Arab Jihadism

Nikāya and Tamkīn between ISIL and al-Qaeda[1]

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Introduction

Hassan Abu Haniyeh adds *Arab Jihadism: Nikāya and Tamkīn between ISIL and al-Qaeda* to a long series of research projects he has undertaken into the different aspects of jihadism which, in recent years, has become one of the most urgent problems facing security, democratic transition, and political modernization in the Arab world. As is the case with most of his writings, Abu Haniyeh's analysis of sources in this project stands out insofar as it escapes the sterility of the theoretical narrative – making it a far more accessible read, not least to a general reader from the Arab region.

The book is composed of nineteen chapters divided into three main sections. The first of these takes up the ideology of global jihadism, while the second and third are given over to a discussion of the rise of the "Islamic State" (IS) and the various branches of al-Qaeda throughout the Arab world.

First: The Ideology of Global Jihadism

In the first section, Abu Haniyeh tracks global jihadism's course of development from the colonial era until the period of "counterrevolution" which followed the short-lived Arab Spring. In this section, which sits at the intersection of the narrative and the documentary, he gives a brief survey of essential concepts such as *tamkīn* (jihad for the sake of gaining political control of territory), *nikāya* (jihad for the sake of hurting the enemy and their interests), solidarity, and global jihadism, while tracing the development of the jihadist movement, the differentiation of its local, regional, and international dimensions over the course of the twentieth century. As the title of the book suggests, the author is particularly interested in how these different dimensions came together in the wake of the "War on Terror" and the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.

While reconstructing the stages of global jihadism's development, Abu Haniyeh follows a traditional chronological approach that begins by explaining the importance of the colonial period as the incubator that nurtured the seed of jihadist ideology and laid the groundwork for its subsequent outgrowth under

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the postcolonial regimes. He shows how the jihadist movement preserved its local character and engaged in a confrontation with "the near enemy" (*al-'aduww al-qarīb*) – that is, Arab regimes – throughout the period leading up to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, before turning in the 1980s towards "solidarity jihad," in which prospective jihadis are encouraged to travel abroad to support other mujahideen and defend Muslim land (p. 51).

Abu Haniyeh traces the concept of solidarity jihad back to three Palestinian theorists: Abdullah Azzam, whose thought was centered on defensive jihad (*jihād al-daf'*); Abu Qatada al-Filistini; and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (pp. 45-46). He contends that this development was an important step towards the "globalized" jihad that has characterized the final years of the twentieth century and the beginning of the next, especially following Osama bin Laden's establishment of the Global Islamic Front to fight Jews and Crusaders in February 1998. The first solidarity jihad networks were founded during the 1990s to direct the mujahideen's activity and coordinate their movement between the fronts of Afghanistan, Bosnia, Tajikistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Chechnya. Gradually, as international and regional conditions evolved, these pre-established jihadist networks facilitated the emergence of highly independent jihadist cells capable of carrying out operations against western interests from Tanzania to Kenya to Yemen – in particular, to hurt and provoke the US. Al-Qaeda, the most prominent movement within the Salafi-jihadist current, continued to emphasize *nikāya* until the 9/11 attacks, the clearest expression of this approach (p. 17). The 9/11 attacks had a seismic effect within the jihadist movement and on the United States' relationship to the Islamic world. The ensuing "global war on terror" served to undermine al-Qaeda and pushed it towards a more decentralized model after the loss of its safe haven in Afghanistan.

Abu Haniyeh argues that bin Laden's turn toward globalized jihad and the adoption of the *nikāya* strategy came as a result of the failure of local and solidarity-based jihadism (p. 79). He also notes that the increased US military presence in the Arab Gulf region after the invasion of Kuwait by the Saddam Hussein regime in 1990 led to heightened animosity toward the US and the local regimes that had brought them there. He attributes the realignment of jihadist organizations towards fighting the "far enemy" (*al-'aduww al-ba'īd*) to a range of factors: the absence of democracy and entrenchment of dictatorship; failure to reach a just solution to the Palestinian question; and the expanding hegemony of US imperialism in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003 under the pretext of promoting democracy, it afforded jihadist movements a historical opportunity to regain some of their previous energy by acting in the name of resistance to occupation (p. 113). The identitarian policies adopted by the US administration in Iraq provided a welcoming environment for rapprochement between jihadist groups and allowed Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's existing network to expand, increase its reach, and exploit perceptions of injustice among Arab Sunnis in Iraq, especially after the First Battle of Fallujah in April 2004 (p. 116). The author argues that Zarqawi succeeded rhetorically in formulating and popularizing Salafi-jihadist ideas that resonated with a large portion of Muslims and Arabs. With the help of well-known jihadist theorists such as al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada, and Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, Zarqawi branded the American invasion a "Crusader campaign," accused Arab and Islamic regimes allied with the US of being infidels, and articulated legal arguments for suicide bombings, killings of civilians, and "unchecked scare tactics" (p. 120).

