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JAHILIYYAH RHETORIC AS A DIVINE LEGITIMACY FOR VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF SAYYID QUTB AND THE CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIST ORTHODOXY ON AL-QAEDA, THE TALIBAN, AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

Abstract

The Islamic conception of Jahiliyyah brings together the three most debated Muslim militant organizations of our times, namely Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Taliban in terms of their justification for violence. It is discussed here that despite significant differences in their political agendas, social and cultural motives as well as religious denominational affiliations, the three organizations are hegemonic in their resort to the notion of Jahiliyyah while opposing the non-Shari'ah based political rule. They converge on the idea that there is an imperative to install a system based on Shari'ah and that any actors opposed to this can be treated as enemies, deviants, and infidels, hence, worthy of violent aggression. It is demonstrated here that this particular connotation of Jahiliyyah was essentially espoused in the works of Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential twentieth century proponents of Islamism and global Jihad. Although developed primarily to denounce Western imperialists in a postcolonial context, one may see Jahiliyyah as a contemporary Islamic rhetoric for providing the three organizations in question, valid pretexts to wage armed insurgencies against whoever they view as hostile political forces. This overall narrative, as this study indicates, relates to the broader contemporary Islamist discourse on the legitimacy of political violence in the name of religion.

Keywords: Islamism, religious violence, Islamist orthodoxy, Jihad, Muslim extremism, Jahiliyyah

Introduction

Ignorance is defined and made meaningful in society in various ways. Although it is a typical outcome of human entropy, in religious discourses it is often epitomized as the rejection and violation of the divine order.[2] Muslims, generally speaking, comprehend it as a state of Godless ignorance, particularly which prevailed in the pre-Islamic world, termed as the era of Jahiliyyah or ignorance.[3]

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2   2 Rodney Stark, *Religion, Deviance, and Social Control*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 1-4

3   3 John Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 154.

Just as any other religious subject matter, the conception of Jahiliyyah for Muslims is contingent on what is revealed in the Qur'an and then what qualifies as its accurate interpretation in the Sunnah or the prophetic tradition. Muslim scholars have carried out the obligation of interpreting the divine intent embedded in both for centuries, in order to facilitate, promote as well as validate Islamic beliefs and practices. The interpretations often differ owing to varying social and historical contexts, and at times lead to serious consequences. Certain modern Muslim interpretations, therefore, view any form of dissent against Islam under the pretext of Jahiliyyah. It is indicated in the following that the three most known Muslim extremist organizations of our times, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Islamic State (IS) arguably advocate violence, suicide attacks and armed conflicts against their opponents in general as worthy of Islamic martyrdom based on this very conceptualization of Jahiliyyah. They corroborate this form of violence under the pretext that they are waging war against the enemies of Islam by invoking the Islamic model of Jihad, whereby violent conflicts can justifiably lead to murder and killing of all sorts.[4] Such actions, according the three organizations, are quite befitting because they fulfill the will of Allah, and because the victims are supposedly those infidels who abhor Islam, and hence are punishable by death. It is revealed here that this rather controversial narrative unites the three organizations in question, consequently linking them with the peculiar post-colonial Jahiliyyah rhetoric advocated in the works of the popular twentieth century Islamic political ideologue, Sayyid Qutb.[5] It is the same rhetoric that was subsequently embraced by several proponents of what can be termed as the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy.[6] Jahiliyyah, in this particular sense serves as a strong justification for violence against any non-Islamic political entity threatening the political supremacy of Muslims, and asserts that the elimination of such proponents of Jahiliyyah is a prime Islamic commitment. To realize this commitment and to regain the past political glory of Muslims, a believer must be prepared to kill or get killed. This Jahiliyyah rhetoric is evident in how all the three organizations unanimously pronounce their objectives, despite having different political agendas and bearing distinct denominational identities within the Muslim community.

The following analysis begins with a brief overview of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the IS, depicting a direct connection between them and the ideas of Qutb. The next section highlights several features in common, along with a brief discussion on their major political and ideological differences. Subsequently, Qutb's notion of Jahiliyyah is deliberated at some length to emphasize its centrality for the narrative of violence adopted by the three organizations. To further substantiate the analysis, then, a few factual examples of insurgencies committed by the three organizations

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4   Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, p. 1.

5   Mustapha Kamal Pasha, Political theology and sovereignty: Sayyid Qutb in our times, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2019, pp. 347-349.

6   6 For an interesting account on how the term Jahiliyyah was adopted subsequently by several twentieth century proponents of Islamism, including Mawdudi, see: Barbara Zollner, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Hasan Al-Hudaybi and Ideology*, New York, Routledge, 2009.

are outlined. Finally, the conclusion will draw together all the sections to recapitulate the overall conceptualization and to reaffirm how the three organizations under study seek religious validity for their acts of violence in Qutb's notion of Jahiliyyah.

