

EXPERT PAPER

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Understanding the Global Jihadist Movement

20 years after 9/11

October 2021



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**UNDERSTANDING THE
GLOBAL JIHADIST MOVEMENT**

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DR. ALI FISHER | DR. NICO PRUCHA

IMPRINT

The European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP) is a research association operating worldwide and with its headquarters in Vienna, Austria. As a non-profit institution the focus of EICTP is on key topics around security policy-related issues. It carries out projects with renowned partners in Austria and abroad, maintains close relationships with high-level research organizations and a network of prominent experts and scholars, offers profound sets of actions, consultations and strategies related to counter-terrorism, hybrid conflicts, and de-radicalization measures and aims at creating policy-related recommendations based on research and expert assessments for decision-makers.

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Esslinggasse 17/5, AT-1010 Vienna
www.eictp.eu

Media owner, editor, producer: EICTP

Place of publication: Esslinggasse 17/5, 1010 Wien

Proof-reading and formal editing: EICTP

Graphic Design:: Citypress GmbH

Print: Citypress GmbH

Disclaimer of liability:

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INTRODUCTION

“People are blind to explanations that lie outside their perception of reality.”
– Stephen King, *The Outsider*

Since 9/11 Western Governments have committed multinational multi-billion-dollar efforts and exerted continuous military pressure to counter Islamist terrorist groups. Following such outlay of resources and sacrifice of lives, politicians, policymakers, and pundits have been keen to announce the so-called defeat and demise of transnational terrorist groups such as al-Dawlat al-Islamiyya (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ). However, as we absolutely focus our attention on threats posed by states like China, Russia, and Iran, and because counter terrorism prioritization appears to be event-driven, there is a real risk that we underestimate the continuous threat of the global Salafi-Jihadi movement. The claims that global jihadi groups have been defeated have proven to be expressions of profound optimism rather than evidence-based analysis. The unfortunate reality is that the global Salafi-Jihadi movement has demonstrated enduring resilience, expanded its operational capability, and recruited a large and more diverse generation of followers than ever before. These circumstances are much worse now than before 9/11.

As we reflect on 20 years since 9/11, and the recent military withdrawal from Afghanistan, how can we better mitigate the global threat of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism? To date, Western countries have analysed and responded to transnational Salafi-Jihadi movements through a Western-centric lens, and in doing so have successively underestimated the global threat of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism. Part of the problem has been focusing primarily on English [or European] language material which are peripheral to the movement and failing to analyse Salafi-Jihadi movements through a theological and forensic linguistic approach to the Arabic core material. These failings have undermined a comprehensive interpretation of the global Salafi-Jihadi movement. As such it has missed important strategic objectives, motives, and tactics of global Salafi-Jihadi groups.

Over the last twenty years, Western military power has demonstrated the ability to leverage airpower and advanced military machinery to effectively destroy the short-term combat capability of Salafi-Jihadi groups and drive them from the governmental bureaucratic organs at the local, regional, or national level. However, each time the groups are ‘defeated’ they have been able to reconfigure in areas which provide ‘fertile soil’ in which the movement can grow. As Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari recently argued:

“We must not complacently assume that military means alone can defeat the terrorists. If Afghanistan has taught a lesson, it is that although sheer force can blunt terror, its removal can cause the threat to return.”¹

While military force can blunt the operational effectiveness of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, the struggle against the movement is one of disrupting the specific ideas or concepts around which the movement coordinates. These concepts give the movement resilience and has enabled groups to remain steadfast and attract supporters despite a twenty-year assault from the world’s most advanced military powers. The central question, therefore, is what ideas and concepts are important to the Salafi-Jihadi movement?

This paper considers the two parallel images of the Salafi-Jihadi movement which have emerged over the last 20 years. One interpretation has been developed by orthodox Terrorism Studies (OTS) with its roots in Political Science. Rather than focusing on the meaning intended by the Salafi-Jihadi movement and understood by the target audience, the claims made by parts of OTS reflect

the Western-centric perspectives of their authors. These claims are often based on the systemic devaluation of Arabic sources and ‘whittling away’ the very theological concepts on which the movement is based. The most flawed parts of the OTS branch of research claim to ‘uncloak’ the real motivations of the movement drawing on ideas such as crime, rap music, gore porn, and a ‘Jihadi Utopia’.² This started with notions of AQ’s ‘single narrative’³ in the aftermath of 9/11 and was recently epitomized by the *ISIS Reader* which, while a flawed Western-centric interpretation of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, is mentioned here because it has been endorsed by many prominent OTS researchers. Such endorsements make this a useful touchstone through which to judge the lens by which OTS researchers view and interpret the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

