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The Phenomenon of Jihadist Thought in the 20th and 21st Centuries: From Ideological Foundations to Armed Brutality

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Abstract: This study explores the phenomenon of jihadist thought across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, analyzing its evolution from ideological foundations to brutal manifestations of armed violence. It argues that jihadist ideology cannot be reduced to isolated acts of terrorism or seen merely through a security lens; rather, it constitutes a complex intellectual and political system shaped by religious texts, political frustrations, historical grievances, and social crises. The research adopts a genealogical and comparative approach to trace jihadism's development from early theorists like Sayyid Qutb to the operational strategies of organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The study identifies key phases in the evolution of jihadist movements: from Qutb's revolutionary reinterpretation of Islamic concepts like jahiliyya and hakimiyya, through the globalized militancy of al-Qaeda, to ISIS's experiment in proto-state governance marked by extreme brutality and sophisticated propaganda. It demonstrates how jihadist thought transformed from revivalist protest to a doctrine of nihilistic violence, with theological justifications evolving alongside geopolitical opportunities, such as the chaos following the Arab Spring and the exploitation of failed states. Further, the research examines how jihadist movements adapted structurally, shifting from hierarchical to decentralized, networked models, leveraging digital technologies to expand their ideological reach and operational capacity. It highlights the persistent tension between global jihadist ambitions and local dynamics, as well as the growing emphasis on virtualization and asymmetric warfare. Ultimately, the study concludes that jihadist thought has evolved into a hybrid ideology—part religious, part revolutionary, part nihilistic—that continues to exploit global grievances and identity crises. Combating its persistence requires not only security measures but also intellectual and theological efforts to reclaim Islamic discourse from extremist distortions and to promote alternative narratives grounded in peace, justice, and human dignity.
Keywords: jihadist, jihad, ideology, revivalist, networks

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Introduction

The phenomenon of jihadist thought is neither a transient nor a marginal episode within the modern and contemporary history of the Arab-Islamic world. Rather, it constitutes a cumulative and evolving intellectual structure with complex ideological, political, and social dimensions. This phenomenon cannot be understood in isolation from the broader transformations that have affected Islamic societies over the past century, nor can it be reduced to mere violence, as is often portrayed in the media or within the security-oriented academic studies. In reality, jihadist thought forms part of a broader ideological system rooted in religious texts, political frustrations, historical accumulations, and social crises.

The present study seeks to analyze this phenomenon within a long-term historical framework that extends from the early theoretical formations of jihadist discourse—most notably those initiated by Sayyid Qutb in the mid-20th century—to its subsequent radical manifestations, particularly within the experiences of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The research is not limited to tracking the ideological evolution but also seeks to reveal the structural transformations that have accompanied jihadist movements: their organizational models, recruitment strategies, financing mechanisms, and their relationships with both regional and international geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, this study aims to demonstrate how jihadist thought was transformed from a discourse of "revivalist protest" into a doctrine of "armed brutality," wherein violence became not merely a tool but a central creed. It investigates the justifications provided by jihadist theorists for this transition and analyzes the intersections between ideological radicalism, the disintegration of states, and the exploitation of identity crises. In doing so, the research intends to distinguish between jihadist thought as a system of ideas and jihadist movements as operational and militant realities.

The analytical method employed in this study is both genealogical and comparative. It draws upon a wide range of primary sources—texts of ideologues, manifestos of jihadist organizations, fatwas, and practical instructions—alongside reports issued by international organizations and academic studies specialized in political science, security, and religious studies. Through this approach, the study aims to answer the following central questions: How did jihadist thought evolve from theoretical revivalist attempts to radical violent doctrines? What are the intellectual, political, and social determinants that allowed this thought to turn into a global phenomenon? How can we today differentiate between the ideological roots of jihadism and the instrumentalization of its discourse by geopolitical actors? The answers to these questions are crucial not only for understanding the past and present of jihadist movements but also for anticipating their potential future mutations and their continuing impact on the security and stability of both Islamic societies and the international system.

The Historical and Doctrinal Roots of Jihadist Thought

Jihadist ideology did not emerge in a vacuum, nor was it the spontaneous product of a single thinker or organization. Rather, its roots stretch deep into the transformations of Islamic political thought during the decline of the classical caliphate and the rise of the modern nation-state. In this historical context, jihadist thought represented both a reaction to, and a radicalization of, broader Islamist currents grappling with colonialism, secular modernity, and the crisis of Islamic governance.

The first seeds of jihadist ideology were sown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries amidst the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire and the European domination of vast Muslim territories. Reformist thinkers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh initially advocated for a revivalist Islam capable of reconciling tradition with modern progress. However, their moderate reformism would soon give way, through successive ideological shifts, to more radical visions. The fusion of Wahhabi literalism with political activism laid the groundwork for the ideological terrain upon which jihadist movements would later thrive (Kepel 2002, 23-27).

The doctrinal foundations of jihadist thought crystallized through the works of figures like Sayyid Qutb, who reinterpreted classical concepts such as jahiliyya (pre-Islamic ignorance), hakimiyya (divine sovereignty), and jihad in light of contemporary political realities. For Qutb, the modern world had reverted to a state of jahiliyya, necessitating not only ideological resistance but active confrontation through violence to restore God's sovereignty on earth (Qutb 2006, 98-101). His writings became a cornerstone for subsequent generations of jihadists, offering both theological legitimacy and strategic direction for violent activism (Qutb, ibid).

Beyond Qutb, the influence of and the militant movements deeply shaped jihadist doctrines (Hegghammer 2010, 75-78). The marriage of these theological elements with the militant activism of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s provided both a mythic narrative and a practical model for global jihad. Figures like Abdullah Azzam promoted the idea of a transnational Islamic struggle as a religious obligation, transforming jihad from a defensive principle into an offensive, global duty (Azzam 1984, 60).

These early formulations were not monolithic; debates raged within jihadist circles over the scope of legitimate targets, the permissibility of indiscriminate violence, and the prioritization of local versus global enemies (al-Suri 2004, 140). Nonetheless, by the late twentieth century, a coherent body of thought had emerged, centered on the rejection of existing Muslim states as illegitimate, the necessity of violent struggle, and the pursuit of a purified Islamic polity through force.