Overview of the Three Organizations

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda is named from the Arabic word al-Qā idah, meaning 'the base' and it was founded in the nineteen eighties[7]. At the outset, Al-Qaeda started as an organization that supported Islamists against the Russian communist empire of the Soviet Union due to their presence in a Muslim land, Afghanistan until the late 1980s.[8] Following this, the group began to fragment and change locations. Since its early days, the agenda has been driven through creating smaller cells with a clear common goal. Subsequently, Al-Qaeda grew in Sudan for a period in the early 1990s and then re-emerged in Afghanistan again but under the control and mutual support of the Taliban.[9] In this period, they began to form alliances with other Islamist organizations who had a mutual recognition of the necessity of a global jihadist outlook and based and defined as Qutb understood this.[10] Outside of the Taliban, the alliance with Egypt's Islamic Jihad and al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah were the most significant, and it was in 2001 that a formal organization known as Qaeda al-Jihad came into being.[11] The expansion of Al-Qaeda was actually manifested through their establishment of several military bases internationally, and then through training and instructing the young recruits.[12] In these years, they were regarded as responsible for bombings that occurred in American government buildings in Tanzania, Kenya Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, among many more, including the 9/11 operation.[13] In the aftermath, the U.N. supported alliance of nations including the US counter attacked the Taliban and engaged Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, and a war had persisted there until 2020. Nevertheless, this period was not very successful in terms of their further expansion. There were counter-offences or terrorist actions in Algeria, Israel Jordan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Indonesia, and the creation of cells throughout the English-speaking world along with most of the Western European countries.[14]

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7   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups,* London: CRC Press, 2021, p. 40.

8   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan,* Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 74.

9   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*. . . p. 77.

10   Adnan A. Musallam, The Posthumous Impact of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) on Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Global Jihadists of Al-Qa'eda, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 43, No. 2, 2020, pp. 7-8.

11   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*. . . pp. 33-35.

12   Emy Matesan, *The Violence Pendulum: Tactical Change in Islamist Groups in Egypt and Indonesia*, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 220.

13   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*. . . 96.

14   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*. . . p. 126.

Islamist Streak

In the late 1990s, the establishment of cell-based organizations along the Afghan-Pakistan border regions created opportunities for alliances of many groups and individuals. Among these, the most significant was between Ayman Al-Zawahiri (d. 2022) and Osama bin Laden (d. 2011). This is significant because of a shared interest in Qutb and the idea of a global jihad. In the period that preceded the 9/11 this union between Al-Qaeda and the Egyptian Jihad organization was influential and attracted significant funding.[15] When the US assassinated bin Laden in 2011, he immediately became the leader, and it was only after the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2020 that he was found in Kabul and then assassinated in drone strike in July 2022. Al-Zawahiri is an important link between the form of jihad articulated by his fellow Egyptian Qutb, and then both the influence of his ideas on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.[16] Given that he extended a significant support to the Taliban through the 1990s, a variety of alliances and influences were established such as their adoption of the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy.[17] Although there were known differences between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda,[18] there was a mutual recognition and sharing of information and ideas and Al-Zawahiri more than anyone else is described by scholars as the link or bridge between the ideas of Qutb, and a broad range of concepts connected with Islamic ideas in general. He has had a direct role and involvement with organizing and influencing cells throughout the middle East but most notably, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) and the IS in Syria.[19] It is the Nusrah Front that represented them in the Syrian Civil War and in 2016.[20] Overall, it is the influence of Al-Zawahiri that is the source of a direct link between Qutb and all the three organizations under study. It may be concluded that through Al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda was directly helped in shaping the ideology and political practices and strategies of the following two organizations.

Taliban

The Taliban as a label and identity, translates from the Pashto/Farsi as 'students'.[21] Like Al-Qaeda, they were formed and shaped by the Afghan conflict that went on with the Soviets. It was a conflict where they were being armed and trained

15   Ibidem, 125.
16   Ibidem, p. 96.
17   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*... pp. 63-64.
18   Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 12.
19   Ibidem, pp. 26-27.
20   Ignacio Alvarez-Ossorio, The Sectarian Dynamics of the Syrian Conflict, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs,* Vol. 17, No. 2, 2019, p. 51.
21   Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*... p. 173.

by the US and a variety of Western allies, and at the same time, fighting the incursion of the then Communist regime in Russia.[22] In the period following the war, there was a significant amount of political strife and conflict among regions and varieties of political interests including an archaic warlord system. By 1994, they had established themselves as in control of Kandahar Province, and by 1996, they had taken over the largest city known as Kabul.[23] By this point, they had control over two thirds of the country and would be recognized as a government by several countries. By the time that they were invaded in 2001 by the US and various United Nations sanctioned forces, there was only a small region in the Northern border of the country that they did not control or about a fifth or twenty percent.[24] In the period between 2001 to 2020, when they officially took over, they were the main force that conflicted with the US and the U.N. During the early years after the invasion, there was a dispersion and fragmentation that occurred, but there has been a steady growth of their power and influence since 2005.[25] They solidified themselves in this period as definitively expanding Shari'ah as the only political alternative. They are regarded as ultraconservative, and this is primarily recognized by the limitations they imposed on females in areas like education and freedom to leave the home un-escorted.[26]