In contrast to this Western-centric OTS approach, a progressive theological linguistic evidence-based approach focuses on the meaning intended by the Salafi-Jihadi movement and understood by the target audience, whose contextual understanding is intricately linked to a specific theological interpretation based on Arabic language and culture.⁴ Disrupting the specific ideas or concepts around which the Salafi-Jihadi movement coordinates, requires evidence-based clarity about those theological concepts. This means taking a forensic linguistic approach to locating the intended meaning from the vast archive of text and audio-visual material produced and curated by the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

The Western mainstream approach backed by OTS is perhaps a special type of neo-colonialism asserting commonplaces like ‘we know you explicitly say do not expect utopia and that utopia is a naive notion, but we as Westerners understand what you meant to say is ... you are utopian’ and hence neglecting the deeply layered theology that is at the core of Sunni jihadi groups worldwide.

The movement has produced hundreds of thousands of pages of text which lay out the central role of theology, what the movement understand by specific concepts, and what behaviour is expected by those who join the movement. As Adam Hoffman argued:

“Ignoring the religiosity of ISIS and other Islamist movements is characteristic of many Western commentators and analysts, but discomfort in the face of religious belief is a major obstacle in the analysis of movements which see religion as the overall framework for interpreting and justifying their actions”.⁵

This material makes it clear that the movement is defined by, and coordinates around, the faith and application of theology - not the borders of a post-Westphalian ‘utopian’ state. Furthermore, reward for waging jihad is located in the eternal abode of paradise and does neither involve short-lived financial gain nor a luxury lifestyle in the temporary world, through which humans are believed to pass before facing divine judgement. The forensic linguistic evidence-base shows the mujahid is fighting in service of God, and that remaining steadfast through difficult times is part of proving commitment to God. This is what the Salafi-Jihadi movement says they are doing, it is how they articulate their commitment, and it is what drives their behaviour.

This commentary piece will outline some of the current analytical gaps, identify a new robust approach, and offer concrete recommendations to policy makers, academics, and counterterrorism practitioners on how to better understand the global jihadi movement in 2021. Adopting a more forensic and comprehensive analytical approach will advance Western countries’ approaches to counter the chronic threat of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism over the next decade.

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING ORTHODOXY

Casting back to the first hundred days after 9/11 and the start of ‘The War on Terror’, the US State Department archive records a telling statement:

“The world has responded with an unprecedented coalition against international terrorism. In the first 100 days of the war, President George W. Bush increased America’s homeland security and built a worldwide coalition that:

- Began to destroy al-Qaeda’s grip on Afghanistan by driving the Taliban from power.
- Disrupted al-Qaeda’s global operations and terrorist financing networks.
- Destroyed al-Qaeda terrorist training camps.
- Helped the innocent people of Afghanistan recover from the Taliban’s reign of terror.
- Helped Afghans put aside long-standing differences to form a new interim government that represents all Afghans – including women.^{6”}

The territorial claims made by the Taliban in early summer 2021, ultimately taking Kabul, exposes the gap between what Western governments and OTS researchers were claiming had been achieved, and the long-term reality on the ground.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN (AGAIN)?

Where does the gap between research and reality come from? In part the answer stems from the need in both academic and policy circles to report success against Salafi-Jihadi groups. This is not a new observation, as Richard Jackson noted in his critique of orthodox approaches to Terrorism Studies: “Knowledge about terrorism always reflects the social-cultural context within which it emerges”.⁷ To date, the predominant focus of the orthodox approach has been to interpret Salafi-Jihadi material with a Western-centric habitus, or within such a social-cultural context.

Some respond that applying a Western perspective is what Western researchers and security services are supposed to do. Yet as the movement is intimately tied to Arabic language and culture, as Reuven Paz noted previously⁸, locating the meaning of the material - as intended by those who wrote it and how the target audience will understand it – rests on an in-depth understanding of a primarily Salafi-Jihadi habitus in Arabic language and not a Western-centric lens.