The author adds that the most distinctive feature of global jihadism in the context of the American invasion of Iraq was an unprecedented combination of *nikāya* and *tamkīn* (p. 117), with the local and global dimensions more closely integrated in the agendas of jihadist organizations than ever before. No longer did they merely seek to upset "American military globalization," in keeping with the stated priority of confronting the "far enemy." Instead, they sought to establish political control over territory and developed strategies for expansion and taking on the "near enemy" (the authoritarian regimes of the Arab region), taking advantage of a widespread sense of mounting tension and insecurity.

One of Abu Haniyeh's most important observations is that the outbreak of revolutions and popular uprisings

in various Arab countries in early 2011 triggered a sustained period of "ideological adaptation" within jihadi Salafism (p. 136). He argues that the rhetoric of al-Qaeda's leadership in the early phase of the Arab Spring shows a marked shift away from elitism toward a sort of populism best summed up by Abu Yahya al-Libi, who exhorted the mujahideen to "take advantage of the atmosphere of courage, bravery, defiance, and impetuosity that has intoxicated the people" to achieve true change by "establishing the rule of God Almighty" (*iqāmat ḥukm Allāh ta'āla*) (p. 143). For his part, Atiyatullah al-Libi told the mujahideen of al-Qaeda not to enter confrontation with "groups with whom [we] have disagreements, such as the brothers of the Ennahda [party] in Tunisia, but to set about constructively laying the groundwork [for future activity]. The same goes for the brothers in Egypt, the Sinai, Rafah, and so on" (p. 145). At the same time, al-Qaeda was moving away from being a "centralized, elitist organization armed with a globalized agenda" toward "local, populist networks of so-called 'Supporters of the Shari'a' [*anṣār al-sharīʿa*], paving the way for the construction of a unified, regional system that can take over local governance and challenge western hegemony" (p. 152).

It is not entirely clear what the author means when he talks about this ongoing ideological adaptation. Both a shift towards populism and organizational decentralization and reconciliation with other Islamists constitute adaptation of the tools and strategies used to arrive at an ideological vision built around jihad, political control and "implementing the Shari'a," a vision which remains fixed. Moreover, this "change of approach" did not extend to one of the most prominent representatives of Salafi jihadism, the Islamic State in Iraq, which maintained its violent approach and expanded its use of suicide bombings and of hardline sectarian-identitarian rhetoric both before and after the popular revolutions.

In any case, within two years, initially peaceful revolutions had degenerated into armed conflicts, sectarian conflicts had intensified, and counterrevolutionary forces had become very influential in many Arab countries. All this created fertile ground for new jihadist groups to appear, for dormant organizations to be revitalized, and for the jihadi-Salafist narrative to regain its power to persuade, assemble, and recruit (pp. 133-134). But against the backdrop of this "Jihadi spring," as the author calls it, the multidimensional strategy ceased to be viable, and strategists and theorists' disagreements on practical priorities and policies – their ideological agreement notwithstanding – surfaced once again (p. 162). A schism thus emerged within global jihadism (pp. 161-162). On the one hand, the Islamic State group sought to implement the Shari'a and establish a caliphate, focusing on the "near enemy" and drawing its energy from an identitarian sectarianism. On the other, various other jihadi organizations remained committed to the traditional approach of al-Qaeda, prioritizing the "far enemy" (in particular the US) while seeking a more pragmatic approach to implement the Shari'a and establish a caliphate.

The problem with this model is that it implies that jihadi groups' agendas and the ideological and organizational boundaries that separate them are largely fixed. In reality, the Islamic State has targeted both its "near" and "far" enemies simultaneously and without distinction, citing the principle that "the disbelieving people are one" (*millat al-kufr wāḥida*) – a phrase that appeared regularly in the speeches given by Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the group's main spokesman, and other senior leaders and jurists. Al-Qaeda branches like the Nusra Front and the Guardians of Religion Organization, meanwhile, refrained from targeting the US or any other entity classified as the "far enemy" (p. 434). There are many other indications that could be cited showing that the jihadist agenda is quite changeable and the difficulty of categorizing jihadist groups on the basis of their often-transitory sensibilities.

Moreover, any close observer of the jihadi activity and theory of recent decades will note that Abu Haniyeh's neat succession of different modes of jihadi action – the jihad of anticolonial struggle (*al-jihādiyya al-niḍāliyya*) (p. 9), then jihad against the "near enemy," then solidarity jihad and globalized jihad, then the multidimensional approach of the War on Terror years, and finally the "schism" within global jihadism – is not, in fact, quite so clear-cut, and has a number of problematic implications.