Deobandi-Islamist Dynamics

While being involved with the Muslim resistance against the Soviets, a significant number of the early Talibans were formed through the Deoband, a religious seminary turned into a school of thought originally formed in India in the late 1800s.[27] They rejected modernism, and maintained that the more that one observes the Shari'ah through *taqlid* or the imitation of the traditional juristic schools of Islam, the less there is a need to follow the direct and independent interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Theologically, this approach stemmed from the Deobandis' reverence for the continuity of the Islamic tradition, mainly represented through pious Sufis, scholars, and jurists of Islam. The Deobadis, therefore, clearly defy the contemporary Islamist orthodox school of thought, which has been a great proponent of *ijtihad* or independent/liberated reasoning of the Islamic scriptures as opposed to *taqlid*.[28] Since Islamists represented more of a political orientation of Islam than just a theological/juristic one, the Deobandis shared a tad different equation with the former. At the outset or from the early twentieth century, the Deobandis

22   Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The power of militant Islam in Afghanistan and beyond,* Yale University Press, 2022, p. 24.
23   Ibidem, pp. 45-46.
24   *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*, Richard English (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 599.
25   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan. . .* p. 261.
26   26 Ibidem, pp. 262-263.
27   Anchita Borthakur, and Angana Kotokey, Ethnicity or religion? The genesis of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, *Asian Affairs,* Vol. 51, No. 4, 2020, p. 820.
28   Gerhard Bowering, *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction*, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 110-111.

were influenced explicitly by the contemporary Islamist narrative.[29] One may find this influence quite perplexing considering that essentially the Deobandis rejected the former's approach in creed and jurisprudence. Perhaps it was due to the political appeal of Islamism that the Deobandis adopted it eventually. In any case, it is through this influence, that the Pashtun rejection of modernism was formed and shaped, and by the 1980s, there were regular radio shows and broadcasts funded by several Islamist organizations to promote their particular approach to political Islam.[30] The goal of the Islamists was motivating the Afghans to move from the traditional Islam toward a more independent, albeit a puritanical strand of Islamic thinking. However, this goal was eventually left unfulfilled.[31] As a matter of fact, the Pashtuns drew from the Sufi traditions that were opposed by the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy. [32] On the other hand, nevertheless, the Deoband emerged as an organization that was opposed to the culture of the West that it viewed as decadent and corrupt.[33]It has been observed that some cells and regions where the Taliban control have more of a direct connection with the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy than others.[34] In short, the influence of Islamism is explicit on the Deobandis and the rejection of Western ideas/thought is consistent with that. [35] As a movement, through the twentieth century, they established a number of seminaries in the regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mullah Mohammad Omar (d. 2013), the most known Taliban supremo along with Mullah Dadullah and Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was the most significant figure in the formation of the Taliban, who was himself a product of the same seminary system. He was responsible for several impactful fatwas that have essentially defined Taliban rule throughout the regions that they controlled, and have recently, reacquired. Along with imposing laws that defined the social and educational lives of women, he eliminated modern technology and culture and media in general. That is, he made non-religious texts, music, an illegal possession and even forbade technologies like cameras and audio or video cassette players. There was likewise a dress code imposed.[36] He was also responsible for the destruction of cultural artifacts such as ancient Buddha states in Bamian. Like Al-Qaeda, his anti-modernism was driven mainly as anti-Western. There is no separating the reactionary or ultra-conservative tendencies from the perspective that living in anything less than a Shari'ah state is immoral or a sin against Allah.[37] Mulla

29   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*... p. 16.
30   Ibidem, p. 70.
31   Ibidem, p. 80.
32   Vern Liebl, Pushtuns, tribalism, leadership, Islam and Taliban: a short view: report from the field, *Small Wars & Insurgencies,* Vol. 18, No. 3, 2007, p. 500.
33   Ibidem, p. 504.
34   Thomas H. Johnson and Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan*, 5th edition, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, pp. 257-258.
35   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*... p. 118.
36   Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2021,* Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 70.
37   Brian Glyn Williams, *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. 253.

Omar was viewed an enemy of the US because of the association with Al-Qaeda and the supposition that they were helping their key leaders from being captured. This fact is mentioned because his approach and that of the Taliban, was not quite in step with Al-Qaeda and they were interested in their own autonomy and control. They supported Islamism elsewhere, but that is not a core element of their own agenda as it is for Al-Qaeda. Fundamentally, they opposed any government that was not Islamic and so the legitimacy of any Afghanistan government even if it is autonomous or not controlled by foreign interests is not sufficient.