Lamenting the shared Western-centric lens of orthodox research and policy, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, has argued that “the public deployment of tokenism expertise on IS [which] is itself a symptom of this lost analysis with at least four trends dominating the discourse on IS: impatient journalistic accounts, one-dimensional security expertise, ethereal Islamism exegesis and short-term think tank analysis”.⁹

This echoes the observations of Critical Terrorism Studies scholars who offer a critique of the “dominance of state-centric, problem solving approaches within terrorism studies and the close ideological and organizational association of key researchers with state institutions – with the concomitant problems of ‘embedded expertise’, ahistoricity and heavy reliance on secondary sources replicating knowledge that by and large reinforces the status quo”.¹⁰ These dominant “regimes of truth” have been useful for those who initiated the War on Terror.¹¹ They were more recently useful for President Trump, who became President while making a commitment to “bomb the shit out of [ISIS]”¹² and has since claimed to “have wiped out the caliphate.”¹³ However, the passage of time has shown Western claims of victory to be hollow. While orthodox Terrorism Studies (OTS) and Western policy makers took a victory lap each time force has blunted the operational effectiveness of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, the movement remained steadfast in their belief and rebuilt their military capacity to fight once more.

As has been argued elsewhere, “the military-academic network” has become the “military-academic terrorism-expert” network when facing IS. As Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou put it, this network “knows only two directions, that of rise or fall, victory or defeat, new or old. Who’s-up-and-who’s-down scorekeeping accounts”.¹⁴ This entirely missed the meaning, purpose, strategy or tactics of the Salafi-jihadi movement. Hence, each time the OTS-policy network has pronounced defeat of Salafi-jihadi groups such as IS, AQ or Taliban, they have returned because the underlying theology around which the movement coordinates went unchallenged while the West celebrated another demonstration of its advanced military power.

When the problems of OTS become part of policy discourse, they are amplified. This was outlined in documents obtained by the Washington Post in 2019 which showed that “The U.S. government across three White House administrations misled the public about failures in the Afghanistan war, often suggesting success where it didn’t exist”.¹⁵ The now evident reality is that the Taliban were not defeated but were simply pursuing their goals on their own timeline. They did not need to maintain something which fitted a political science and post-Westphalian conception of a “state” or standing army to be able to maintain a loyal group of followers united around a specific

theology. These followers remained steadfast in their faith and waited for the opportunity to return to combat. Ultimately, the Taliban resurgence in the summer 2021 shows the Taliban did not get the Western memo that they had been defeated. Part of the reason for this disconnect between the understanding within the OTS-policy nexus and reality on the ground was the way events were understood, as AP News reported:

“Every data point was altered to present the best picture possible,” Bob Crowley, an Army colonel who served as a counterinsurgency adviser to U.S. military commanders in 2013 and 2014, told government interviewers, according to the [Washington] Post. “Surveys, for instance, were totally unreliable but reinforced that everything we were doing was right and we became a self-licking ice cream cone.”⁶

This problem is exacerbated within the OTS-policy echo chamber due to the frequent reliance on ‘self-referential systems of knowledge production’ where claims of success and victory are frequently repeated back and forth.¹⁷ Looking back across the last 20 years, it is possible to plot the trajectory of the orthodox approach in repeatedly claiming defeat, and “Just as had been the case a decade earlier with Al Qaeda, the discussion remained explicitly about mapping the defeat of a repellent entity bent on annihilation of the West”.¹⁸ As we have witnessed in Kabul, as on many previous occasions, misunderstanding how Salafi-Jihadi groups derive meaning from events and maintain theological coherence can lead to disastrous misinterpretations.

One may recall how the AQ leadership had been cut off from foot soldiers in 2005-2006 only for the New York Times to report in 2007 American officials had “mounting evidence that Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahri, had been steadily building an operations hub in the mountainous Pakistani tribal area of North Waziristan”.¹⁹

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who led Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in defeating Al Qaeda in Iraq and killing its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, believed that by 2009-2010 “we had essentially crushed Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)” Rohan Gunaratna argued a year before Osama Bin Laden was killed that AQ had “already lost significant public support and was on the path of decline”. The subsequent killing of Bin Laden was hailed as a crushing, but not necessarily lethal, blow. Some terrorism analysts including Paul Cruickshank thought the Arab Spring could be al-Qaeda’s fall.²⁰ Indeed, there were many ways in which the Arab Spring could be presented as bad news for AQ as it “appeared to undermine core tenets of the Al-Qaeda doctrine”.²¹ Fawaz A. Gerges wrote that “Only a miracle will resuscitate a transnational jihad of the al-Qaeda variety”.²² Ian Black wrote that “Al-Qaida had already looked marginal and on the back foot for several years. But the dawn of largely peaceful change in the Middle East and North Africa this year rendered it irrelevant.”²³

