Middle East Brief

Jihadi Revisionism: Will It Save the World?

Khalil Al-Anani

It is remarkable that even as al-Qaeda is stepping up violence and terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, a process of revisionism—of rethinking jihadi doctrine and philosophy—is gaining steam, presided over by leaders of formerly violent extremist groups who now profess the error of the thought and ideology that have guided them for the past two decades. The various revisionist efforts reinterpret religious texts and fatwas related to jihad[1] with the objective of minimizing extremist or militant understandings of sacred texts, so as to make these texts more grounded in reality and more suitable for practical application.

Revisionism has taken hold in Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia, bringing to light rifts between jihadi movements and among their members. Yet, disagreement continues regarding the potential of the revisionist movement to put out the flame of jihad in the Islamic world; to stop—or at least reduce—jihadi violence; and to influence new generations of jihadis. This Brief examines one instance of jihadi revisionism—Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's 2007 renunciation of his own influential jihadi manifesto—and the response of the jihadis, especially that of Ayman al-Zawahiri, to this effort.

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The Story of Jihadi Revisionism

The network of organizations constituting the jihadi movement developed in Egypt during the 1970s and 1980s after the hanging of Sayyid Qutb in 1966. He, more than any other single person, inspired the Muslim world to take up jihadi doctrine. His influential work, *Milestones*, reverberates throughout Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj's *The Absent Obligation.* This interpretation of jihadi philosophy in turn was adopted by jihadists even after the gurus of jihad were arrested and Qutb and Faraj were executed—in 1966 and 1982, respectively.

In 1980, the group Tanzim al-Jihad (the Jihad Organization), also known as al-Jihad, was temporarily formed from a merger of various Islamist groups, including al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group), also known as al-Jama'a and which was led by Faraj at the time. This combined organization assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981. Following Sadat's assassination, hundreds of activists were jailed, among them Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was released in 1985 and left for Afghanistan. During the 1980s and 1990s, the violent Islamic movement in Egypt was principally led by two groups: al-Jama'a, headed by the blind Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman and al-Jihad, which having split from al-Jama'a, was now under the leadership of al-Zawahiri. In February 1998, al-Jihad formally merged with al-Qaeda and formed a unified organization, declaring "jihad against Jews and Crusaders."[2]

Prior to this, al-Jama'a had been responsible for several acts of violence in Egypt—most importantly the assassination in October 1990 of Rif'at al-Mahgub, the speaker of the Egyptian parliament and in 1993 the assassination attempts on former prime minister 'Atif al-Sidqi, former interior minister Hasan al-Alfi, and former minister of information Safwat al-Sharif. The first step toward revisionism was taken in Egypt by al-Jama'a in July 1997. In what it called "the nonviolence initiative," the group declared an end to all acts of violence in Egypt and abroad. Its last act of violence occurred in November 1997 with the massacre at Luxor, during which fifty-eight tourists were killed[3] and which is widely believed to have been an attempt to sabotage the "nonviolence initiative" by splinter groups within al-Jama'a. The group went public with its non-violence initiative in 2002.

For more than a decade, al-Jama'a has issued some twenty-five books and documents proclaiming the group's complete abandonment of its jihadi ideological heritage. It has also issued several fatwas banning the use of violence and condemning the violent practices of other jihadi groups, such as al-Qaeda. Many Jama'a leaders have addressed al-Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri directly, asking them to desist from violence and condemning jihad as fruitless.[4] The al-Jama'a has engaged in no acts of violence in Egypt or abroad since 1997, transforming itself into a religious group focused on outreach while intellectually engaging public issues of political or religious controversy in Egyptian society.

