).

The Prospect Theory and Behavioral Economics Approach

Al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada have been devoted to theoretical works on religion more than being engaged with practical jihad. In this approach, the paper focuses on the jihadi path of Abdallah Azzam and Al-Zarqawi, the two intellectual and practical leaders for Salafi-jihadist groups. This theory accounts for some behaviors and decisions that these individuals made under the influence of “loss-and-gain possibilities”. In this sense, the paper argues here that loss and gain prospects dominated Azzam and Al-Zarqawi during the fight against the Soviets and the American-led coalitions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of 2003, Al-Zarqawi stationed his group in Iraq where they were able to thrive because of the deteriorating social, economic, and political conditions that the American-led invasion in 2003 caused. He was able to mobilize Sunni tribes against the U.S. and Iranian-patronized Shia sect who controlled most of the state’s joints (Shestak. 2018).

Al-Zarqawi gained an exceptional reputation through his charismatic leadership, extremist ideology, and courageous fighting during his stay in Iraq. He implemented the strategy of fighting the near enemy that his teacher Al-Maqdisi advocated. He prioritized targeting, in particular, the Shia of Iraq because they were – as he believed - traitors and apostates who managed, in pursuit of personal interests, to assist the American invaders. In support of his position, Al-Zarqawi justified killing Muslims by recalling Ibn Taymiyya’s Takfiri Fatwas against “polytheist” Shia, in the medieval era, when Mongolians invaded the Abbasid caliphate - as explained in the second chapter (Jones, 2014).

Al-Zarqawi’s strategy was a threshold of a more violent phase of Salafi-Jihadism; he applied terrorist ways and means not only by an extensive use of suicide bombings against Americans, Arab Christians, and Shia indiscriminately but also by the use of videotaped beheadings that aimed to demonstrate his brutality and cast terror into the hearts of his enemies. Indeed, to some extent, Al-Zarqawi’s strategy proved effective, and his security narrative, which was fostered by declaring his group as the vanguard of Sunni sect against apostate Shia and infidel American invaders, granted him with considerable public support among oppressed Sunni communities. However, his tactical victories did not endure, and his power was significantly undermined in 2004 when his group was overwhelmed by a vigorous counter-campaign conducted by militias from Iraqi tribes supported by U.S. forces. Therefore, in order to recover the mass losses that he suffered, Al-Zarqawi declared his allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and renamed his group to AQI. This decision enabled him to regenerate his group by exploiting the name of the Central al-Qaida as a brand for material and moral support (Wagemakers, 2018).

What this shows is that the devastating “losses” in al-Qaida’s fighters and leadership in Afghanistan also obliged this strategic alliance between Osama Bin Laden and Al-Zarqawi. The movement needed to open a new front to alleviate the robust U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan by broadening the operational spectrum. By extension, they aimed to secure their existence, endurance, and sustainability by “gaining” recruits through exploiting AQI’s proximity to Mujahedeen-rich Levant. Equally important, the “losses” in Afghanistan was backfired by “gaining” international franchises in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Riedel, 2008).

The paper argues here that probabilities of loss and gain were markedly taken into consideration by Al-Zarqawi. The heavy losses that he suffered in Afghanistan after September eleventh and later in Iraq made his decision of relinquishing Jihadism inconceivable. He might have believed that he had already been granted with wide reputation and that regaining his power through compromising with Central al-Qaida would be achievable. These calculations also indicate that the alliance between Al-Zarqawi and Bin Laden was not, in fact, religious as much as being pragmatic in contemplation of securing their ideology’s survival and regaining their groups’ losses. In like manner, Abdallah Azzam, who physically fought against Israel in the 1960s as previously pointed out, perceived Palestine as a significant loss that cannot be compensated. It can be said, through the “loss-and-gain approach,” that his dedication to jihad resulted from an impression that he had already lost more than he would live for. Azzam exerted his efforts on rallying foreign fighters from worldwide Muslim communities to save Afghanistan from occupation as well as to proliferate his Ideological philosophy of global Jihadism.

Conclusion

Based on this methodological analysis of different causes and motivations of Salafi-Jihadist groups for violent extremism, the paper believes that the Salafi-Jihadist elite are among the primary actors of many contemporary intra-state conflicts. The jihadi narrative of leading ideologues like Abdallah Azzam, Abu Mohammad Al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada Al-Felistini, and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi is inspiring for many militant groups around the world. The paper believes that the psychodynamics of these dominant figures are substantial for explaining their violent actions. Their deep-seated psychological feelings, demands, and desires impact their decisions and shape their strategic narrative. Therefore, achieving long-term conflict resolution cannot be achieved without engaging their symbolic leaders or, at least, considering their religious identity and conceptual discourse.

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