In 2012 Peter Bergen argued it was time to declare victory as al Qaeda was defeated. Similarly, many have been keen to proclaim the defeat and collapse of the Islamic State.²⁴ Jason Burke wrote in October 2017 “a victory is a victory, and there are few reasons for cheer these days. So let us celebrate the defeat of Islamic State and its hateful so-called caliphate – and keep a wary eye out for the next fight”.²⁵ He was not alone and many others have been keen to claim victory as well.²⁶ The view endorsed by many OTS researchers was presented by the authors of the *ISIS Reader*. Its authors, who previously presented themselves as independent academics, now acknowledge they “spent their careers in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, advisory, and capacity-building roles”.²⁷ All this as a prelude to announcing in terms friendly to US policy that ISIS was defeated on the basis that “territorial loss is defeat for the movement, that is what the authors have decided to call it. By every measure, the group is defeated...”²⁸

Yet at the time of writing, despite having destroyed the physical infrastructure in areas where IS openly operated – what might be thought of as blunting their operational ability - IS still uses tactics including Katyusha rockets, RPG, IED and targeted assassinations, and has claimed over 100 killed or wounded in suicide bombing attacks in Baghdad and Kabul Airport respectively.²⁹

Which European country today would accept the claim that a group was defeated if these attacks happened within their borders, and why should a different standard be applied in Iraq or other parts of the world?³⁰

In addition, since late December 2020 Salafi-Jihadi groups have also been on the rise throughout Central Africa, West Africa and the Sahel.³¹ This creates an additional front in their activity, not a ‘reconfiguration’ or ‘move’ to Africa. Despite the recent volume of column inches on Africa in the Western press, IS still claims to have carried out more operations and often inflicts greater casualties in Iraq – an area approximately a tenth the size of West Africa.³² As has been the case with the ‘defeat’ of the Taliban and AQ before, Western-centric researchers have functioned as part of a state-private network which presented successful policy outcomes against IS³³, even while the reality on the ground was fundamentally different.

These two decades of the War on Terror started with claims of an AQ ‘single narrative’ during the post 9/11 rush to publish and have ended with the caricature of the Salafi-Jihadi movement in which OTS researchers claim to uncloak the real ISIS brand built on brutality and utopia. We cannot reasonably spend another 20 years interpreting the actions of the Salafi-Jihadi movement through a Western-centric lens, ‘whittling away’ the theology on which the movement is based. We cannot repeat the missteps of the last 20 years in which feedback loops created by ‘embedded expertise’ successively underestimated the global threat of Salafi-Jihadi terrorism and provided policy makers with the best possible interpretation of the facts on the ground.

MOVING FORWARD

In contrast to the OTS position where Arabic language material and theological references are frequently devalued, a theological linguistic position acknowledges that the focal point of the Salafi-Jihadi movement is their theology, and the primary language is Arabic. This follows the path set by Reuven Paz, who argued:

“The long Jihad, which the West—and indeed much of the world—is currently facing uses the Internet to provide both Jihadists and us, a wide spectrum of diversified information. Western analysts can learn more about modern Jihad by reading the lips of Jihadi clerics, scholars, operatives, commanders, leaders, as well as the response of their growing audience. Improving their ability to do so, and above all in the original language, must be a priority”.³⁴

According to the progressive approach, research is produced using the treasure trove and evidence-base of historical and contemporary religious writings written in their primary language Arabic.³⁵ This is because, as Reuven Paz noted, the Salafi-Jihadi movement is “almost entirely directed in Arabic and its content is intimately tied to the socio-political context of the Arab world”.³⁶ In this way, the evidence-based forensic linguistic approach focuses on what the Salafi-Jihadi material is intended to communicate to the target audience. In this approach, the interpretation of meaning relies on knowing by heart the encoded references and being able to decipher jihadi visual codes. Only by understanding the language, references, codes and socio-political context, can analysis uncover what Salafi-Jihadi groups are communicating. Analysis must be backed by the ability to quote previous examples that elucidate the conceptual framework of producer and target audience. Those who adopt this approach lament the epistemic violence, based on Eurocentric and colonialist prejudice present in OTS, as Rüdiger Lohlker recently argued:

“The possibility of a Jihadi theology seems to be unimaginable by mainstream Jihadism research that is stuck with the idea that religion is not important at all for a thorough understanding of Jihadism, since it is not important for Western(ized) researchers”.³⁷

Indeed, as Rüdiger Lohlker has written elsewhere: “It is crystal clear—to virtually anyone who has the linguistic capacity to grasp and the opportunity to witness what jihadists are actually saying, writing and doing, both online and offline—that religion matters.”³⁸ Instead of the ‘AQ single narrative’ or ‘Jihadi Utopia’, it is theology through which the Salafi-Jihadi movement derives meaning and maintains lasting credibility built on legacy – despite claims of defeat by outsiders.³⁹ It is the theology that allows that meaning to be expressed in written and visual codes, and it is through that theology the movement is able to communicate, galvanize the Mujahid vanguard (core supporters) and energise the Ummah (recruitment).⁴⁰