The ideological continuity between early jihadist thought and contemporary extremism is evident in the persistent invocation of theological concepts to justify violence. From al-Qaeda's strategic documents to ISIS's public communiqués, the

rhetoric remains steeped in references to Quranic verses, prophetic traditions, and medieval juristic rulings, selectively interpreted to serve revolutionary ends (Gerges 2016, 39-42).

This chapter demonstrates that the genealogy of jihadist ideology is neither linear nor uniform but is marked by ruptures, adaptations, and syntheses. It is a product of intellectual engagements with modernity, colonialism, and intra-Muslim conflicts, shaped as much by doctrinal innovation as by historical circumstance (Haykel 2003, 120-122).

The Evolution of Jihadist Organizations: From al-Qaeda to ISIS

The history of jihadist movements cannot be understood without tracing the organizational transformations that shaped their modes of action and ideological priorities. From the decentralized networks of the 1990s to the proto-state ambitions of ISIS, these movements have demonstrated both adaptability and ideological rigidity in pursuit of their goals. This chapter outlines the key stages of this evolution, highlighting the shifts in strategy, leadership, and geographic focus that accompanied each phase.

Al-Qaeda emerged in the aftermath of the Afghan jihad, where foreign fighters, known as the Arab Afghans, coalesced around figures like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Initially conceived as a logistical and support network for jihadist causes worldwide, al-Qaeda's ambitions quickly escalated towards global confrontation, culminating in the attacks of September 11, 2001(Wright 2006). The organization's ideological blueprint, articulated in documents such as The Management of Savagery, emphasized a long-term strategy of exhausting Western powers, destabilizing Muslim states, and establishing zones of chaos conducive to jihadist rule (Naji 2006, 8).

Al-Qaeda's operational structure was characterized by a decentralized model, granting regional affiliates significant autonomy. This flexibility allowed the brand to expand across the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, fostering the rise of groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabaab in Somalia (Gunaratna 2002, 144). However, this decentralization also led to strategic incoherence, as local affiliates pursued divergent objectives, sometimes at odds with al-Qaeda's global focus (Hoffman 2017).

The rise of ISIS represented both a continuation and a radical rupture within the jihadist milieu. Originating from al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, ISIS initially functioned within the parameters of al-Qaeda's global jihad framework (Warrick 2015, 94). However, Zarqawi's brutal tactics and sectarian violence strained relations with al-Qaeda's central leadership, leading to a formal schism in 2014. Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS declared a caliphate, presenting

itself not merely as a militant organization but as a state apparatus with territorial, administrative, and economic ambitions (Gerges 2016, 115).

ISIS's proto-state model marked a significant departure from al-Qaeda's insurgent and terrorist strategies. The group emphasized governance, propaganda, and the establishment of social services alongside its military campaigns. Its sophisticated use of media, including high-quality videos, online magazines like Dabiq, and targeted recruitment campaigns, enabled it to attract thousands of foreign fighters and assert control over large swathes of Iraq and Syria (Winter 2017, 6). This approach resonated with disillusioned populations and radicalized individuals seeking belonging and purpose within a "pure" Islamic polity.

The rivalry between al-Qaeda and ISIS reflects deeper ideological and strategic divergences. Al-Qaeda has generally prioritized the long-term erosion of Western influence and gradual infiltration of local structures, whereas ISIS pursued immediate territorial conquest and the reestablishment of the caliphate. This difference is evident in their contrasting approaches to violence: al-Qaeda's relatively restrained targeting versus ISIS's theatrical brutality and widespread use of mass executions, sexual slavery, and cultural destruction (Hassan & Weiss 2015, 153). Both organizations, however, share a foundational commitment to violent jihad and the rejection of existing state structures, viewing them as illegitimate constructs imposed by Western imperialism and upheld by apostate rulers. Their theological justifications draw from a shared canon of texts, including Ibn Taymiyya's writings on jihad and governance, though each interprets these sources to suit their distinct strategic needs (Haykel 2009, 49).

The evolution from al-Qaeda to ISIS illustrates the adaptive capacity of jihadist movements in the face of changing geopolitical landscapes. While al-Qaeda capitalized on the post-Cold War disorder and the American-led wars in the Muslim world, ISIS exploited the chaos of the Arab Spring, sectarian conflicts, and weak state institutions. These conditions provided fertile ground for their narratives of grievance, victimization, and divine mandate (Neumann 2016, 55).

The Intellectual Evolution of Jihadist Discourse—From Theory to Violent Extremism

The process of radicalization within jihadist groups was not merely a product of isolated readings or local contexts. Rather, it was an accumulative ideological project that drew on intellectual borrowings across different generations. Figures such as Sayyid Qutb did not arise from a vacuum; his works were themselves founded upon predecessors' writings in religious literature, notably those addressing al-wala' wa al-bara' (loyalty and disavowal), the doctrinal differentiation between believers and non-believers, and the question of the legitimacy of "excommunication" (takfir)(Qutb 1964). This intellectual construction was later "weaponized" through the writings of Abdullah

Azzam and his calls for “mobilized jihad,” as well as through Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s attempts to establish the theological foundations of jihad against tyrannical regimes, which he classified under the notion of taghut (false deity) (al-Maqdisi 1984).

Thus, what was once a theoretical framework became a practical program. After the Afghan war, jihadist literature witnessed a shift from theoretical indoctrination to practical operational manuals, as reflected in the manuals of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and later, al-Qaeda (EIJ 1990). The Afghan war also served as the meeting point of many currents that had been geographically and ideologically scattered. Returning fighters carried with them more than just arms and battle experience; they brought back a new globalist jihadist imagination, one which connected Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Palestine through a single ideological lens (Hegghammer 2010).

