# The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology

By Assaf Moghadam

IN RECENT YEARS, a growing number of analysts and policymakers have referred to the doctrines guiding al-Qa`ida and its associates as an ideology, and they appear to have influenced the Bush administration into adopting the term as well. In an address at the Capital Hilton in Washington, D.C. in September 2006, for example, President Bush characterized the 9/11 suicide hijackers as men who "kill in the name of a clear and focused ideology."[1] In the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (NSCT) released in the same month, the authors described al-Qa`ida's set of beliefs as "an ideology of oppression, violence, and hate,"[2] as well as "a form of totalitarianism following in the path of fascism and Nazism."[3]

Although descriptions of the precepts and beliefs guiding al-Qa`ida and its associates as ideological in nature certainly hit the mark, few serious attempts have been made to justify the use of the term "ideology" in connection with the Salafi-jihad—the guiding doctrine of al-Qa`ida, its affiliates, associates and progeny.[4] This article will discuss the nature of ideologies and examine the extent to which the Salafi-jihad can be compared to other ideologies such as fascism or communism. It concludes that the Salafi-jihad is best described as a religious ideology rather than a secular ideology such as fascism or National Socialism. The final part will explain why a proper labeling of the Salafi-jihad has important policy implications.

### The Functions of Ideologies

Ideologies have several core functions, of which the first is to raise awareness to a particular group of people that a certain issue deserves their attention. Ideologies explain to that "in-group" why social, political, or economic conditions are as they are. Since individuals often seek explanations in times of crisis, ideologies are particularly appealing when a group of people perceives itself to be in a predicament. The second function is a diagnostic one, whereby the ideology attributes blame for the present predicament of the in-group upon some "out-group." The out-group is identified with a certain behavior that, according to the narrative offered by the ideology, undermines the well-being of the in-group. A third function of ideology lies in the creation of a group identity. At the same time that the out-group is blamed for the predicament of the in-group, the ideology identifies and highlights the common characteristics of those individuals who adhere to, or are potential adherents of, the ideology. The fourth and final function of ideologies is a programmatic one. It consists of the ideology offering a specific program of action said to remedy the in-group of its predicament and urges its adherents to implement that course of action.[5]

Ideologies are links between thoughts, beliefs and myths on the one hand, and action on the other hand. They can be instruments of preservation in as far as they can help a given group to preserve its political power. More commonly, however, ideologies are used as instruments of competition and conflict, whereby a group can utilize ideology as a means of opposition and contestation. Once a group internalizes the sets of beliefs associated with a given ideology, that ideology provides a "cognitive map" that filters the way social realities are perceived, rendering that reality easier to grasp, more coherent, and thus more meaningful. It is for that reason that ideologies offer some measure of security and relief in the face of ambiguity—particularly in times of crisis.

Ideology may help create significant divides between adherents and non-adherents. According to Christopher Flood, individuals who are especially convinced by an ideology can exhibit "a remarkable ability to ignore, deny, or reinterpret information which is incompatible with tenets of their belief system."[6] Ideologues themselves, meanwhile, "tend to be explicit in their cognitive claims, exclusionary in their membership, authoritarian in their leadership, rigorous in their ethical mandates, and insistent on the rightness of their causes."[7]

To the in-group, ideology confers identification with a particular cause, and thus a sense of purpose. That shared sense of purpose can form a common identity among the members, while at the same time heighten opposition and feelings of separation from individuals who do not share these beliefs.

### The Salafi-jihad: Religion or Ideology?

The Salafi-jihad is more akin to an ideology than to a religion because like other ideologies it is a by-product of the industrialization that swept through Europe beginning in the 19th century and is hence an outgrowth of modernity. It is intimately linked to the dislocating and turbulent effects of globalization, which introduced rapid changes in the social, political and economic realms of life. Those transformations have challenged established and rooted notions of identity associated with traditional social structures.

The Salafi-jihad is an ideology because its functions are essentially congruent with those of other ideologies. Analogous to the first, explanatory function of ideology, the Salafi-jihadists' goal is to raise awareness among Muslims that their religion has been on the wane. Whereas Islam used to be at its peak during the first centuries of its existence, Salafi-jihadists urge Muslims to understand that the tide has turned, and that Islam is in a constant state of decline in religious, political, military, economic and cultural terms.

1 "President Discusses Global War on Terror," September 5, 2006, available at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060905-4.html.