With the role of theology front and centre, explanations of the Salafi-Jihadi movement which focus on the few amongst their number who are street criminals, gangsters, individuals obsessed with computer games (particularly first-person shooters or GTA), and a desire to go from zero-to-hero all become obsolete artifacts of a Western-centric imagination.⁴¹ This is because it is the theology which holds together the Salafi-Jihadi movement, not crime, computer games, Nutella nor kittens.⁴²

But why do some individuals who join Salafi-Jihadi groups have, for example, criminal backgrounds? The UK Content Strategy highlights the answer; there is “no single pathway, or ‘conveyor belt’, leading to involvement in terrorism. Terrorists come from a broad range of backgrounds and appear to become involved in different ways and for differing reasons”.⁴³ Furthermore: “While

no single factor will cause someone to become involved in terrorism, several factors can converge to create the conditions under which radicalisation can occur”.⁴⁴ While some have used this to justify focusing on specific fads, pet theories, and niche factors, based on a few edge cases, when it is read correctly this is an important step for policy in articulating that there are many routes to join a Salafi-Jihadi group.⁴⁵ This does not mean that if a researcher finds a small group who share a behavioural trait, it can be claimed as the focal point of the movement. There are many routes to Jihad and individuals may have a range of motivations leading them there, but in the Salafi-Jihadi context they all lead to one place – the movement revolves around theology.

The multiple routes exist because the movement is rhizomatic.⁴⁶ That is to say, the movement has many interconnected, non-hierarchical entry and exit points with many individual clusters where thought and activity is concentrated. The rhizomatic nature of the movement operates on many levels. The interconnectivity of the theological concepts is mirrored by way meaning is expressed across text, video, images and audio. Despite the western proclivity for categorizing images of ‘utopia’ or ‘brutality’ the meaning expressed in them is part of the interconnected expression of theology. In fact, many studies of jihadi images do not even quote Salafi-Jihadi texts to explain the categories of meaning the Western researcher has created and claims to have identified within the images. This approach is flawed as the visual code does not exist independently from the other forms of communication through which Salafi-Jihadi groups express themselves.

One of the clearest distinctions between the OTS state-private or military-terrorism expert network and the progressive evidence-based forensic linguistic approach is the locus of meaning – and specifically the notion of a jihadi utopia.

In the OTS approach, many have claimed to find evidence of a jihadi utopia. On the policy side, then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson referred the “radical and false utopian vision that purports to be based upon the Quran”.⁴⁷ Likewise, Charlie Winter has pushed a similar interpretation claiming, the “Islamic State’s emphasis on the utopia narrative is unambiguous” and “unless we understand what makes up this ‘utopia’, any attempt to challenge the ideas is doomed to failure”.⁴⁸

The evidence-based reality is that despite the adamant certainty with which claims of a jihadi ‘utopia’ or ‘utopianism’ are made, the concept appears in virtually no documents produced by the Salafi-Jihadi movement. In fact, although the authors of the *ISIS Reader* claim that utopia was one of the key elements of the so-called ISIS brand, this is the only time in the entire work that ‘Utopia’ is mentioned. Not a single document presented in the collection even mentions it nor does any of their analysis show how these ‘milestone texts’ could support that interpretation.

Where we find a description of what the ‘utopia’ and ‘utopianism’ label is intended to denote, it is often a combination of the post-Westphalian notion of a ‘state’ with the application of sharia. For example: “ISIS aims to provide both a physical and spiritual refuge for Muslims – a ‘utopian’ society where all Muslims can worship according to ISIS’s interpretation of God’s commands. As a starting point, this includes a physical territory where their community can be safe from physical and spiritual threats, and where Islamic law (sharia) is the only law of the land”.⁴⁹ In another description, “In the logic of ISIS, a ‘pure’ pre-colonial version of Islam is the solution to the conflicts of the modern era, and the utopia of a ‘caliphate’ is the aspiration.”⁵⁰ The use of a Western concept to label an Arabic approach consciously or sub-consciously imports Western assumptions about the organization of society into the interpretation of the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

While it is beyond the scope of this piece to provide a lengthy discussion of the distinction, it is worth noting four elements where notions of utopia diverge from the Salafi-Jihadi concepts.

