

A Word from the Guest Editor: The Evolution of Jihad in the 21st Century

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The rise of extremism and terrorism in the Islamic world, particularly the emergence of what has been termed Islamic jihad in the 21st century, remains one of the most critical and widely debated topics among policymakers, researchers, and scholars over the past four decades. Despite extensive academic and political discourse on the subject, the phenomenon necessitates deeper analytical scrutiny, particularly from Muslim scholars who possess an intricate understanding of Islamic theology and jurisprudence. This issue represents a significant transformation in the global geopolitical and ideological landscape, with far-reaching consequences for numerous societies.

The phenomenon of jihadist extremism is not an isolated development but rather an extension of historical waves of terrorism that have emerged since the late 19th century. The first wave, influenced by anarchist movements in Europe, set a precedent for subsequent ideological and militant upheavals. By the fourth wave, terrorism had shifted toward the Islamic world—a region previously distant from the ideological currents that shaped earlier movements. The political and intellectual transformations imposed by the Cold War, coupled with the post-colonial emergence of new Muslim-majority states, engendered a profound identity crisis. This crisis manifested in competing ideological trends: one seeking alignment with Western modernity and another striving to reaffirm Islamic traditions.

The ideological contestation intensified amid the proliferation of imported doctrines such as nationalism, communism, and liberalism, forcing Muslim intellectuals to either assimilate or resist these foreign influences. The year 1979 marked a pivotal turning point, as the Iranian Revolution, the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan collectively reshaped the political and ideological trajectory of the Muslim world. Within this turbulent environment, a radical reinterpretation of Islam emerged, one that sought to reclaim political and intellectual sovereignty for Muslims by reviving classical Islamic doctrines without adapting them to contemporary realities. This ideological rigidity led to a distorted

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understanding of jihad, transforming it from a historically contextualized concept into a tool for militant resistance against perceived ideological and military threats.

This special issue comprises a series of scholarly articles that critically examine the evolution of jihadist thought, analyzing the political, ideological, and socio-historical factors that contributed to its rise. The contributions explore diverse dimensions of the phenomenon, from its ideological underpinnings to its geopolitical ramifications.

Lilia Chantouh's article examines the catalytic role of three major events in 1979—the Iranian Revolution, the Grand Mosque seizure in Mecca, and the Soviet-Afghan War—in shaping the trajectory of jihadist movements. The Iranian Revolution demonstrated the potential for Islamist forces to overthrow secular regimes, inspiring militant Islamists across the Muslim world. Simultaneously, the Grand Mosque incident underscored the growing tensions between conservative Islamic factions and modernist state policies in the Muslim world leading to increased religious radicalization. In addition, the Afghan conflict facilitated the globalization of jihadist ideology, transforming it from a localized resistance movement into a transnational-armed struggle.

Adel Aissaoui's contribution critically engages with Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis, which posited that post-Cold War conflicts would be driven by cultural and religious divisions rather than ideological or economic rivalries. Aissaoui contends that Huntington's framework oversimplified civilizational interactions by emphasizing conflict over dialogue, thereby reinforcing a binary worldview that exacerbated tensions between the Muslim world and the West. The article highlights how the "clash" narrative contributed to the securitization of Islam, framing Muslim political activism as inherently violent. This securitization, in turn, created a self-fulfilling prophecy, as marginalized Islamist groups increasingly adopted militant strategies in response to Western military interventions and ideological hegemony. Aissaoui concludes that a more nuanced understanding of civilizational interactions—one that acknowledges coexistence and mutual influence—is essential to countering extremist narratives.

Mohamed Bechari's study traces the intellectual foundations of jihadist thought, analyzing how theological misinterpretations and socio-political grievances have fueled armed extremism. The article identifies key ideological milestones, from Sayyid Qutb's radical reinterpretation of Islamic concepts such as jahiliyya (pre-Islamic ignorance) and hukm al-din (divine governance) to Al-Qaeda's global jihad and ISIS's proto-state model. Bechari emphasizes that jihadist ideology cannot be reduced to mere terrorism but must be understood as a complex socio-political phenomenon shaped by historical grievances, and theological distortions. The study also examines the structural evolution of jihadist organizations, noting their shift from hierarchical structures to decentralized, network-based operations facilitated by digital communication technologies.

Shafiq Flynn's article critically assesses the role of U.S. military and political

interventions in exacerbating jihadist extremism. The study argues that prior to Western interference, the Islamic world maintained relative stability compared to other regions. However, successive U.S. interventions—from Cold War-era support for Afghan mujahideen to the post-9/11 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—destabilized the region and provided jihadist groups with potent recruitment narratives. The article highlights how U.S. policies in Libya, Syria, and Yemen further entrenched jihadist movements by creating power vacuums and fostering anti-Western resentment. Flynn concludes that unless U.S. policymakers reassess their interventionist strategies, the cycle of extremism and counterterrorism will persist.

Badra Alghanami's psychological analysis explores the phenomenon of religious alienation among Muslim youth, particularly those radicalized after returning from jihadist conflicts. The study identifies four key manifestations of religious alienation: The Search for Identity and Belonging, Rejection of Established Norms, Binary Worldview and Simplified Moral Frameworks. Alghanami deeply analysis theses manifestations and argues that counter-extremism efforts must address these psychological vulnerabilities rather than focusing solely on ideological or military solutions.

Bashar Bakkour's article critically examines four key jurisprudential concepts manipulated by jihadist groups to justify violence: Hakimiya (God Governance) Takfir (Excommunication) – The practice of declaring Muslims as apostates. The Sword Verse – Selective Qur'anic interpretations endorsing warfare. Tataruss (Human Shields) – Justifications for civilian casualties. Bakkour attempts to analyse these four religious premises through a textual analysis of both classical Islamic jurisprudential sources and contemporary extremist literature. The importance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how these key legal foundations have been misread, leading to the emergence of jihadist ideology. The study demonstrates that jihadist groups' reading of these four foundations is a modern political rewriting that violates the legal traditions that jihadist groups claim to defend. The study offers insights for religious scholars, policymakers, and security professionals working to counter violent extremism by refuting evidence-based extremist literature.

The rise of jihadist extremism is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in historical, ideological, and geopolitical factors. Effective counterterrorism strategies must integrate theological, psychological, and political approaches to dismantle extremist narratives and address underlying grievances. This special issue provides a comprehensive framework for understanding jihadist radicalization evolved in the 21st century.