Islamic State

The Islamic State or IS was first created in Iraq and the Levant. As a term, the 'Daesh' or 'Islamic State' applies to distinct and related organizations in both Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[38] They are a transnational Sunni organization that has its foundations in the West regions of Iraq and in the eastern regions of Syria. As an organization in a single way, they were created in April of 2013 as IS and that is when they launched an offensive agenda.[39] This included fighting both government and opposing forces in Syria which was then having a civil war. One of the commonalities of IS which is shared by Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, is that they were shaped in conflict and the Iraq War between 2003 and 2011 was formidable. Likewise, the Syrian Civil War was important to the formation of the group within that region, and this was an uprising against Bashar Al-Assad that was initiated in the beginning months of 2011.[40]

Caliphate in the Folds of Al-Qaeda

In that period, Al-Qaeda was operating in Iraq and through that era, it was framed as a wider Sunni based insurgency that both opposed the foreign invaders but also the Iraqi government. The key leader was Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (d. 2006) who was directly involved with violent confrontations or direct attacks.[41] Following his assassination in 2006 a group of militant and conservative cells and organizations began to refer to themselves as working for the cause of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).[42] In 2010, Abu Bakr AL-Baghdadi (d. 2019) became the leader before being installed as the caliph. In 2014 on June 11, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is established and Al-Bagdhadi is officially installed as a new caliph.[43] He was killed by

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38   *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*... p. 92.
39   Ibidem, pp. 465-467.
40   Ibidem, pp. 468-469.
41   Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*... pp. 179-182.
42   Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 57-58.
43   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*... p. 149.

US forces in 2019 or killed himself during a raid/attack.[44] Immediately, there were displacements made of thousands of non-Muslim individuals and within the city of Mosul, there were actual massacres. Where the IS was initially situated in Iraq and Syria, following the split with Al-Qaeda in 2014,[45] it expanded its campaigns in terms of viewing itself as the international successor of Al-Qaeda. In February 2014, Al-Za-wahiri, the then leader of Al-Qaeda officially made a split with the organization.[46] He specifically objected to the establishment of a caliph based on a prophecy. Al-Qae-da, subsequently, agreed with the idea of a caliph and especially, the establishment of a Shari'ah state but they did not accept how the first was chosen to be installed.[47]

Similarities and Differences

Similarities: Colonial Past and Anti-Western/Modern Worldview

Before examining the very specific differences among the three organizations under study, the most general similarities are outlined. As a general framework, it is argued that they all define or affirm their own identities, in opposition to 'the West' and this is an approach that is also explicit in Qutb's works. They also define themselves in opposition to Muslims who pander and support the West, and those who do not support political institutions founded in Shari'ah. In particular, these three organizations diverge with the West, their allies, and Muslim supporters regarding major historical factors and regarding the fundamental role of religion in society and political life. Both the historical and theological differences are related to one another, and so the diverging history of the West has two trajectories that is outlined first. In terms of the rhetoric and ideology of the three organizations, there is a short-term historical or post-twentieth century period that is important, and then the longer expanse of time that begins with the era of the Prophet Muhammad and the following first centuries of Islamic expansion and the installation of the caliphs.

There is no separating the antipathy of the three organizations toward 'the West' from the general trend of imperialism and colonial expansion. The West and the spread of modern democratic and liberal political institutions is viewed by all these organizations as corrupting and at the core of what needs to be eliminated to restore institutions that are in-line with the will of Allah. When defining what or who 'the West' is regarding their imperial subjugation of Islamic culture and power, the Berlin Conference of 1884 is a useful starting point. It is both a symbolic spot in which the twentieth century can be understood, and it is important for understand-

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44   Ibidem, p. 159.
45   Hararo J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*... p. 178.
46   "Global Terrorism Database", University of Maryland, October 1, 2022. Available at: *https://start.umd.edu/gtd* (accessed October 20, 2022).
47   Hararo J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement*... pp. 178-179.

ing the decline of the Qur'anic influence of the so-called caliphate.[48] Put briefly, the hubris of European or Western imperialism is inseparable from the three organizations' grievances that under-gird Islamic insurgencies. It is an important and very legitimate grievance and this needs to be closely defined so that a clearer explication of the rhetoric and ideology of insurgency or violence can be made. There is a direct line between Western/European imperialism and the legitimacy of reclaiming the territories and cultures that the three organizations seek to redefine on their own terms. To understand the three organizations in relation to the West, one needs to understand the nature of Eurocentrism.[49] To understand this as an actual form of conflict, there is a continuum from the time of the Crusades straight until the twentieth century of European and Islamist interests and territories being at odds with each other. A simple example of this was the Ottoman Caliphate or Empire which lasted from 1299 to 1924.[50] Although it was a Muslim empire, there is not a strict way of defining it as such. There were all kinds of social customs and business customs that would not be acceptable under Islamic law, and so did the dynamics of the practice of the faith from region to region. [51] However, there is no separating these conflicts as essentially having religious variables to consider. However, this context did serve as an important motive for a 'war with the west' that is central to understanding important similarities among the three organizations.[52]