1. Shahada not territory is the start point for Salafi-Jihadi groups.

Salafi-Jihadi physical territory is not a start point for anything within the Salafi-Jihadi movement as Salafi-Jihadis do not follow the post-Westphalian concept of states. The precursor to ISIS (ISI) fought for years without territory. Shahada, the profession of faith in God, is the only credible start point. Discussion of ‘narratives’ which provide for any other start point have misunderstood the nature of the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

2. Islam is a complete system.

On a simple level, if utopia just means something akin to Islamic law or sharia, what value is added by exchanging it for a Western label like utopia? Using utopia as some notion of a legal system inserts another level of Western-centric misunderstanding as sharia is a much broader concept than denoted by the Western notion of a legal system. In the Salafi-Jihadi habitus, as Anwar al-Awlaki put it, Islam is a “complete system”, it governs all areas of human life. It is not limited to the equivalent areas covered by a Western legal system.

3. God’s law applies to all parts of human life.

The notion of utopia or Utopianism is often contrasted with other themes or narratives including some form of militarism or combat in OTS research. This makes sense in Western constructs where there is comfort with the distinction between religion and governance, and the organizing principles which divide warfighting from other parts of society. However, a Salafi-Jihadi habitus does not have the same divisions. This is because Salafi-Jihadi groups live in service of God (as they interpret that concept) and God is all-knowing. There are no areas of human life beyond God’s law. As such living under God’s law cannot be separate from combat (or any other ‘theme’ label which OTS apply) all areas of life are part of living in service of God. One need only review Yusuf ibn Salih al-Uyayri’s ‘The Islamic Ruling on the Permissibility of Self-Sacrificial Operations’, or Hussain bin Mahmood’s ‘The Issue Of Beheading’ to see that God’s law and warfighting are inseparable in a Salafi-Jihadi habitus.⁵¹

4. Jihad and prayer are both forms of worship.

Ibada often rendered in shorthand translation as ‘worship’ means to follow God’s commands about behavior *at all times*. This relates to jihad just as it does to the conduct of worship in the narrow Western meaning of the term – they are not separate. Hence, one nashid released by Furat media begins, “this is ‘ibada ... the peak of ‘ibada ... Jihad fi sabilillah”. Jihad is part of ‘ibada, just as following the true path of God in other aspects of life is ‘ibada. Hence, dividing utopia and combat just entrenches the mental constructs represented by Western labels rather than providing an authentic evidence-based forensic linguistic interpretation of what is intended by the Salafi-Jihadi movement or likely understood by their supporters.

These four points are by no means comprehensive, but they show that the labels such as utopia / utopianism which have been adopted by OTS create artificial ‘narrative’ or thematic divisions that do not exist in the Salafi-Jihadi habitus. As such, the labels adopted in OTS research reflect the habitus and expectations of the OTS researchers rather than an evidence-based interpretation of the object of study. Furthermore, if one examines what Salafi-Jihadis mean when they use the term utopia, other difficulties in the OTS labelling emerge. Looking across a vast archive of over 300,000 pages of material produced by the Salafi-Jihadi movement, it is clear they speak of utopia approximately as often as they speak of cabbage and less than they mention cheese; hardly major building blocks of their movement. This alone should challenge the notion of utopia as an important concept to Salafi-Jihadism. It is a Western label applied within the OTS-policy feedback loop without importance to the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

For the avoidance of doubt, a review of the occasions when Salafi-Jihadis do mention ‘utopia’ shows that it is to explicitly state they do not mean to create a jihadi utopia. For example, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin⁵² gave his advice to Muslims in the ten days before the new Islamic year in 2004, which was featured in the 9th issue of Sawt al-Jihad, the Voice of Jihad. It said in part:

Your brothers the Mujahideen in the Arab Peninsula have raised the flag of jihad on the path of God. They are firm on their path, following the traditions and conduct of their prophet Muhammad – peace and blessings upon him – gazing upon victory, hoping for martyrdom, lingering between these two. They do not live for mere dreams, **they do not live in an imaginary utopia.**⁵³ Rather, they are striving to establish the truth of God, firmly relying on God’s aid, sincerely committed to God’s promise, having no concern of the enemies’ strength.⁵⁴

Furthermore, AQ theologian and combat veteran Abu Yaha al-Libi argued, taking the example from the Quran and the companions of the prophet:

It also gives a person a deep, firm and clear understanding of the nature of this great religion, and it widens his understanding of worship as being something which encompasses all aspects of life, based upon human effort. **The person ceases to remain in the realm of imagination, utopia and miracles.**⁵⁵