One cannot overlook the role of the internet and satellite channels, especially from the mid-1990s onward, in disseminating these ideas. Virtual spaces became alternative arenas for recruitment, ideological dissemination, and logistical organization (Neumann 2016). It is within these same spaces that the intellectual narratives shifted: from viewing jihad as a local defense measure to considering it an obligatory global endeavor, with the West as the permanent adversary. This is evidenced by Osama bin Laden’s declarations, particularly his 1996 “Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places” (Bin Laden 1996).

The transmutation from localized insurgency to global terrorism found its fullest expression in the attacks of 9/11. These were not merely military operations but ideological manifestos implemented through violent action (Wright 2006). The war on terror that followed, particularly the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, served only to deepen the jihadist conviction that their struggle was both just and apocalyptic. The rise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s discourse, with its explicitly sectarian and nihilistic tone, further radicalized the movement, transforming jihad from a calculated military engagement to a practice of extreme brutality aimed at annihilation rather than victory (Gerges 2016).

The ideological trajectory continued with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). ISIS did not simply inherit al-Qaeda’s ideological legacy; it transformed it into a state-building project, albeit one based on systematic violence and savagery. The doctrines of governance, allegiance, and takfir were codified in new forms, providing the group with an internal legal and theological justification for acts of extermination, slavery, and public executions (al-Baghdadi 2014). ISIS’s use of media to disseminate such acts was part of its strategy: terror was both a military tactic and an ideological message (Winter 2015).

Ideological Foundations of Modern Jihadism: Between Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb

The ideological underpinnings of modern jihadist movements represent a synthesis of medieval doctrines and modern revolutionary thought. Central to this synthesis are the writings of Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), whose fatwas on jihad, apostasy, and governance have been revived to legitimize contemporary jihadist violence, and the revolutionary interpretations of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), whose articulation of jahiliyya and hakimiyya provided a blueprint for rejecting modern state structures and advocating violent change.

Ibn Taymiyya's jurisprudential legacy remains a cornerstone for jihadist ideologues. His fatwas during the Mongol invasions, particularly his insistence on the apostasy of rulers who fail to implement Sharia fully, have been selectively cited to justify rebellion against Muslim governments deemed insufficiently Islamic (Ibn Taymiyya 1995). His notion of Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Kufr, alongside his conditional endorsement of violence against Muslim rulers, provides jihadists with an early theological scaffold for legitimizing insurgency (Michot 2019, 90). However, Ibn Taymiyya's thought was context-bound, addressing specific historical and political crises. Jihadist movements have recontextualized his rulings to suit their universalist ambitions, often stripping his arguments of their nuanced limitations and historical specificity (Hoover 2007). The reductionist appropriation of Ibn Taymiyya is evident in the writings of Abd al-Salam Faraj and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who framed jihad as an individual obligation in the face of impious rule (Faraj 1996, 167).

Sayyid Qutb, by contrast, introduced a radical modernist dimension to jihadist ideology through his concept of jahiliyya—a state of ignorance not limited to the pre-Islamic period but applicable to contemporary societies governed by man-made laws rather than divine injunctions. His principal work, Milestones (Ma'alim fi al-Tariq), posits a binary worldview: societies either submit to God's sovereignty (hakimiyya) or exist in a state of apostasy and ignorance (Qutb 2006). For Qutb, the primary task of the vanguard is to dismantle these jahili structures through active struggle, an idea that transformed jihad from a defensive measure into a revolutionary imperative (Roxanne 1999, 116). Qutb's influence on jihadist thought cannot be overstated. His framing of jihad as both a means of self-purification and societal transformation laid the intellectual groundwork for groups like Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri explicitly credited Qutb with providing the theoretical justification for violent revolution, interpreting hakimiyya as a call to arms against both Western hegemony and secular Arab regimes (al-Zawahiri 2006).

The convergence of Ibn Taymiyya's medieval jurisprudence and Qutb's

revolutionary ideology crystallized in the writings of later jihadist theorists like Abu Musab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji. Al-Suri's Call to Global Islamic Resistanceadvocates decentralized jihad, drawing upon both thinkers to validate long-term attritional strategies (al-Suri 2007). Naji's The Management of Savagery operationalizes these ideas into a doctrine of controlled chaos, designed to exhaust enemy resources and establish zones for future Islamic governance (Naji 2006, 18).

This ideological genealogy underscores a persistent tension within jihadist thought: between the revivalist desire to restore a perceived golden age of Islam and the revolutionary impetus to create a new world order through violence. While Ibn Taymiyya's writings provided the theological tools, Qutb's modernist lens supplied the political strategy. Together, they shaped a vision of jihad not as isolated acts of terror but as a comprehensive project aimed at civilizational transformation (Maher 2016, 145). Moreover, both thinkers contributed to the absolutist and exclusivist tendencies inherent in jihadist ideology. The insistence on clear demarcations between believer and apostate, the valorization of martyrdom, and the rejection of compromise with existing political systems resonate throughout jihadist manifestos. These doctrines have enabled jihadist groups to justify indiscriminate violence, framing it as a divinely sanctioned duty rather than a strategic choice (Hegghammer 2009).

The persistence of these ideas reflects the broader crisis of legitimacy in the Muslim world, where weak governance, corruption, and external interventions have fueled narratives of victimization and divine mandate. Jihadist ideologues exploit these conditions, offering a totalizing worldview that promises purity, justice, and redemption through struggle.

The Expansion of Jihadist Networks and Their Geopolitical Exploitation

The phenomenon of jihadist movements did not remain confined to ideological spheres or limited territorial theaters. Rather, it became gradually intertwined with complex international relations and regional geopolitical balances. This dynamic interplay allowed jihadist groups to evolve from marginal actors into central players influencing conflicts and redefining security doctrines (Hoffman 2006).