Firstly, the historical-theoretical link between the anticolonial struggle and contemporary jihadist organizations seems somewhat inaccurate. The "jihad of struggle" against foreign occupiers and colonists was not of a purely Islamic character, despite the symbolic choice of words. National liberation movements, and later secular Arab regimes, used "Jihad" (like other religious vocabulary) rhetorically and expediently to mobilize support and to legitimate themselves. It cannot be taken as the basis of some sort of historical continuity or link, which may not be very strong at all. The growth of Salafi-jihadist organizations and the recent expansion of their activities is tied to the particular political conditions that have colored the past four decades, conditions that the book treats in quite some detail. The precursors of today's jihadi activity only begin to appear in Sayyid Qutb's Egypt, and only spread further afield in the second half of the 1970s. And as important as those early stages were, Salafi jihadism as we know it today – in both its organizational and rhetorical characteristics – was the product of the cross-pollination of Wahhabi Salafism and Qutbist Brotherhood activism in Afghanistan in the 1980s,(3) and only matured into a major regional and international actor in the unipolar world ushered in by the collapse of the USSR. It is only if we are discussing Islamism in the broadest terms that it is possible to talk about the far-reaching effects of the colonial period and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire on the use of religion as a framing device for political action and popular mobilization in Arab and Islamic societies.

Secondly, on Abu Haniyeh's historical account, global jihadism seems to consist of a series of reactions:

1. Jihadism comes about as a reaction to colonialism.
2. It then switches focus to the "near enemy," the despotic authoritarian regimes that took over Arab states after independence.
3. It reorients towards "solidarity jihad" because of repression by these authoritarian regimes, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the exploitation of the *mujahideen* by those Arab regimes and by the US.
4. In response to globalization and US hegemony, jihadism turns to internationalism (p. 17).
5. In response to the US occupation of Iraq and the sectarian policies of the new Iraqi government (especially marginalization of Sunni Arabs), it then adopts a multidimensional approach combining the local with the international.
6. The militarization of peaceful revolutions in various Arab countries and the seizure of power by counterrevolutionary forces produced fragmentation within jihadism and the drifting apart of its major forces.

There is a great deal of truth in this structural analysis. However, it deprives Islamists of their agency and makes it seem as if all they do is react to outside forces. There is, clearly, a great deal of ideological commitment within the ranks of activist Islamists, but there is also a significant degree of rationality and strategic planning. It is precisely this ongoing – and unstable – dialectical relationship between ideology and reality that makes an attempt to predict the fate of the jihadist movements exceedingly difficult.

Second: The Rise of the Islamic State

The second section of the book traces the rise of the "Islamic State" from the 2003 invasion of Iraq through to its establishment of a caliphate in June 2014. According to the author, the "Islamic State" began as a Salafi-jihadist network established by Zarqawi immediately after the American invasion of Iraq, eventually becoming a "highly complex, bureaucratic, and military organization" with a wide geographic reach, equipped with an internally cohesive security apparatus and an active propaganda machine (pp. 189-190). The organization has taken pains, whether in its beginnings under Zarqawi or later under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to present itself as "an identitarian representative of a downtrodden Sunni Islam at risk from Shi'i expansionism in the region and engaged

3 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2006), p. 225.

in combat against global imperialism and local dictatorship" (p. 190).

In his analysis of the factors behind "Islamic State's" emergence, Abu Haniyeh emphasizes the role the American occupation played in "entrenching sectarian and identitarian differences between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims" (p. 184): the occupation enabled Shi'i forces loyal to Iran to take the reins of power in Iraq and "marginalize the Sunnis, punishing them for their involvement with the previous regime and their resistance to the occupation" (Ibid.). He also refers to Zarqawi's personality, his alternative approach to jihadism, and his ability to exploit conditions after the occupation to grow and strengthen his jihadist network (pp. 184-185). Finally, he touches on the importance of the internet and social media to Islamic State's success in building its reputation and getting its message across. However, he does not consider the phenomenon of "foreign fighters" in detail or ask why the organization has been so successful in luring in and recruiting young people born and raised in the West – people who have never directly experienced the injustice of these despotic regimes, sectarian discrimination, or the so-called "Sunni crisis" that followed the invasion of Iraq.[4]

Third: al-Qaeda and its Branches

In the third and final section of the book, Abu Haniyeh reviews the experiences of al-Qaeda offshoots in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Islamic Maghreb, providing a lengthy discussion of the Nusra Front in Syria, its organizational and ideological transformations, its ties to the central al-Qaeda organization, and the circumstances of its subsequent disaffiliation. He notes that the Nusra Front has always had a pragmatic bent and has constantly sought organizational autonomy and a distinctive ideology setting it apart from the other armed factions in Syria and from Islamic State. So long as it remains caught between its Salafi-jihadist affiliations and the ever-shifting political and military realities on the ground in Syria, he predicts that this ambiguity will remain.