Jihadi revisionism came about against the backdrop of the Egyptian security establishment's desire to close the file on local jihadi groups and to release the five thousand prisoners who had been detained over the past twenty years. (Roughly 15 thousand prisoners associated with al-Jama'a had already been released between 1997 and 2007 following that group's revisionist initiative.)[5] It was within this context that the most significant moment in jihadi revisionism took place in Cairo in November 2007. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, also known as

Dr. Fadl and 'Abd al-Qadir Ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, issued from prison a 111-page document entitled "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World." This document rejects his own influential jihadi manifestos from 1988. Al-Sharif wrote the document in late 2006 and showed it to the imprisoned leaders of al-Jihad for approval in addition to presenting it to the Islamic Research Academy at al-Azhar, which approved it and recommended that it be published.[6] According to al-Sharif, he wrote it to help put a stop to al-Qaeda's violence and terrorism—which, he believed, had distorted the meaning of jihad. Al-Sharif's revisionist initiative provoked a lengthy response from Ayman al-Zawahiri, who condemned it as "a call to a new American religion."

Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's reassessment was extremely important—more so than similar initiatives undertaken by al-Jama'a and by other groups in Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Libya—for three interrelated reasons. First, al-Sharif's biography places him at the center of jihadi activity in the 1980s and 1990s. Born in August 1950 in the city of Beni Suef in the northern part of Upper Egypt, he went to a traditional school (kuttab) and had memorized the Quran at a young age. He began writing in his youth, and after his high school matriculation he enrolled as a medical student at Cairo University, specializing in general surgery. He graduated in 1974 with honors and was appointed to the surgery department of the Qasr al-'Ayni Faculty of Medicine. An introvert, he joined the thirteen-member Maadi Group formed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, considered to be the first kernel of al-Jihad.

Al-Sharif was tried and acquitted in absentia in 1981 for the assassination of Anwar Sadat. He left Egypt in 1982 and worked for a short time in the United Arab Emirates. He then decided to offer his medical expertise to the Afghan jihad, which he did in Pakistan from 1983 until 1993. When Pakistan ejected the Arab mujahidin, he moved to Sudan for several months and then to Yemen in 1994. He was sentenced to twenty-five years in absentia in the so-called Returnees from Albania trial, conducted in 1999 in Egypt.[7] After the September 11 attacks, he was arrested in Yemen where he was working as a surgeon. Yemen turned him over to the Egyptian authorities on February 20, 2004, and since then he has been serving a life sentence in an Egyptian prison.[8]

Second, Al-Sharif was widely known as the most significant ideologue and legal philosopher of international jihad, and his two major works had a substantial impact on young jihadis in Afghanistan. His *al-'Umda fi 'idad al-'idda* (The Faithful Guide for Preparation) is a jihadi manifesto; published in 1988; this 500-plus-page tome lays out the legal and operational parameters of jihadism. In *al-Jami' fi* *talab al-'ilm al-sharif* (The Compendium in Pursuit of Noble Knowledge), a 1,100-page opus released in 1993, al-Sharif elaborates the most significant legal judgments pertaining to jihad, rebellion against one's rulers, democracy, and the application of Islamic law.[9]

Finally, al-Sharif is significant due to the evolution of his revisionist thought. The initial ideological rupture between him and al-Zawahiri occurred in 1993, when al-Sharif left his command of al-Jihad to protest the killings carried out by the group in Egypt. Consequently al-Zawahiri assumed the position of commander. Al-Sharif's revisionism continued to develop following the September 11 attacks and a spate of terrorist attacks around the world, from London and Madrid to Saudi Arabia and Morocco. These attacks reflect the transformations in the international jihadi movement propelled by Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. Al-Sharif's revisionist initiative stresses the error of using violence to achieve political objectives and the need to pursue political reform through peaceful means. It thus constitutes a repudiation of violent jihadi ideology, which rejects engaging in political action according to the rules of democracy.

The Content of Jihadi Revisionism

In four main sections and fifteen articles, "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" discusses the status of, and legitimate conditions for, jihad under Islamic law; rebelling against one's rulers; labeling other Muslims infidels; the use of violence; the murder of foreigners in their countries; and relations with non-Muslims. Al-Sharif also asks in the document that his book *al-'Umda* be confiscated, since it had been invoked by jihadi groups around the world as a charter and constitution for their jihad against local rulers and foreigners. Renouncing the murder of civilians of any nationality, he insists that jihadi groups have misunderstood his book and that it was never intended as an invitation to kill civilians. The most significant issues raised in al-Sharif's revisionist document are as follows.