On the other hand, all three organizations are aligned with the principles of Islamism, and this is the root of their orthodoxy.[53] As indicated earlier, the expansion of this Islamist orthodoxy in the contemporary era, is largely connected to the establishment and the expansion of the three organizations in question.[54] One may witness the actual influence of this ideology in a peculiar type of Islamic education that was offered in all the regions where the three organizations emerged from.[55]

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48   Samory Rashid, *The Islamist Challenge and Africa*, London, Lexington Books, 2018, p. 73.

49   Brian Steed, *ISIS: An Introduction and Guide to the Islamic State,* New York, ABC-CLIO, 2016, p. 128.

50   *Middle East Conflicts from Ancient Egypt to the 21st Century: An Encyclopedia and Document Collection,* Spencer Tucker (ed.), New York, ABC-CLIO, 2019, p. 927.

51   Cemal Kafadar, *Between two worlds: The construction of the Ottoman state*, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 47-49.

52   Heath W. Lowry, *The nature of the early Ottoman state,* Binghampton, Suny Press, 2003, p. 7.

53   Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State, *Connections*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2017, pp. 27-28.

54   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*. . . pp. 70-71.

55   *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*. . . pp. 241-242.

Differences

The two main differences among the three organizations include the way in which the top of the organizational hierarchy is ideologically defined, and then their particular political agendas are geographically determined. The geographic differences are fairly straightforward although there is no doubt that cultural differences play a role. The Taliban are unique against Al-Qaeda and IS in cultural and geographical terms, and their agenda likewise is defined accordingly. There is no separating the formation of the Taliban as uniquely Pashtun and very geographically bound by Afghanistan/Pakistan border regions, and the fact that their culture, language, traditions, and social hierarchies can be traced back for over a century and a half.[56] There is a very different political history in terms of their relationships with Europeans. Compared with North Africa and the Middle East, Afghanistan like Mongolia has been among the most successful nation states to resist colonial control or any type of foreign power. Although the Taliban support the general Shari'ah law agenda of the other two organizations, their focus has always been the immediate concerns of Afghanistan.[57] They are supportive of Al-Qaeda and IS in terms of their goals of globalizing Islamism but are also very much connected to a specific history with particular political goals. They would not have existed except for the Soviet War and then later conflict with the US and some of their allies. From the outset of the relations between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the former was viewed with both a complete lack of familiarity but also in terms of it creating social or inter-personal differences. It has been widely reported that the Taliban found that the Al-Qaeda was aloof and often condescending.[58] At the same time, the Taliban officially did adopt the prevalent Islamist orthodoxy to some extent and there was an active agenda of eradicating some of the more archaic and totemic dimensions of their religious practices.[59]

Along with geographical and historical-cultural divergences, the type or form of hierarchy poses some problems. In 2014, Al-Qaeda officially split their affiliation with IS and it followed their installation of a caliph.[60] Where there is a fundamental split between the role of the caliphate versus the role of a spiritual leader, there is nevertheless a very essential connection with a political system based on a form of theocracy over and against, a constitutional or democratic system. For Al-Qaeda, there is a consistency adopted from the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood that countries like Egypt have had many Muslim ruling authorities that have been

56   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*... p. 137.
57   *The Cambridge History of Terrorism*... p. 234.
58   Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The myth of the Taliban-al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan*... p. 72.
59   Ibidem, p. 73.
60   Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State...p. 29.

denounced as corrupt.[61] Both Qutb and Al-Zawahiri, for example, were specifically critical of their native Egypt in these terms.[62] Al-Qaeda views a one-world state as their vision and this has been an agenda explicitly supported by IS. The Taliban, on the other hand, are specifically focused on Afghanistan and have alternative social and political customs to address areas of common interest or concern.