2 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, September 2006, p. 5, available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/nsct2006.pdf.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

4 For the purposes of this article, the terms Salafi-jihad, Salafi-jihadists and Salafi-jihadist refer to the core doctrines and beliefs of al-Qa`ida and its associated movements—i.e., its ideology. It does not refer to the larger social movement comprised of al-Qa`ida and its associates.

5 A similar categorization of the functions of ideology is used in Terence Ball and Richard Dagger, *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

6 Christopher G. Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York and London: Garland, 1996), p. 20.

7 Bruce B. Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 77.

Secondly, and analogous with the diagnostic function of modern ideologies, the Salafi-jihad identifies the alleged source of Islam's conundrum in the persistent attacks and humiliation of Muslims on the part of an anti-Islamic alliance of what it terms "Crusaders," "Zionists" and "apostates."

The third function of the Salafi-jihad also parallels that of other ideologies, namely its attempt at creating a new identity for its adherents. Several scholars have argued that Muslims and Western converts adopting Salafi-jihadist tenets suffer from a crisis of identity.[8] To those who are disoriented by modernity, the Salafi-jihad provides a new sense of self-definition and belonging in the form of membership to a supranational entity. Salafi-jihadists attempt to instill into Muslims the notion that the only identity that truly matters is that of membership in the umma, the global Islamic community that bestows comfort, dignity, security and honor upon the downtrodden Muslims.

Finally, like all ideologies, Salafi-jihadists present a program of action, namely jihad, which is understood in military terms. They assert that jihad will reverse the tide of history and redeem adherents and potential adherents of Salafi-jihadist ideology from their misery. Martyrdom is extolled as the ultimate way in which jihad can be waged—hence the proliferation of suicide attacks among Salafi-jihadist groups.[9]

Similar to other ideologies, the Salafi-jihad sharply distinguishes between its adherents and those who reject its doctrines. Westerners are commonly described as infidels, while moderate Muslims and Arabs are labeled apostates. To the most extreme Salafi-jihadists, Muslims who reject the tenets of Salafi-jihad are tantamount to infidels, thus deserving of death.

Like leaders of other ideologies, Usama bin Ladin and leading figures of Salafi-jihadist groups ignore, deny, or reinterpret information that counters or could potentially weaken their argument. For instance, Salafi-jihadists ignored Western support to Muslim Indonesia in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. They interpret their violence on other Muslims as religiously sanctioned, ignoring sections of Muslim holy texts that prohibit internecine fighting or the killing of civilians. They single-handedly blame the West for each and every misfortune that has befallen Muslims.

As an ideology, the Salafi-jihad has much in common with radical leftist ideologies of 20th century Europe. Like the radical left, the Salafi-jihad describes its action in part as a revolt against injustice, and it rejects bourgeois values, imperialism and materialism. The goal of both the leftist movements and Salafi-jihadists is essentially an elusive quest to help bring about a more just society—violence is seen as a justified means to an end. Both Salafi-jihadists and radical leftist revolutionaries believe that the scope of their activities and the importance of their actions are global in nature, as are their goals. As Stephen Holmes observed, for Salafi-jihadists the caliphate "is the religious equivalent of Marx's Communist utopia."[10]

If the Salafi-jihad is thus an ideology, what is its relationship with religion—and how do ideologies differ from religions? Religions differ from ideologies in two important respects, namely their target audience and their relationship toward the existing order. In terms of their target audience, the primary focus of ideologies is the group, whereas that of religions is the individual. As Bruce Lawrence has pointed out, "religion focuses on maximizing individual benefit through group participation, while ideology is intent on maximizing group benefit through individual participation."[11] Precisely because of its preoccupation with the group as a whole, ideology demands great loyalty and commitment on the part of the individual member. Ideologies, like religions, demand verbal assent from their members, but more than religions ideologies also demand complete control over the thoughts, words and deeds of their adherents.[12] This characteristic also applies to al-Qa`ida and like-minded groups, who have prominently adopted an approach of "you are either with us or against us."

Second, religions tend to support existing orders, while ideologies tend to confront them. "Ideologies are not merely world-reflecting but world-constituting," wrote Lawrence. "They tend to have a 'missionary' zeal to show others what they need to do, to correct and help them to that end."[13] Thus, unlike religious leaders, Bin Ladin goes beyond merely disagreeing with those who do not share his beliefs—he battles them.