Engaging in Jihad
Al-Sharif believes that the meaning of jihad has been distorted and perverted and notes that the acts of jihadis have harmed individual Muslims as well as Islam itself. Jihadis have misunderstood Islamic texts, harmed themselves, struck blows against their societies, and led the West to put pressure on Muslim émigrés and residents. He observes that they have also contributed to the destruction of Afghanistan and Iraq and continue to cause much pain and destruction in Muslim lands.

"Rationalizing Jihadist Action" lays out conditions that must prevail for legitimate jihad, in the absence of which jihad is no longer a duty. Among other conditions, before setting out on jihad, a person must receive permission from his parents and creditors. Muslim women and their families must also be protected from the consequences of jihad. One must have the *means* to engage in jihad—meaning both that there are sufficient financial and physical resources and that appropriate external circumstances are obtained: in particular, parity between the two parties to the clash. These conditions do not exist at the present time, the document states, and the harm jihad would entail far outweighs any potential benefit.[10] Therefore, jihad should not be waged.[11]

Rebellion against Rulers

In contrast to other jihadi writings, which allow rebellion against one's rulers and thus encourage the emergence of jihadi movements, al-Sharif does not allow rebellion which will lead to further evils, even if the unbelief of the rulers or the regime is unquestionable. "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" asserts that clashes with the authorities in Muslim countries in the name of jihad are not the proper means for achieving the implementation of Islamic law. Rebellion against local rulers is therefore impermissible.[12] Significantly, al-Sharif here reverses his own previous writings, which had advocated the overthrow of domestic regimes in the Islamic world.

Attacks on Western Countries and Killing Innocent Civilians

"Rationalizing Jihadist Action" rejects any offensive actions undertaken inside Western countries for two reasons. First, there is the possibility that Muslims themselves may be victims. (With this argument, al-Sharif undermines one of the primary principles invoked by violent jihadi groups: that of *tatarrus*, which allows the killing of Muslims who live among non-Muslims.) Second, al-Sharif argues that attacks on foreigners in their own countries are a form of treachery. These attacks constitute a betrayal of the contract of safe passage under which Muslims are allowed to enter the countries of non-Muslims. The document notes that if a Muslim enters an infidel country, the local residents respect the integrity of his life and property; if he is attacked, they prosecute the aggressor and compensate the Muslim.

Accordingly, "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" prohibits betraying foreigners, attacking their property or women, or blowing up their planes, trains, or hotels. In particular, it condemns the September 11 attacks, claiming that they were not jihad but a type of treachery or betrayal perpetrated by al-Qaeda against the United States. The document also states that it is impermissible to harm public or private property or defraud foreigners of their wealth. This includes defrauding insurance companies, evading rent, or refusing to pay telephone bills on the grounds that the defrauded parties are unbelievers. "This is all forbidden and not permissible under Islamic law," the document asserts, "for it is treachery."[13]

Attacks on Foreign Tourists

"Rationalizing Jihadist Action" condemns all offensives carried out by extremist groups in Arab countries such as Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan. In particular, it rejects any attacks on foreign tourists visiting Muslim countries, identifying a number of grounds for this ruling. First, there is the possibility that Muslims could be victims in any assault on foreign tourists. Second, such attacks constitute intimidation and a betrayal of innocent citizens—and innocent foreign women and children might, in fact, be killed. Innocent citizens, the document asserts, should not pay the price for their governments' errors. In addition, the principle of like treatment is operative, meaning that as long as Muslims are given safety in foreign countries, foreigners must likewise enjoy safety in Islamic countries. Finally, the document notes, tourists have not come to Muslim countries with the purpose of fighting Muslims, but to visit in peace. Thus, they should be protected until they return safely to their home countries.[14]