Sayyid Qutb and Jahiliyyah

Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian thinker who is essential to understanding the rhetoric and ideology of violence that the three organizations in question seem to have embraced. He was born in 1906 in an Egyptian town called Musha, and was executed in Egypt in 1966 by the then Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.[63] He was one of seven members of the Muslim Brotherhood who were arrested for conspiring to overthrow Nasser and even though he was not convicted by any evidence that he had a direct involvement in a specific plot, the ideas articulated in some of his writings were used as the justification for his death by hanging. Qutb became an important figure in Egypt through the 1950s when independence was achieved, or decolonization was occurring. He is important for reemphasizing an old idea known as Jahiliyyah. This is a "concept that every Muslim schoolchild learns growing up",[64] and it refers to the historical period before Muhammad. Historically, it has meant that period of moral darkness and decay on the Arabian Peninsula immediately before the coming of the light of Islam.[65] Jahiliyyah has typically been translated as 'ignorance' or even 'barbarism', but it should be understood in the context of the classical and medieval Islamic dichotomy of good versus evil, of light versus darkness, of knowledge versus ignorance. In his writings, the topic is addressed extensively. There is no separating the ignorance that is articulated in his works, with the type of ignorance or barbarism that he viewed as being responsible for the actual physical torture that he was experiencing in prison.[66] It is a concept that is used to explain what would lead an individual, group, organization, or an entire civilization to subjugate another individual without the respect of some basic human rights. Moreover, he maintained that the subjugation of one individual or group over and against a race, religion, or social class as likewise an extension of Jahiliyyah.[67]

"Indeed, Islam establishes the values and morals which are 'human' - those which develop characteristics in a human being which distinguish him from the ani-

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61   Godfrey Garner and Maeghin Alarid-Hughes, *Origins of Terrorism: The Rise of the World's Most Formidable Terrorist Groups*... p. 64.
62   Ibidem, p. 29.
63   John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the origins of radical Islamism*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 2.
64   Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*... p. 14.
65   Ibidem, p. 14.
66   Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State... p. 34.
67   John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the origins of radical Islamism*... p. 67.

mals. In whatever society Islam is dominant, whether it is an agricultural or industrial society, nomadic and pastoral or urban and settled, poor or rich, it implants these human values and morals, nurtures them and strengthens them; it develops human characteristics progressively and guards against degeneration toward animalism. The direction of the line which separates human values from animal-like characteristics is upward; but if this direction is reversed, then despite all material progress the civilization will be 'backward', 'degenerative', and 'Jahili'".[68]

Qutb uses Jahiliyyah as a contemporary way of describing the West or the type of Eurocentrism and imperialism that defined the non-Islamic world. Where Jahiliyyah implies darkness and ignorance, Islam is conversely 'light' and 'knowledge'. For Qutb, the West remained in darkness because they were not founding their political institutions and systems on the will of Allah.[69] The decolonization period created institutions that facilitated the foreign ownership of natural resources even if it was providing some institutional freedoms. However, Qutb along with others saw this as a transfer of power and authority that remained controlled by the secular authority of European and eventually, American nation states. For Qutb, such a hierarchy is a form of Jahiliyyah because it is a challenge and affront to Allah's 'sovereignty on earth', and by contrast the existing power is "claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behaviour, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what Allah Almighty has prescribed"[70].

It is that these authorities are 'secular' that establish them as Jahiliyyah, or they are claiming the right to declare laws or values. In a Shari'ah system, and especially one that is in line with the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy, the law in its most primary or elemental form is revelation and the text of the Qur'an. Qutb is explicit that "all existing societies are affected by Jahiliyya"[71] because they are either pagan or pre-Qur'anic religions like Judaism or Christianity, or, in the case of communist/secular systems, they are not founded on Allah or Shari'ah. This is a key element of Qutb's reading of the West as an enemy of a spiritually based political state: "The property of Allah has the same standing with me as that of an orphan; if I have no need of it, I will leave it untouched, and if I need it, I will take only what is right"[72].

For the three organizations in question, it is an important point of contrast between the Jahiliyyah that defines societies that do not have a theocracy that defines social institutions. Jahiliyyah, for them, actually defines Western/Occidental and secular societies as inferior and as morally or spiritually bankrupt. As a narrative, it fits in with the wider perspective that European progress since the period of the Renais-

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68   Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, AB al-Mehri (ed.), Birmingham, Maktabah booksellers and publishers, 2006, p. 110.

69   Mustapha Pasha, Political theology and sovereignty: Sayyid Qutb in our times, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2019, pp. 351-352.

70   Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*… p. 27.

71   William E. Shepard, Sayyid Qutb's doctrine of jāhiliyya, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2003, p. 527.

72   Sayyid Qutb, *Social justice in Islam*, Oneonta NY, Islamic Publications International, 2000, p. 218.

sance was only possible through the adoption of substantial scientific advances acquired from the Middle East. As Qutb stresses, the European Crusades that went on for centuries benefited Europeans for many reasons, but also because of the large Muslim libraries they stole in places like the South of Spain in this era.[73] Stated in other terms, secular legal systems are a practice that is condemned and one that is associated with the Jahiliyyah that is characterized by Islamists like Qutb who prefer a theocracy over and against a form of secularism. All three organizations in question too stress that Jahiliyyah is the rhetoric of the enlightened against those who are in the dark, or those who are guided by the 'will of Allah' against those who are heretical. This is an important 'us versus them' form of group psychology and a powerful recruitment device. More significantly, the notion of non-Muslims or non-Islamists as backward or bearers of Jahiliyyah, unites the three organizations.