Following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, a new strategic environment was created that permitted jihadist networks to proliferate and adapt. The dismantling of the Iraqi state and army, the marginalization of Sunni populations, and the spread of sectarian violence formed fertile ground for al-Qaeda in Iraq, later to become ISIS (Gerges 2016). These groups skillfully exploited the grievances of local populations, turning ideological narratives into

pragmatic tools of recruitment and territorial control. They presented themselves as defenders of Sunni Islam against Shia expansionism, framing the conflict within apocalyptic narratives rooted in hadith and eschatological traditions (McCants 2015). Simultaneously, regional powers began to instrumentalize jihadist factions within broader strategic competitions. States like Iran, Turkey, and Qatar have, at various times, used jihadist proxies to advance their geopolitical interests, whether through direct support, tacit alliances, or manipulation of conflict dynamics (Soufan 2017). This reality rendered the jihadist landscape more intricate, as groups aligned temporarily with state actors whose agendas were fundamentally distinct from the jihadists' proclaimed objectives. Such alliances further complicated counter-terrorism efforts, as they blurred the lines between insurgency, terrorism, and state-sponsored violence (Byman 2019). Moreover, the Syrian war served as a critical incubator for jihadist expansion. The collapse of state authority, combined with international rivalries, created a permissive environment for groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (later Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) and ISIS to entrench themselves (Lister 2015). Foreign fighters flowed into the region from across the globe, drawn by social media propaganda and the promise of martyrdom or statehood. This transnational mobilization was unprecedented in scale and diversity, bringing together recruits from Europe, North Africa, the Gulf, and Central Asia (Neumann 2016).

Jihadist networks also demonstrated an ability to adapt structurally. Unlike previous generations bound to rigid hierarchical models, modern jihadist groups adopted decentralized structures, allowing local cells substantial autonomy while maintaining ideological cohesion through shared doctrines and propaganda channels (Pantucci 2015). This flexibility enabled them to survive leadership decapitations, military defeats, and internal schisms, re-emerging under new names and structures when necessary. The so-called "franchise" model—where local groups pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda or ISIS while retaining operational independence—illustrates this adaptability (Hegghammer 2010).

The exploitation of failed or fragile states further contributed to jihadist expansion. Regions such as the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Southeast Asia became arenas of jihadist activity, where weak governance, porous borders, and local grievances provided ample opportunities for recruitment and entrenchment (ICG 2016). These territories became not only operational bases but also ideological laboratories, where global jihadist narratives were adapted to local contexts, merging religious ideology with tribal, ethnic, or socio-economic grievances.

The Organizational Structures of Contemporary Jihadist Movements: From Al-Qaeda to ISIS

The organizational structures of modern jihadist movements have undergone significant transformations over the past three decades, evolving from hierarchical, centralized networks to decentralized, networked, and franchise-based models. These shifts reflect both ideological developments and strategic adaptations to the evolving global security environment, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S.-led "War on Terror."

Al-Qaeda, founded by Osama bin Laden in 1988, initially adopted a relatively hierarchical structure, with a clear chain of command, centralized funding mechanisms, and a global network of affiliated training camps. This model reflected bin Laden's background as a financier and organizer rather than a field commander. Al-Qaeda's central command (Al-Qaeda Core) maintained tight control over major operations, as seen in the meticulous planning of the September 11, 2001 attacks (Hoffman, 2017, 269). However, the U.S.-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas from 2001 onward severely disrupted this centralized model, forcing Al-Qaeda to adapt by decentralizing its operations (Burke 2015).

This decentralization gave rise to a franchise model, wherein regional groups pledged allegiance (bay'a) to Al-Qaeda's central leadership while maintaining operational autonomy. Examples include Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Al-Shabaab in Somalia. These groups adapted jihadist ideology to local grievances, blending global jihadist objectives with regional conflicts. This strategy allowed Al-Qaeda to project influence globally despite its weakened core, although it also introduced challenges of ideological coherence and operational coordination (Joscelyn & Roggio 2020).

The rise of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) marked a radical departure from Al-Qaeda's decentralized approach. Emerging from the ashes of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), ISIS under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sought to establish immediate territorial control, culminating in the 2014 proclamation of the "Caliphate" from Mosul. ISIS rejected Al-Qaeda's gradualist strategy and prioritization of clandestine operations in favor of overt conquest, state-building, and brutal enforcement of Sharia (McCants 2015). The group's proto-state structure incorporated ministries, courts, taxation systems, and a formal military hierarchy, reflecting a hybrid of jihadist insurgency and totalitarian governance (Knights 2020, 3). ISIS's organizational model was vertically integrated within its territorial holdings but leveraged horizontal, networked structures for external operations. The so-called "wilayat" (provinces) outside Iraq and Syria, such as in Libya, Sinai, and Afghanistan (Khorasan), mirrored the franchise approach but were more tightly integrated through media coordination, funding channels, and strategic directives from the central leadership (Haroro

2016, 17). Moreover, ISIS pioneered the use of digital platforms for recruitment, propaganda, and coordination, creating a virtual caliphate that transcended geography (Winter 2019, 29).

These organizational dynamics reflect differing strategic priorities. Al-Qaeda prioritizes endurance and ideological purity, fostering alliances with local insurgencies and embedding itself within Muslim societies to gradually erode state structures. In contrast, ISIS prioritized rapid territorial expansion and spectacular violence to create momentum and legitimacy, often at the expense of broader popular support (Moghadam 2017). Both models exhibit strengths and vulnerabilities. Al-Qaeda's diffuse network makes it resilient to decapitation strikes but vulnerable to ideological fragmentation, as evidenced by the schism with ISIS. ISIS's centralized proto-state model allowed rapid resource mobilization but made it susceptible to conventional military defeat, as demonstrated by the collapse of its territorial holdings by 2019 (Whiteside 2016). Furthermore, the adaptability of these organizations is key to their longevity. Al-Qaeda has rebranded itself post-ISIS as a more moderate force, focusing on long-term strategic objectives and positioning itself as a defender of Muslim populations against foreign intervention. ISIS, despite territorial losses, persists through its global franchises and insurgent cells, maintaining a potent threat through attritional warfare and lone-wolf attacks inspired by its ideology (Colin 2019).

The competition between these models has shaped the trajectory of global jihadism. Where Al-Qaeda fosters deep roots within conflict zones, leveraging tribal, ethnic, and sectarian dynamics, ISIS appeals to disenfranchised youth through a narrative of immediate empowerment and apocalyptic destiny. This competition influences recruitment strategies, funding, propaganda, and operational tactics, creating a dynamic and evolving landscape of jihadist activity (Berger 2018).