This same notion was repeated in 2012 by Abu Mansur al-Amriki:⁵⁶ “I can understand the extreme courage it takes to leave land and loved ones behind, **but to expect a blissful utopia afterwards is quite a naïve notion**”.⁵⁷ IS weekly newspaper al-Naba’ has also reiterated this point, one such article outlines the foundations of their struggle as one driven for justice based on their understanding of applying sharia law. It further highlights, “we see a lot of writings by philosophers and commentators in the service of ignorant circles of power, [that] existence is about establishing justice, the pursuit of happiness, and other such terms about utopia”.⁵⁸ From an evidence-based forensic linguistic perspective it is clear that creating a post-Westphalian State in which a jihadi utopia can exist is an anathema to the movement. While OTS researchers claim to have identified utopian themes and narratives, the Salafi-Jihadi movement explicitly describes the expectation of a utopia as a naïve notion.

For decades the Salafi-Jihadi movement has been explicit, the individual mujahid awaits victory or martyrdom on the “path of God”, his life in this world is exclusively based on working to elevate the religion of God with reward in the hereafter, as “this world is a corridor not an abode (fa-l-dunya dar mamarr wa-laysat dar maqarr)”.⁵⁹ Ultimately, to become focused on “the materialistic heaps of the transient world” is to drift from the path of jihad and become fascinated by the ‘tails of cows’, rather than serving Allah with reward in paradise.⁶⁰ The IS makes this clear even when releasing English translations for a wider audience.

Compare what Salafi-Jihadis clearly state in their own words, with the OTS claim that “if you operate within Islamic State boundaries and its interpretation of what is right and wrong you will be fine – and not only be fine but you will be eating ice cream as well”.⁶¹ The last 20 years, from Afghanistan to Iraq, Yemen, Mali and Somalia, have shown Salafi-Jihadis are clear in their theology. Any attempt to challenge the Salafi-Jihadi movement by undermining the idea of an ice cream infused jihadi utopia is doomed to failure because the very idea that IS, AQ or any other Salafi-Jihadi group is focused on utopia is an artefact of Western imagination and their preference for Western labels. This idea of utopia is pushed by a State-Private network of vested interests and embedded academics, published in OTS peer review journals, but which Salafi-Jihadi texts explicitly contradict.

Much of the orthodoxy has focused on what groups of predominantly English-speaking white men define as victory and defeat based on their Western-centric perspectives.⁶² As white Western-centric frames of reference have little resonance or relevance to the core of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, it should come as little surprise that the purportedly defeated groups continue fighting – and some like the Taliban will be resurgent, apparently unaware of their defeat.

In contrast to OTS, the Salafi-Jihadi movement and their intended target audience share a broadly similar theological frame of reference. This is why the Salafi-Jihadi movement shares a lot of historical and contemporary material produced by what might be termed Salafi writers. This is the Salafi-Jihadi nexus - which provides Jihadi groups with a resilient and coherent theological framework upon which to build their specific application of theology. It is these ideas which are central to the struggle with the Salafi-Jihadi movement, as once the military force has blunted their operational ability, the borderless network connected by faith remains.

SALAFI-JIHADI NEXUS

Policymakers and analysts tasked to tackle the Salafi-Jihadi threat need to comprehend the encoded meaning Salafi-Jihadis are using. This meaning revolves around the Salafi-Jihadi nexus; specifically, how theological meaning relates to purpose, strategy, and tactics. Their teaching and missionary work (da'wa) is drawn from an interpretation of the Quran, stories of the Sahaba, schools of jurisprudence, and examples from modern theologians and martyrs all familiar within the target audience. These intersect with local grievances and global geo-political issues linked to Islamic countries and territories. Whatever the route or 'cocktail' of factors which bring an individual to the Salafi-Jihadi movement, that movement is based on a transnational movement which rejects the borders of post-Westphalian states, the concept of man-made laws, and (as has been shown) a blissful utopia.⁶³ Instead, their understanding of action and reward operates on a much longer timescale. They fight in this transient existence in the hope of reward for an indefinite period in paradise.

The spine of the Salafi-jihadi movement is made from a three-tiered network of theology that drives motivation and determination:

1. IS/AQ produce their own unique content: The writings, videos, audio-sermons etc. that these designated terrorist groups produce and self-publish.
2. IS/AQ republish mainly writings that are not produced by them uniquely and which often predates their existence by centuries. These writings are of selected Sunni Muslim scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Ibn Qayyim, that are of such great importance to the terrorist groups, that they republish and share such literature as part of their branded content.
3. In the online and offline ecosystem of AQ/IS, many more writings of Salafi scholars are shared 'as is', rather than being republished or branded. These are shared as scanned PDFs that are easy to find online, alongside the previous categories of self-published and rebranded materials. Together, the Salafi-Jihadi movement has a wide network of theological content that enables them to re-energize and rebuild when parts are removed or taken down.