Takfir and the Treatment of Copts

Takfir (labeling other Muslims infidels) is a cornerstone of the philosophy of militant groups. The idea originated with Sayyid Qutb in his aforementioned work, *Milestones*, written in the 1960s. All violent groups have adopted this principle over the last three decades, and it has been invoked as the major justification for acts of murder and terror: Since the rulers of Arab and Muslim societies have all been considered infidels, it was deemed permissible to rebel against them and change their societies by force. In "Rationalizing Jihadist Action," al-Sharif establishes strict limitations on the practice of *takfir*, noting that it is difficult to declare any individual an infidel without a thorough examination.[15]

Regarding the treatment of Christians in Islamic countries, "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" asserts that citizens cannot be discriminated against on the basis of religion; the operative principle should be citizenship, which affords all citizens equal rights and obligations. This represents a qualitative transformation in jihadi thought regarding relationships with the domestic or internal "other." "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" forbids killing Jews and Christians and allows trade with them and taking non-Muslims as wives.[16]

Responses to "Rationalizing Jihadist Action"

Sayyid Imam al-Sharif's document prompted vigorous reaction and sparked a media war among jihadis. Most al-Jihad members detained in Egyptian prisons endorsed the content of "Rationalizing Jihadist Action." Al-Sharif himself notes that in February 2007 he toured various prisons where al-Jihad leaders and members were detained. Two months later, a conference was held in the Fayyum Prison during which the document was presented to hundreds of al-Jihad members and received their support. Additionally, both moderates and former jihadis, such as those from al-Jama'a in Egypt, welcomed "Rationalizing Jihadist Action," seeing the initiative as an important step on the road to stopping violence in the Islamic world and abroad. Nagih Ibrahim, a leader of al-Jama'a who was at the forefront of the Jama'a initiative in 1997, welcomed the document, seeing it as a rectification of ideas propagated by al-Qaeda and al-Jihad.[17] Ahmad Yusuf, a former member of al-Jihad's Consultative Council, maintained that al-Sharif's initiative represented a "tsunami" in jihadi thought that would influence generations of youth who hoped to join al-Qaeda and might stop them from engaging in violence.[18] 'Asim 'Abd al-Magid, another leader of al-Jama'a, remarked that jihadi revisionism would have an impact on the violence in Egypt and abroad—and, as well, on al-Qaeda.

Al-Magid believed that owing to al-Sharif's standing among the first-generation ranks in al-Qaeda, revisionism would further rifts and schisms within the organization.[19] These disagreements were reported in the Arab press and the Egyptian authorities, in order to prevent any open conflict among former jihadists, isolated some thirty al-Jihad leaders who rejected al-Sharif's revisionism. Among the most prominent jihadis isolated were Muhammad al-Zawahiri, the brother of Ayman al-Zawahiri and the former commander of al-Jihad's military wing, as well as Magdi Salim and Ahmad Salam Mabruk, who had been detained after President Sadat's assassination.[20] Still some al-Jihad members living abroad were disturbed by al-Sharif's document—such as Hani al-Siba'i, a former member currently living in London, who launched a strident attack on al-Sharif, contending that "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" was produced under psychological duress as a result of torture in Egyptian prisons and is therefore invalid.[21]

Al-Qaeda also rejected al-Sharif's revisionism, and Ayman al-Zawahiri denounced "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" as a fabrication by the Egyptian security establishment and "a desperate, American-sponsored attempt to stop the fierce wave of the jihadi awakening."[22] He argued that al-Sharif's initiative amounted to a regression from or abandonment of jihadi principles that thereby served American interests. He further criticized the suspension of jihadi operations in Egypt. Additionally, al-Zawahiri argued that since al-Sharif was a prisoner and did not possess freedom of expression, his document could not be trusted, in keeping with the Islamic religious principle that prisoners have no authority.