From Organizational Structures to the Doctrine of Brutality

The trajectory of jihadist movements from ideological origins to organizational structuring reveals a progressive transition from a purely dogmatic focus to the formulation of a comprehensive theory of armed brutality. This evolution is not arbitrary; rather, it reflects an organic response to contextual changes, security pressures, and the tactical opportunities afforded by weak or collapsing states (Hoffman 2006).

Initially, organizations such as al-Qaeda sought to establish centralized command structures that mirrored traditional military hierarchies. These structures allowed for strategic planning, resource allocation, and

coordination of operations across disparate theaters (Gerges 2005). However, as counterterrorism efforts intensified post-9/11, with the U.S.-led global campaign against terrorism decimating al-Qaeda's core leadership, jihadist groups pivoted towards decentralized models. This shift was not merely tactical but ideological, rooted in a broader reinterpretation of jihad that emphasized local initiative, self-sufficiency, and operational fluidity (Hegghammer 2010).

This decentralization gave rise to what scholars have termed "leaderless jihad," where individuals or small cells, inspired by the broader jihadist narrative but lacking direct organizational ties, perpetrate acts of violence (Sageman 2008). Such a model effectively blurred the lines between structured militancy and lone-wolf terrorism, rendering counterterrorism strategies more complex. It also aligned with evolving doctrines within jihadist circles that valorized spontaneity, martyrdom operations, and media impact over conventional military victories (Pantucci 2015).

The emergence of ISIS introduced a radical departure from previous jihadist models by establishing a proto-state. Unlike al-Qaeda's amorphous networks, ISIS combined territorial control, governance structures, and military organization with its brutal ideological agenda (Gerges 2016). This entity proclaimed itself the Caliphate, reviving a notion central to Sunni Islamist imagination yet moribund in practice for centuries. ISIS's state-building endeavor involved the establishment of courts, schools, financial systems, and public services, all framed within a hyper-violent interpretation of Sharia (Soufan 2017).

ISIS's brutality was not incidental but a deliberate strategy rooted in its reading of Islamic history and eschatology. The group's publications, notably Dabiq and Rumiyah, systematically outlined theological justifications for extreme violence, presenting savagery as both a deterrent and a purifying force necessary for the establishment of divine rule (McCants 2015, 112–118). This doctrinal turn towards brutality was further amplified by the use of digital media, with graphic executions and mass atrocities circulated globally to instill fear, attract recruits, and provoke overreactions from adversaries (Neumann 2016).

The integration of brutality into jihadist doctrine was not unique to ISIS, however. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Boko Haram in Nigeria also developed localized versions of this approach, adapted to their cultural and operational environments (ICG 2016). These adaptations reveal a shared understanding among jihadist groups that violence serves multiple functions: ideological purity, territorial dominance, psychological warfare, and narrative control (Byman 2019). Moreover, the doctrine of brutality extended beyond physical violence to encompass cultural and historical erasure. The destruction of heritage sites, libraries, and religious monuments formed part of a broader strategy to erase pre-jihadist identities and

impose a monolithic religious-political order (Lister 2015). This aspect aligns with ISIS's apocalyptic worldview, where annihilation precedes rebirth and chaos serves divine providence.

This strategic and doctrinal turn underscores a fundamental question: is brutality an inherent feature of jihadist ideology, or a contingent strategy shaped by circumstances? While some scholars argue for the former, suggesting an intrinsic linkage to particular readings of Islamic texts, others highlight the adaptive nature of these movements, where brutality becomes instrumental rather than essential (Maher 2016). What is certain is that jihadist groups have institutionalized violence as a means of survival, expansion, and influence, embedding it within their organizational DNA.

The Dynamics of Transnational Expansion and Regional Adaptation

The phenomenon of jihadist movements cannot be fully comprehended without an in-depth understanding of their transnational dynamics and capacity for adaptation to diverse regional contexts. These organizations, while sharing a common ideological nucleus rooted in jihadist thought, demonstrate remarkable flexibility in reconfiguring their strategies, structures, and narratives in response to the specificities of the regions in which they operate (Hoffman 2006).

At the heart of this expansion lies a dual logic: ideological universalism and strategic pragmatism. On the one hand, jihadist movements claim a global mission to establish the rule of God on earth, transcending borders and ethnic identities. On the other hand, they exhibit a tactical willingness to integrate local grievances, socio-political conflicts, and historical animosities into their operational agendas (Gerges 2005). This dialectic between the global and the local explains the proliferation of jihadist factions in regions as diverse as the Sahel, Southeast Asia, the Caucasus, and the Horn of Africa (Hegghammer 2010).

A key feature of this adaptive capacity is the franchising model initiated by al-Qaeda and later emulated by ISIS. This model allows for the incorporation of local militant groups under the umbrella of a larger brand, granting them ideological legitimacy and access to resources while permitting significant operational autonomy (Sageman 2008). The alliances with groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, and Abu Sayyaf illustrate this mechanism of expansion, wherein local conflicts are reframed within the narrative of global jihad (Pantucci 2015).

The operational strategies of these affiliates often diverge significantly from the core organizations. In the Sahel, for instance, jihadist groups exploit ethnic tensions, porous borders, and state fragility to establish territorial control and

integrate into illicit economies such as drug trafficking and human smuggling (Gerges 2016). In contrast, Southeast Asian groups tend to leverage urban environments, weak law enforcement, and sectarian divides to perpetrate high-profile attacks aimed at destabilizing governments and provoking sectarian violence (Soufan 2017). This localization of strategies underscores the adaptability of jihadist movements to distinct socio-political ecologies.