Examples of 'Justified' Violence

Two of the core measures of these three organizations that are significant, is the necessity of a Shari'ah system and second, that there are justified uses of violence. Both considerations come together in cases, more visibly, where there are acts of suicide attacks, for instance. All three have committed these and all their leaders are on the record advocating for this kind of martyrdom. The Qur'an forbids suicide and so the religious justification for suicide terrorism is that an act of sacrifice will be rewarded in cases where there is an asymmetrical balance of power.[74] The title of martyr is most apt, according to this conception, for the one fighting Jihad or a *mujahid*. A *mujahid*, Qutb emphasizes is among those who will know with certainty about their place in the afterlife.[75] The Soviet War became the first era where this was widely used, and where the notion of sacrifice was justified in Qur'anic terms. All three organizations have committed suicide bombings with casualties and with fatalities. In the case of sacrificing in this regard, a recent example for the Taliban would be the 100 people that died in Kabul as a result of a suicide bomber and in October 2021. IS committed suicide bombings in mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar and the result was the death of 115 people. Overall, from 1998 until the present, Al-Qaeda has been responsible for 33 suicide terrorist attacks that resulted in fatalities. Likewise, according to the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland, the Taliban are responsible for 637 such attacks. In the same period, IS was responsible for 830 attacks in Egypt, Iraq, and the Levant as well as in Bangladesh and the Subsahara.[76] These are confirmed incidents as opposed to suspected or unconfirmed in-

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73   Ibidem, p. 273.
74   William J. Topich, Pakistan: *The Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Rise of Terrorism*. . . p. 111.
75   Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Heirs of Abu Bakr: On the Ideology and Conception of History in al-Qaeda and Islamic State. . . p. 35.
76   "National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism", 2022. "Global Terrorism Database 1970 – 2020", available at: *https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd* (accessed October 4, 2022).

cidents which the database qualifies for, and the numbers would actually be higher. Along with suicide bombings as an act of violence, all three organizations condone the use of traditional corporal punishment which are unquestionably non-lethal forms of violence. Violence is imposed against enemies, and domestically or within the family. All three organizations recognize Jahiliyyah in these instances as an important rhetoric rendering their enemies as either infidels or deviant Muslims who too should be declared as infidels. Hence, all forms of violence are justified against such enemies because Jahiliyyah is a sin that, according to all three organizations is punishable by death.

Extreme forms of violence, including suicide attacks and Jahiliyya have important core elements in common and it is what combines the three organizations regardless of their differences. In the most fundamental terms, both denote a divide that is clearly an 'us' versus 'them' situation. There is a binary opposite in the case of 'ignorance' and 'enlightenment' when it comes to Jahiliyyah, and with the act of a martyr, there is the infinite reward that is likewise a notion that has no contradiction.[77] That is, there is no contradiction with the absolute binary opposite of a sinner who is condemned to another entirely opposite form of an eternal afterlife. The 'absolute' nature of suicide and the absolute nature of a political conflict where the law of Allah or an Islamist insurgency is against an opposite.

There are many parallels that can and have been drawn between their visions of Shari'ah, but when it comes to violence and who the enemy or enemies are, these three organizations seem unanimously absolute. As a line in the sand, it is a commitment to violence that is characteristic of how all these organizations have expanded their agendas. Put briefly, the three organizations studied here have had numerous 'martyrdom operations' because they are behind hundreds of attacks combining for thousands of fatalities.[78]

Generally speaking, combat is either reactive or proactive and to an outsider, their attacks appear to be politically motivated insurgencies against their opponents in an extreme and brutal manner. However, for the three organizations such attacks are also reactive and not just proactive. The founders of Al-Qaeda were deeply influenced by Qutb, and they did much to shape the ideology and political actions of both the Taliban and IS.[79]

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77   Adnan A. Musallam, The Posthumous Impact of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) on Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Global Jihadists of Al-Qa'eda, *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2020, pp. 7-8.

78   Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill. The Allure of Suicide Terror*. . . p. 1.

79   Ibidem, p. 345.

Conclusion

Extremist tendencies in Islamist organizations are dominantly viewed as the outcome of how young Muslim minds are convinced on the religious validity of violence. This so-called religious endorsement of violence is, indeed, capable of transforming the vulnerable Muslim youth into hardened and military trained soldiers. One of the means by which such an indoctrination occurs, is through building a narrative around certain relevant religious rhetorical conceptions, Jahiliyyah being one of them in such conception in the Islamic context. The three most obvious Muslim extremist groups, Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the IS unitedly subscribe to the conception of Jahiliyyah, particularly as advocated in the works of Qutb and adopted by the Islamist orientation at large. The founders and key figures of Al-Qaeda are widely on the record as indicating the strong influence of Qutb. In turn, they became based in Afghanistan and collaborated and influenced the Taliban in many ways. Further, Al-Qaeda and to some extent, the Taliban directly helped shaped the ideology and political practices and strategies of IS. These organizations share a number of features in common and that was the focus of this study along with a discussion of their differences.