In response to al-Sharif, al-Zawahiri issued *al-Tabri'a* (The Exoneration), a work of some 200 pages that was published on several fundamentalist websites. Al-Zawahiri devoted one chapter to each of the original's sections, citing refutations from leading jihadi ideologues such as 'Abdullah 'Azzam, the Palestinian Abu Qatada, and the Syrian Abu Mus'ab. He considered court proceedings in connection with cases of religious violence in Egypt as constituting a refutation of al-Sharif's work, and he minimized the document's impact among jihadis, belittling al-Sharif's influence and importance.[23]

The Real Impact of Revisionist Thought

Al-Zawahiri's response can be seen as a predictable one. The initiatives to stop jihadi violence and integrate militant Islamist groups into normative Arab sociopolitical life strike a blow at al-Qaeda's strategy of diffusion, whereby it creates a network of local agents in various Muslim countries that declare their affiliation with the group.[24] In assessing the real impact of revisionist thought on future jihadi action, two questions need to be answered. First, can revisionist initiatives from former jihadis stop jihadi violence? For that matter, are there any guarantees that revisionist jihadis themselves will not turn to armed action in the future?

With respect to the first question, there is much disagreement about the real impact of "Rationalizing Jihadist Action" on al-Qaeda, and on jihadi action in the world at large. Some observers believe that the document represents the first real challenge to jihadi groups like al-Qaeda. Taking note of the author's intellectual standing, they also point out that a great many jihadi leaders in Egypt approved the document, giving it more weight as an expression of consensus. They further argue that the document will influence the disciples of al-Sharif who currently lead jihad, among them Abu Mus'ab.[25]

In contrast, others believe that the jihadi revisionist initiative will have little impact on global jihad or on al-Qaeda. This position has several merits. They argue, first, that al-Qaeda's central leadership in Afghanistan has been dispersed, and the organization no longer *has* a unified central leadership. They contend that al-Qaeda has become more of an ideological movement than a cohesive

organization because of U.S. military action— and despite al-Sharif's personal standing, he has no influence over the younger generation of jihadis, particularly those who emerged after September 11, 2001.

The critics maintain that new ideologues and Islamic legal scholars have replaced Sayyid Imam al-Sharif and enjoy greater standing among the new generations in al-Qaeda. These include Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi ('Isam al-Barqawi), a Jordanian national who has written more than fifty works of jurisprudence, along with essays elaborating jihadi thought in much narrower and more literal terms than do al-Sharif's works. Al-Maqdisi's most important works are *al-'Aqida al-Maqdisiyya* (The Maqdisi Creed) and *Thamarat al jihad* (The Fruits of Jihad), and his website continues to receive new visitors and supporters every day. There is also Abu Qatada ('Umar Mahmud 'Uthman), a Jordanian of Palestinian origin whose fatwas have fostered jihadi violence in Algeria. Among his most important works are *al-Jihad wal ijtihad* (Jihad and Interpretation) and *Aliyat al-taghyir bayn al-wahm wal haqiqa* (Mechanisms for Change between Fiction and Fact). Finally, there is a long list of new jihadi ideologues in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, whose electronic books and articles are widely circulated in Arab countries and who have played a substantial role in disseminating jihadi Salafi thought.

This new generation of jihadis reveals the extent to which the world is currently confronting a jihadism and an operational and intellectual system that is completely different from that addressed by the revisionism—and this gap severely limits the likelihood of an effective revisionist movement. New jihadists are not that familiar with the thought of the old jihadists, and they were not affected by the revisionism literature of al-Jama'a in Egypt. In addition, the new jihadi theorists are still aiming to mobilize Muslim youth to fight against the West, and they are abetted by two conditions. First, the inflammatory socioeconomic conditions in the Muslim world—such as high unemployment rates and failed development projects in many Arab countries—play a vital role in heating up the political atmosphere that produces hundreds of frustrated and disappointed youth. These youth collectively serve as a jihadi time bomb. Second, the current regional and international polarization, which encourages violent tendencies and the rise of militant thought in the region and justifies the adoption of the jihadi enterprise in the minds of many Muslims.

It would be naïve, then, to expect these revisionist jihadi tracts to substantially effect al-Qaeda cells and their followers, with whom the latter maintain merely a spiritual relationship. The ideological and spiritual connection between al-Sharif and the post-9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq jihadi generations seems very weak—not only on account of the lack of direct interaction between them, but also because the old sheikhs have been supplanted by new ones who have monopolized the philosophical discourse influencing new al-Qaeda members.