The phenomenon of "glocalization"—the fusion of global jihadist narratives with local contexts—is further evident in the recruitment strategies employed by these groups. While global propaganda emphasizes religious duty, apocalyptic visions, and martyrdom, local recruitment often appeals to more immediate concerns: revenge for government abuses, economic marginalization, or communal protection (McCants 2015, 116). This dual messaging enables jihadist organizations to resonate with a broader demographic spectrum, from ideologically committed extremists to disenfranchised youth seeking purpose or belonging (Neumann 2016). Moreover, the technological dimension has amplified the reach and impact of these movements. The internet and social media platforms have become essential tools for propaganda dissemination, recruitment, fundraising, and operational coordination (ICG 2016). Virtual spaces allow jihadist ideologies to transcend physical borders, creating transnational networks of sympathizers and operatives who can act autonomously yet remain ideologically aligned (Byman 2019). This digital infrastructure has also facilitated the spread of operational expertise, with manuals on bomb-making, assassination techniques, and security evasion circulating widely online (Lister 2015).

The adaptability of jihadist movements is not without its internal tensions. The balance between local autonomy and global coherence often generates conflicts over priorities, tactics, and interpretations of Sharia. Disputes between al-Qaeda's central leadership and its affiliates, or between ISIS and its wilayats, exemplify these fractures (Maher 2016). These tensions can lead to schisms, defections, and intra-jihadist violence, further complicating the landscape of global terrorism (McCants 2015, 116).

The future trajectory of jihadist movements will likely continue this pattern of decentralized proliferation and regional adaptation. As state responses evolve and geopolitical shifts create new vacuums, these groups will exploit emerging opportunities while recalibrating their narratives to align with local grievances. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing effective counterterrorism strategies that address both the global ideology and the local realities fueling jihadist violence (Maher 2016).

The Transformation of Jihadist Thought in the Twenty-First Century

The evolution of jihadist thought in the twenty-first century is characterized by two intertwined dynamics: the intensification of ideological radicalism and the diversification of strategic paradigms. These transformations reflect the dialectical relationship between global political developments and internal doctrinal shifts within jihadist movements (Roy 2017).

At the heart of this evolution lies the transition from a hierarchical, centralized conception of jihad, as embodied by al-Qaeda, to a more fragmented and decentralized model championed by ISIS. While al-Qaeda's discourse remained rooted in a long-term strategy aimed at gradually eroding Western influence and establishing an Islamic caliphate, ISIS adopted a confrontational approach centered on the immediate proclamation of the caliphate and the imposition of its authority through extreme violence and territorial conquest (Gerges 2016). This strategic bifurcation not only revealed contrasting interpretations of jihad but also underscored the adaptive capacities of these movements in response to geopolitical contingencies (Kepel 2017).

The theoretical underpinnings of this evolution are anchored in a reinterpretation of classical jihadist doctrines. Contemporary jihadist ideologues, notably Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji, advanced a vision of asymmetrical warfare grounded in chaos, decentralization, and the erosion of state structures (al-Suri 2004). Al-Suri's concept of "leaderless jihad" and Naji's "management of savagery" proposed operational frameworks that prioritize small-scale, autonomous actions over coordinated, hierarchical campaigns (Naji 2004). These ideas found fertile ground in the context of failed states, civil wars, and the retreat of centralized authority across the Middle East and North Africa (ICG 2016).

The Arab Spring served as a catalyst for the mutation of jihadist strategies. The collapse of conventional regimes, the proliferation of armed factions, and the weakening of state control created unprecedented opportunities for jihadist groups to expand, recruit, and experiment with governance models (Lynch 2016). In Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, jihadist factions entrenched themselves not merely as insurgents but as proto-states, administering territories, imposing legal codes, and providing services (Lister 2015). This shift from clandestine cells to territorial governance marked a significant departure from previous jihadist paradigms focused solely on guerilla warfare and sporadic terrorism (Byman 2015).

The rise of ISIS epitomized this transformation. By declaring a caliphate in 2014 and appointing Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph, ISIS redefined the jihadist landscape. Its propaganda emphasized the restoration of Islamic dignity, the re-establishment of a pre-colonial political order, and the obligation

of Muslims worldwide to emigrate (hijrah) to its territories (Zelin 2020). This narrative resonated with marginalized individuals, disillusioned youth, and radicals seeking a sense of purpose, leading to an unprecedented influx of foreign fighters (Hegghammer 2010). Concurrently, the jihadist discourse embraced new theological justifications for extreme violence. Texts such as Dabiqand Rumiyah propagated interpretations that sanctioned slavery, mass executions, and the destruction of cultural heritage, all framed as religiously mandated (Dabiq and Rumiyah 2014/2017). These doctrinal shifts reflected a hardening of jihadist ideology, wherein brutality became both a tactic and a theological virtue (Maher 2016). The fusion of medieval jurisprudence with modern nihilism produced a unique brand of jihadism, distinct from its predecessors (Hassan & Weiss 2015).

Nevertheless, the defeat of ISIS's territorial project did not signify the end of jihadist ambitions. Instead, it marked a return to decentralization, with remnants reorganizing into cells, insurgent bands, and virtual networks. The reliance on digital platforms for recruitment, indoctrination, and coordination has intensified, allowing jihadist ideologies to persist despite the absence of physical sanctuaries. This reconfiguration echoes al-Suri's earlier prescriptions for a diffuse, resilient jihadist presence immune to conventional military defeat (al-Suri 2004).

A critical dimension of this transformation is the globalization of jihadist narratives. While previous generations focused primarily on the "near enemy"—apostate regimes in Muslim lands—contemporary jihadist rhetoric increasingly targets the "far enemy" and seeks to provoke global polarization (Roy 2004). Attacks in Paris, London, New York, and Christchurch serve both as retaliation and as strategic instruments to fuel anti-Muslim sentiments, thereby validating jihadist claims of a civilizational war (Pantucci 2015). This global scope underscores the intersection between local grievances and global ambitions within jihadist thought (Neumann 2016).

In conclusion, the evolution of jihadist thought in the twenty-first century reflects a complex interplay between ideological rigidity and strategic flexibility. The oscillation between centralization and fragmentation, territorial control and clandestine networks, underscores the adaptive capacities of these movements. Understanding this metamorphosis is essential for anticipating future trajectories and crafting effective responses to the enduring threat of jihadist extremism (Hoffman 2006).