In his discussion of phenomena like the Islamic State and *Anṣār al-Sharīʿa*, Abu Haniyeh affirms that jihadist organizations are no different from other ideological armed organizations around the world: they are greatly influenced by their environment and adapt to specific local needs. But as with most studies of armed Islamist movements, the question of how much room there really is for maneuver and adaptation remains unanswered. What are the limits of jihadist theorists and leaders' ability to formulate a discourse rooted in both the historical circumstances and political reality? In other words, is ideological discourse mere putty in the hands of leaders, reshaped as circumstances demand? Or are there ideological non-negotiables that impose themselves upon jihadist discourse and strategies employed, no matter the circumstances?

It is worth noting that Arab states' failure to construct national identities capable of encompassing ethnic, religious, and confessional diversity goes almost unmentioned in Abu Haniyeh's analysis. This problem well predates the US invasion, and is the product of earlier decades – decades in which local regimes failed to strengthen a sense of common national identity, contributed, by way of oppression and marginalization, to the degrading of the social fabric, and laid the groundwork for identity fragmentation at the first sign of political change. As a result, citizens withdrew into pre-national sectoral groupings which come to the fore during any national crisis – something which became abundantly clear when no single inclusive national resistance movement emerged after 2003. Similar identitarian rifts appeared after the Gulf War, and during civil wars in Lebanon and, more recently, Syria. They have dogged Arab societies since the colonial period. They have been put to work in turn by post-independence regimes in many Arab countries (not only Saddam's Iraq or Assad's Syria) – and not only those under US occupation. The responsibility of the US, Russia,

4 Hassan Abu Haniyeh & Mohammad Abu Rumman, *Tanẓīm al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya: al-Azma al-Sunniyya ʿala al-Jihādiyya al-ʿĀlamiyya* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015).

and Iran does not absolve those Arab regimes that have cultivated civil conflicts and sectarian divisions to maintain power or gain local and international legitimacy under the pretext of protecting segments of society from each other and keeping the peace.

Methodologically, Abu Haniyeh says in his introduction that he is offering an alternative to simplistic, orientalist accounts that reduce jihadism to timeless doctrinal and cultural factors stemming from Islam itself (p. 8), adopting instead a political-economic framework. The reality, however, is that this kind of framing is not entirely new – in fact, recent studies of extremism and terrorism are replete with structural analyses that place great weight on the influence of factors like poverty, ignorance, or dictatorship on the spread of religious extremism and ideological violence. But in any case, neither approach – the structural or the culturalist – can provide a complete analysis of the rise of organizations like the Islamic State and the Nusra Front.

It should be noted that alongside these objective factors, there are numerous other subjective factors pertaining to jihadist groups and networks themselves. These organizations are composed of individuals with their own views, preferences, and reasons for doing what they do – reasons which may be rooted in their upbringing, their ideological commitments, their personal interests or their relationships with one another and with the society around them. More broadly, Islamic thought is stagnant, and the reformist current has been absent from (or has been driven out of) the intellectual system for more than a century (p. 13). Taken together, these subjective factors mean that Islamist organizations do more than simply react to outside influences, whether we are discussing their responses to historical conditions (including the prevailing interpretations of religion, cultural, and ideological models and ways of thinking) or even their desire and ability to consciously and directedly play a part in shaping the reality in which they exist.

This is the general impression given by the book. Of course, Abu Haniyeh is too knowledgeable a scholar to attribute the development of Arab and global jihadism to mere spontaneous or arbitrary reactions. He knows very well the effect of the subjective factors stemming from the core of the jihadist experience, the relations between its leaders, and their priorities and varied interests. It is clear, however, that the author has elected in the book to concentrate on objective factors, which are easily found within the book (they are generally mentioned in chapter introductions). Subjective factors, intra-leadership conflicts, and variation in mentalities, interests, and priorities, on the other hand, are scattered throughout the body of the text in varied locations, making them more difficult to access.

Denying Islamists their agency, however, produces another problem. The book ends up tacitly agreeing with jihadist propaganda. Jihadist groups claim that others bear responsibility for the violence and destruction they carry out, that they are helpless victims whose only option is to take up arms to defend the Ummah and its oppressed peoples from outsiders' attacks on their land and identity. They have turned victimhood into a ready means of recruiting new members, mobilizing support, and evading various moral and legal concerns.

Of course, the point here is not to minimize the importance of anger as a motivator for political and military activity or to cast doubt on the realities of oppression and marginalization. The point is to draw attention to the role and agency of Islamists in charting a course of collective action, framing it ideologically, and determining what organizational tools and structures should be used.

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