The answer to the second question seems simpler. While there is no guarantee, empirical evidence has shown that most of those who were part of the revisionist movement have not returned to violence. Al-Jama'a, as mentioned earlier, has not engaged in acts of violence since 1997, and has even condemned all killings by al-Qaeda. In Egypt, al-Jihad has mounted no violent operations since 1995, and its members have not joined any violent organizations in Egypt for the last decade.

Conclusion: The Future of Jihadi Violence

The principal significance of jihadi revisionism is that it insists on the failure of violent means to solve political problems. It teaches militant movements that hope to attack Arab and non-Arab governments and regimes that they are destined to fail. Revisionist thinking can also help correct several erroneous assumptions about jihad, especially regarding the use of violence and the murder of innocent civilians. The treatment of these issues in jihadist philosophy is often vague, thereby providing fertile ground for violent groups seeking religious justification for their terrorism.

Revisionist thought may have a greater impact on new generations of jihadis if the political and cultural conditions that produced jihadist thinking also change. For that to happen, the United States must reconsider its regional and global policies. It, too, needs to engage in reassessment—in this case, of the so-called War on Terror, because it has only stoked tensions and polarization between the Islamic world and the West, giving jihadis an excuse for their acts of vengeance.

Endnotes

1 "Jihad," in this context, refers to a military struggle undertaken "in the way of *God*"; usually it is directed against rebels, apostates, or occupiers, or for the sake of defending the Islamic state.

2 Khalil Gebara, "The End of Egyptian Islamic Jihad?" *Terrorism Monitor* 3, issue 3 (February 10, 2005).

3 *Al-Masyy Al-youm*, November 17, 2007.

4 'Asim 'Abd al-Majid, "Nasiha wajiba li-qadat al-Qa'ida" (Advice to Al-Qaeda Leaders), n.d.

5 See Ahmad al-Khatib, *Islam Online*, January 15, 2008* and Subhi Mujahid, *Al-Masyy Al-youm*, May 14, 2007.*

6 Interview with Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, *Al-Hayat*, December 9, 2007.

7 This case refers to the trial of members of al-jihad organization who participated in the Afghan war and left for Europe after the end of that war. They were extradited from Albania to Egypt, where they were tried along with other defendants.

8 *Al-Hayat*, December 9, 2007.

9 See *Islam Online*, November 29, 2007.*

10 *Islamists Today*, "Rationalizing Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World," part 2, November 20, 2007.*

11 Ibid., part 4, *Al-Jarida*, November 21, 2007.

12 Ibid., part 5, *Al-Jarida*, November 22, 2007.

13 Ibid., part 7, *Al-Jarida*, November 25, 2007.

14 Ibid., part 6, *Al-Jarida*, November 23, 2007.

15 Ibid., part 9, *Al-Jarida*, November 27, 2007.

16 Ibid., part 10, *Al-Jarida*, November 28, 2007.

17 Interview with Nagih Ibrahim on *Islam Online*, July 14, 2007.*

18 Interview with Ahmad Yusuf in *al-Jarida*, November 25, 2007.

19 Interview with al-Magid in *al-Jarida*, December 3, 2007.

20 *Al-Hayat*, November 20, 2007.

21 *Al-Sharq Al-awsat*, November 19, 2007.

22 *Al-Hayat*, March 4, 2008.

23 See *Islamists Today*, March 4, 2008.*

24 The network may include a large, already existent organization (such as the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat, which has become the face of al-Qaeda in Islamic North Africa) or a small cell—or, for that matter, individuals anywhere in the world who admire and adopt al-Qaeda's ideas and strategy. See Dr. 'Ammar 'Ali Hasan, "Hal al-Qa'ida kama yu'abbir 'anha kitab al-tabri'a li-Ayman al-Zawahiri," *al-Hayat*, March 12, 2008.

25 Diya' Rashwan, "al-Muraja'at: kayf tu'aththir 'ala-l-jihadiyin fi-l-'alam," *al-Ahram*, December 2, 2007.

26 Khalil Al-Anani, "Muraja'at al-jihadiyin wa utubiya inha' al-'unf," *al-Hayat*, December 5, 2007.

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