The Future of Jihadist Thought: From Militarization to Virtualization

The future of jihadist thought appears increasingly detached from the classical paradigms of armed struggle and territorial conquest that shaped its twentieth-century manifestations. Instead, it gravitates toward new horizons where virtualization, ideological resilience, and adaptive strategies redefine both its modes of action and its ideological underpinnings (Hoffman 2006).

The transition from militarization to virtualization stems fundamentally from the accumulated failures of jihadist projects to establish enduring state-like entities. The collapse of the so-called Islamic State's territorial caliphate in 2019, following the fall of Mosul, Raqqa, and Baghouz, starkly illustrated the unsustainability of jihadist proto-states in the face of coordinated international military efforts (Hassan & Weiss 2015). This failure prompted a profound strategic reassessment within jihadist circles, emphasizing survival, diffusion, and influence over direct territorial control (ICG 2016).

Virtualization manifests in several interconnected forms. First, the migration of jihadist activities to the digital sphere reflects an acknowledgment of the internet's unparalleled potential for recruitment, indoctrination, and operational coordination (Klausen 2015). Encrypted platforms, social media networks, and the dark web provide jihadists with resilient communication channels, allowing decentralized cells and lone actors to operate without centralized commands (Sageman 2008). This operational shift echoes the strategic foresight of ideologues such as Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who advocated for decentralized, autonomous cells capable of sustaining a perpetual jihad without hierarchical structures (al-Suri 2004).

Second, the virtualization of jihad encompasses the ideological realm. Contemporary jihadist narratives increasingly frame their struggle not as confined to specific geographies but as a global confrontation between the Islamic ummah and its perceived enemies (Roy 2017). This universalist discourse leverages grievances related to Islamophobia, foreign interventions, and socio-political exclusion to construct a transnational imaginary of perpetual conflict (Neumann 2016). Digital media amplify these narratives, producing a continuous stream of propaganda that transcends linguistic, cultural, and national barriers (Dabiq and Rumiyah 2014/2017).

The recruitment strategies of jihadist movements have also adapted to this virtualized landscape. Rather than relying solely on traditional networks of mosques, religious circles, or familial ties, jihadist recruiters now exploit online forums, gaming platforms, and social media influencers to reach potential sympathizers (Hegghammer 2010). This approach facilitates the radicalization of individuals in isolation, detached from any physical community but connected through digital echo chambers that reinforce extremist beliefs (Zelin 2020).

Furthermore, the convergence between jihadist ideologies and emerging technologies raises new security challenges. The potential for cyber jihad, encompassing hacking, digital sabotage, and the dissemination of sophisticated disinformation campaigns, represents an evolution from purely kinetic forms of violence to hybridized strategies blending the virtual with the physical (Cronin 2019). While jihadist capacities in this domain remain limited compared to state actors, the trajectory points toward increased sophistication and innovation (UN 2020).

In parallel, the future of jihadist thought is likely to witness an increased entanglement with other forms of extremism. The cross-fertilization between jihadist, far-right, and ethno-nationalist narratives, facilitated by shared digital spaces and mutual antagonisms, creates a complex ecosystem of radical ideologies feeding off each other (Ebner 2017). This dynamic reinforces a global cycle of violence, where acts of terrorism inspire retaliatory measures, which in turn validate the jihadist narrative of an existential war against Islam (Pantucci 2015).

From a doctrinal perspective, the virtualization of jihadist thought may lead to a further abstraction of its theological foundations. Detached from concrete communities and territories, future jihadist ideologies might prioritize apocalyptic and eschatological themes, framing their struggle as part of an unfolding cosmic battle between good and evil (Maher 2016). This shift could exacerbate the nihilistic tendencies already present in groups like ISIS, prioritizing symbolic violence over tangible political objectives (Gerges 2016).

Nevertheless, certain constants are likely to persist. The quest for legitimacy through appeals to classical jurisprudence, the instrumentalization of grievances, and the manipulation of religious sentiments will remain core features of jihadist discourse (Byman 2015). What changes is the medium through which these messages are conveyed and the audience they seek to reach—now more globalized, more isolated, and more susceptible to radical narratives that offer belonging, purpose, and agency (Kepel 2017).

Finally, the future of jihadist thought cannot be dissociated from broader geopolitical developments. Conflicts in regions such as the Sahel, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen continue to provide fertile ground for jihadist mobilization. The interplay between local conflicts and global jihadist networks ensures that these movements will persist, mutate, and adapt, exploiting every vacuum of governance and every failure of integration policies in Western societies (Lynch 2016).

In conclusion, the future of jihadist thought is marked by a transition from physical insurgency to virtual insurgency, from territorial ambitions to ideological omnipresence. The resilience of these movements lies not in their capacity to conquer lands but in their ability to adapt to technological, social,

and political shifts, ensuring the persistence of their threat in ever-changing forms (Roy 2004).

Conclusion: From Intellectual Foundations to Violent Barbarity—A Critical Assessment

The evolution of jihadist thought from the twentieth to the twenty-first century demonstrates a clear trajectory from ideological foundations rooted in specific political grievances toward a more nihilistic and barbaric violence detached from both classical jurisprudence and political rationality. This development reflects broader transformations within Islamist movements, international politics, and the dynamics of violence itself (Roy 2004).

Initially, jihadist thought emerged from a matrix of anti-colonial struggles, nationalist aspirations, and the perceived failure of secular ideologies in the Muslim world. Early figures like Sayyid Quṭb framed jihad as both a spiritual and political imperative aimed at liberating Muslim societies from internal decay and external domination (Quṭb 1964). In this context, jihadist discourse maintained a semblance of coherence with Islamic legal traditions, drawing upon the classical doctrines of defensive jihad, albeit selectively and often distortedly (Abou El Fadl 2005).