Yet, while the Salafi-jihad is distinct from Islam due to the former's ideological nature, it also differs from ordinary ideologies in an important respect—it tends to use religious words, symbols and values to sustain itself and grow. Ideologies are usually devoid of religious symbols. Ian Adams, for instance, wrote that "what separates [religion from ideology] is that while the central feature of a religious understanding is its concept of the divine, the central feature of an ideological understanding is its conception of human nature."[14]

Unlike secular ideologies, however, the Salafi-jihad is a religious ideology because it invokes religion in three ways. First, it describes itself and its enemies in religious terms. Salafi-jihadists label themselves using such religious names as the "Army of Muhammad," the "Lions of Islam," and of course "jihadist." At the same time, they describe their enemies in religious terms as well, referring to them as Crusaders, apostates, or infidels. Secondly, Salafi-jihadists describe their strategy and mission as a religious one. Their struggle is a jihad, which they themselves define in military terms, as opposed to the "internal war"

8 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Suicide Bombers: Allah's New Martyrs* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

9 Indeed, Salafi-jihadist groups are the dominant perpetrators of suicide attacks today. See Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming in 2008).

10 Stephen Holmes, "Al-Qaeda, September 11, 2001," in Diego Gambetta ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 170.

11 Lawrence, *Defenders of God*, p. 79.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ian Adams, *The Logic of Political Belief: A Philosophical Analysis of Ideology* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp. 86-87.

against human temptations. Their main tactic, they claim, is not suicide attacks, but "martyrdom operations"—a term whose origin is ironically associated with Shi`a Islam, which itself is deemed apostate by Salafi-jihadists. Finally, they justify acts of violence with references drawn selectively from the Qur'an. Most Muslims, including non-violent Salafists, cite a number of sources from the Qur'an and hadith against the killing of civilians. Salafi-jihadists, on the other hand, cite a number of Qur'anic verses and Hanbali rulings in support of their claim, such as Sura 16:126: "And if you take your turn, then punish with the like of that with which you were afflicted."

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### Policy Implications

Accurately labeling the nature of Salafi-jihadist doctrine as a religious ideology is not merely an exercise in academic theorizing, but has important policy implications. Most importantly, it should be obvious that the United States and its allies are not facing a religion—Islam—as their main enemy, but an ideology, namely the Salafi-jihad. The fact that the Salafi-jihad is no ordinary secular ideology, but a religious one, however, is of additional significance because it renders the attempt to challenge that ideology far more complex. Salafi-jihadists employ religious rhetoric and symbols to advance their cause. Although they selectively pick from the Islamic tradition only those elements that advance their narrow agenda, they nevertheless draw from the same religious sources that inform the lives and practices of more than a billion other Muslims. It is for that reason that ordinary Muslims—not to speak of non-Muslims—find it particularly difficult and dangerous to challenge Salafi-jihadists without running the risk of being accused of targeting Islam as a whole.

If the vast majority of non-Muslims find it difficult to strike the right chord between attacking Salafi-jihadists without being perceived as attacking Islam, the hurdles for the United States and its allies seem almost insurmountable. Therefore, a counter-terrorism approach that highlights the corruption of Salafi-jihadist ideology not on religious, but on secular grounds, is more likely to have the desired effect of weakening that ideology's appeal. Rather than highlighting the doctrinal and theological inconsistencies among Salafi-jihadists, the United States and its allies should grasp every opportunity to highlight the disastrous consequences that Salafi-jihadist violence has wrought on the everyday lives not only of Westerners, but first and foremost on Muslims themselves. It is a simple, though not sufficiently emphasized fact that the primary victims of Salafi-jihadists are Muslims, who are killed and maimed in far greater numbers than non-Muslims. Salafi-jihadists openly justify the killing of civilians, including Muslims, under a logic of the ends justifying the means. It is equally a fact that leaders of Salafi-jihadist organizations hypocritically preach about the benefits of martyrdom, but rarely, if ever, conduct suicidal operations themselves, or send their loved ones on such missions. It is a fact that al-Qa`ida and associated groups offer no vision for Muslims other than perennial jihad—hardly an appealing prospect.

Waging a battle against a religious ideology such as the Salafi-jihad is a challenging task that requires commitment and ingenuity. Yet, highlighting a few simple, yet damaging facts about the actual results of Salafi-jihadists can go a long way.

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