All three organizations are generally sees as fundamentalist and influenced by the so-called Islamist mindset, calling for the establishment of an almighty Islamic political rule over the world. However, they diverge on the scale and intricacies of what type of rule is adequate. The notion of a caliph, for instance, is not agreed on and neither is the extent to which conflict or jihad should exist. Both Al-Qaeda and IS are globalist in their agendas while the Taliban is focused only on their regional or territorial interests. In addition, the Taliban are also known for their Deobandi orientation, which is at odds with the Islamist approach, at least, as far as creed and jurisprudence are concerned. The Taliban's complex adaptation of the contemporary Islamist orthodoxy despite their strong Deobandi roots, therefore, remains a subject for further enquiry. Nevertheless, it was established in this study how the three organizations unanimously embraced Qutb's notion of Jahiliyyah. In other words, Qutb believed in an ongoing jihad against any non-Islamist political body and that by definition, any such conflict was justified because they were in a condition of Jahiliyyah. This is a form of ignorance that means it is akin to being an infidel or completely beyond the capacity of Islamic enlightenment. Qutb's notion of Jahiliyyah, is an ignorance of any society or political body that does not live and define their collective and individual selves within a Shari'ah system. Further, it is an ignorance that drives or motivates the subjugation of one group over another – such is the case with the colonizers over the colonized, the corporations against the people and their resources, and then the enablers who could be local politicians that believe they

are living their lives as moral or observing Muslims. The three organizations have adopted this Qutb's view of Jahiliyyah, and likewise the accompanying or corollary perspective that any political body that is not defined through a Shari'ah system is an enemy against it. Qutb, in a way, provoke the three organizations against any and all political bodies that have historically impeded Shari'ah systems such as those who eliminated the traditional caliphs, and he maintains that this conflict should be perpetuated until such a power structure based on the will of Allah is created world-wide. Subsequently, the analysis was further substantiated by the topic of violent attacks, including suicide bombings and these three organizations have been responsible for. Self-sacrifice and murder are extreme forms of behaviour, and without question, these actions are based on a perspective and set of beliefs that ought to be understood and one of the key elements they share, concerns the way in which they define non-Islamist political systems as ignorant and bearers of Jahiliyyah. In the hindsight, this study establishes how the wider Islamist orthodox discourse in our times may conveniently justify extremist attitude and violence against a political force by resorting to the conception of Jahiliyyah. Although it is yet to be thoroughly and comparatively studied, this perplexing Jahiliyyah worldview even seems to precede the rhetoric of *takfir* or excommunication, which was hitherto seen as the primary basis for Muslim extremist organizations in denouncing the West's Muslim allies. By the virtue of Jahiliyyah, they can expediently categorize all their enemies, Muslims, or non-Muslims as worthy of aggression and violence.

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Мухамед Халид

РЕТОРИКА ЏАХИЛИЈЕ КАО БОЖАНСКИ ЛЕГИТИМИТЕТ ЗА НАСИЉЕ: СТУДИЈА УТИЦАЈА СЕИДА КУТБА И САВРЕМЕНИХ ИСЛАМИСТА НА АЛ КАИДУ, ТАЛИБАНЕ И ИСЛАМСКУ ДРЖАВУ

Сажетак

Исламска концепција џахилије повезује три најпознатије муслиманске милитаристичке организације нашег времена, Ал Каиду, Исламску државу и Талибане у односи на њихова оправдања за насиље. Иако се ове три организације разликују по својим политичким агендама, друштвеним и културолошким мотивима али и по верској деноминацији, ове групе су хегемонистичке у својој употреби џахилије док се противе политичким режимима који нису шеријатски. Они се воде идејом да је успостављање политичких система заснованих на шеријату императив и да су сви који се противе овој идеји непријатељи и неверници. Стога, они су мета насиља. У овом раду приказује се посебна идеја џахилије која се презентује у радовима Сеида Кутба, једног он најутицајнијих промотера исламизма и глобалног џихада у двадесетом веку. Иако је пре свега развијена као одговор западном империјализму у једном постоколонијалистичком контексту, џахилија се може видети и као основа коју ове три организације користе као оправдање за сукоб са непријатељским политичким силама. Овај наратив, како се у раду показује, односи се на шири исламистички дискурс о легитимности политичког насиља у име религије.

Кључне речи: исламизам, верско насиље, исламска ортодоксија, џихад, екстремизам, џахилија