However, the collapse of post-colonial states, the failure of political Islam to achieve governance through democratic means, and the repressive responses of the political regimes catalyzed a shift toward more radical, violent, and transnational forms of jihadism (Kepel 2002). The Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union provided the template for this new phase, fostering networks, ideologies, and operational models that transcended national boundaries (Hegghammer 2010). Figures such as Abdullah Azzam and Osama bin Laden redefined jihad as a global, open-ended confrontation between Islam and the West, a narrative that found fertile ground amid the geopolitical upheavals of the 1990s and 2000s (Gerges 2005).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a watershed moment, crystallizing the global jihadist paradigm and elevating al-Qaeda to the forefront of international terrorism (Bergen 2006). However, the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with the Arab Spring's chaotic aftermath, further radicalized jihadist discourse. The emergence of the Islamic State represented both a continuation and a rupture with previous models. ISIS's emphasis on territorial conquest, apocalyptic eschatology, and extreme violence against both Muslims and non-Muslims alike epitomized the mutation of jihadist thought into a form of ideological barbarity (Hassan & Weiss 2015).

This evolution underscores a fundamental paradox within jihadist ideology:

while it claims to restore an authentic Islamic order, its methods and doctrines increasingly diverge from the jurisprudential and ethical frameworks of the tradition it purports to defend (Haykel 2016). The instrumentalization of classical concepts such as dar al-harb (the abode of war), takfir(excommunication), and bay'ah (pledge of allegiance) serves strategic ends rather than theological integrity (March & Revkin 2015). The result is a hybrid ideology, part religious, part revolutionary, part nihilistic, whose appeal lies as much in its aesthetics of violence as in its doctrinal pretensions (Maher 2016). Moreover, the symbiosis between jihadist violence and global media ecosystems has magnified the impact of jihadist actions beyond their tactical significance. Beheadings, suicide bombings, and mass atrocities are meticulously staged for maximum psychological effect, leveraging the immediacy of digital communication to instill fear, recruit followers, and provoke overreactions from adversaries (Winter 2017). This media-savvy barbarity represents a significant departure from the restrained adab al-harb (ethics of war) found in classical Islamic jurisprudence (Hayward 2012).

Yet, despite their brutality, jihadist movements remain vulnerable to internal contradictions and external pressures. Ideological incoherence, leadership rivalries, and the alienation of local populations have repeatedly undermined their strategic objectives (ICG 2016). The fragmentation of groups, defections, and the erosion of territorial control illustrate the inherent instability of organizations built upon extremism and violence (Burke 2015). Furthermore, international cooperation, intelligence advancements, and community resilience have blunted the most immediate threats posed by jihadist networks, though the ideological undercurrents persist (Byman 2019).

Looking forward, the challenge posed by jihadist thought lies less in its capacity for mass mobilization than in its adaptability and resilience. Its shift toward decentralized, virtualized forms mirrors broader trends in warfare and radicalization. Lone actors, micro-cells, and online communities ensure that the ideological virus remains active even as its organizational hosts decay (Cronin 2019). Combating this threat requires not only military and security measures but also intellectual, theological, and socio-political responses capable of addressing the root causes of radicalization (Neumann 2016). In this regard, the role of Muslim scholars, civil society, and educational institutions is paramount. Reclaiming the discourse of jihad from extremist appropriations necessitates a reinvigoration of authentic Islamic teachings on peace, justice, and the ethics of war (Ramadan 2009). Initiatives aimed at deconstructing the pseudo-jurisprudence of jihadist groups, highlighting the historical diversity of Islamic thought, and promoting alternative narratives grounded in maqasid al-shari'ah (the objectives of Islamic law) offer viable pathways for countering radical ideologies (Auda 2008).

In conclusion, the phenomenon of jihadist thought over the past century reveals a trajectory from politicized resistance to ideological barbarity, shaped by the interplay of local grievances, global politics, and technological transformations. Its persistence reminds us that the battle against violent extremism is as much intellectual and moral as it is military and legal (Sageman 2008). Without addressing the underlying crises of identity, governance, and interpretation within Muslim societies, the specter of jihadist violence will continue to haunt the international community in ever-evolving forms.

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Мохамед Бечари

Феномен џихадистичке мисли у 20. и 21. веку: од идеолошких основа до оружане бруталности

Сажетак: Ова студија истражује феномен џихадистичке мисли током двадесетог и двадесет првог века, анализирајући њен развој од идеолошких основа до бруталних облика оружаног насиља. У раду се тврди да се џихадистичка идеологија не може свести на изоловане терористичке акте нити посматрати искључиво кроз безбедносну призму; напротив, она представља сложен интелектуални и политички систем обликован верским текстовима, политичким фрустрацијама, историјским неправдама и друштвеним кризама. Истраживање користи генеалошки и компаративни приступ како би пратило развој џихадизма од раних теоретичара попут Сајида Кутба до оперативних стратегија организација као што су Ал-Каида и ИСИС. Студија идентификује кључне фазе у развоју џихадистичких покрета: од Кутбовог револуционарног преиспитивања исламских појмова као што су џахилија и хакимија, преко глобализоване милитантности Ал-Каиде, до експеримента ИСИС-а у квазидржавном управљању обележеном екстремном бруталношћу и софистицираном пропагандом. Рад показује како се џихадистичка мисао трансформисала од обновитељског протеста у доктрину нихилистичког насиља, при чему су се теолошка оправдања развијала упоредо са геополитичким приликама, као што су хаос након Арапског пролећа и искоришћавање пропалих држава. Даље, истраживање испитује како су се џихадистички покрети структурно прилагођавали, прелазећи са хијерархијских на децентрализоване, умрежене моделе, користећи дигиталне технологије за ширење свог идеолошког домета и оперативних капацитета. Истиче се трајна напетост између глобалних амбиција џихадизма и локалних динамика, као и све већи нагласак на виртуелизацији и асиметричном ратовању. На крају, студија закључује да се џихадистичка мисао развила у хибридну идеологију — делом верску, делом револуционарну, делом нихилистичку — која наставља да користи глобалне неправде и кризе идентитета. Борба против њене постојаности захтева не само безбедносне мере већ и интелектуалне и теолошке напоре усмерене ка враћању исламског дискурса из екстремистичких искривљења и промовисању алтернативних наратива заснованих на миру, правди и људском достојанству.

Кључне речи: џихадиста, џихад, идеологија, обновитељски покрет, мреже