To avoid the missteps of the past, if researchers are to make claims about the strategy, tactics, beliefs, and purpose of the Salafi-Jihadi movement they should be able to construct a coherent series of quotes from the archive of written, audio and visual material which connects that claim to the long lineage of Salafi-Jihadi thought.

THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF THE SALAFI-JIHADI NEXUS

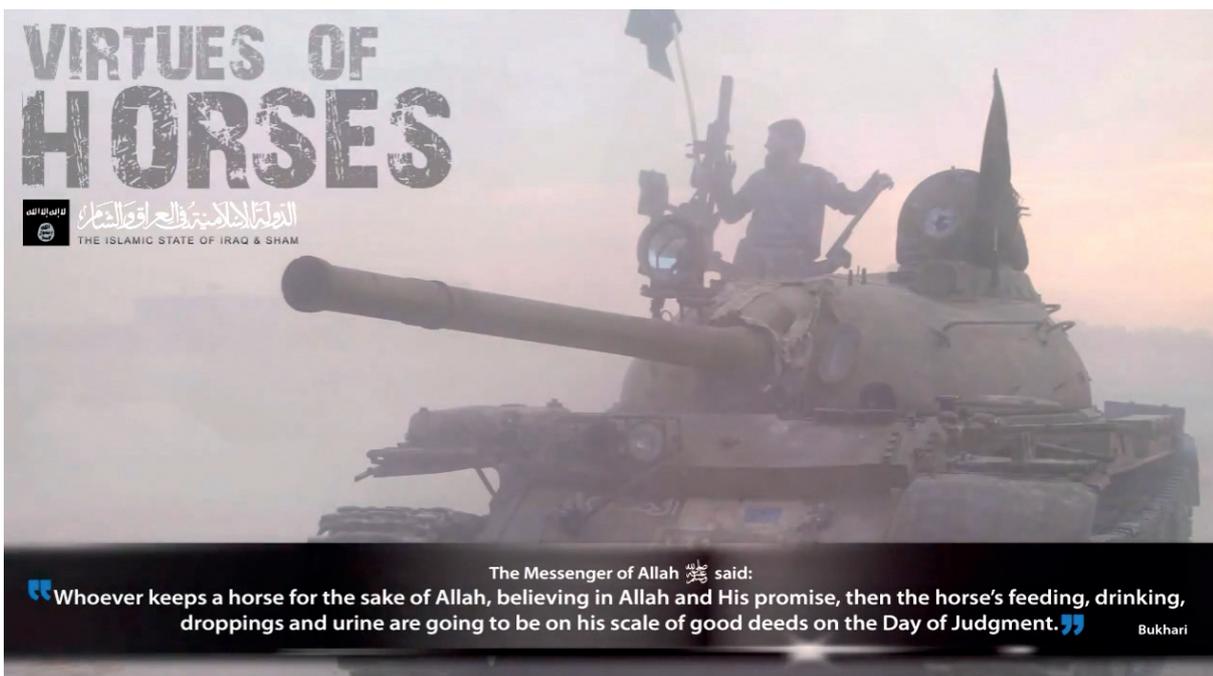
For decades, the Salafi-Jihadi movement has been proficient in continually producing content (or propaganda) and finding the means of transnational delivery through the internet.⁶⁴ This has been done independent of the status on the ground, in terms of having territorial control or not. Jihadi groups constantly use religious sources, references and codes in their communication, developed, enriched and deployed in the past decades.

Anyone who wishes to understand this vivid subculture online must recognize the encoded meaning, just like anyone who seeks access to learn more and become an activist (militant or not) for the cause can be empowered by the many role models who are fulfilling theological elements.



Pictures such as the above directly reference selected verses of the Quran. The literature of jihad – backed and enhanced by the Salafi side of the nexus – provides hundreds of pages explaining the specific meaning of verse 9:73 referenced in the picture above. Together the elements build an all-encompassing and coherent explanation – the Salafi-Jihadi reality.

The following sample pictures provide a glimpse into the universe of the ecosystem, showing the mixture of today's violence mixed with religious sources identifying the theological rationale for Salafi-Jihadi actions and deeds.



الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام
THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ & SHAM

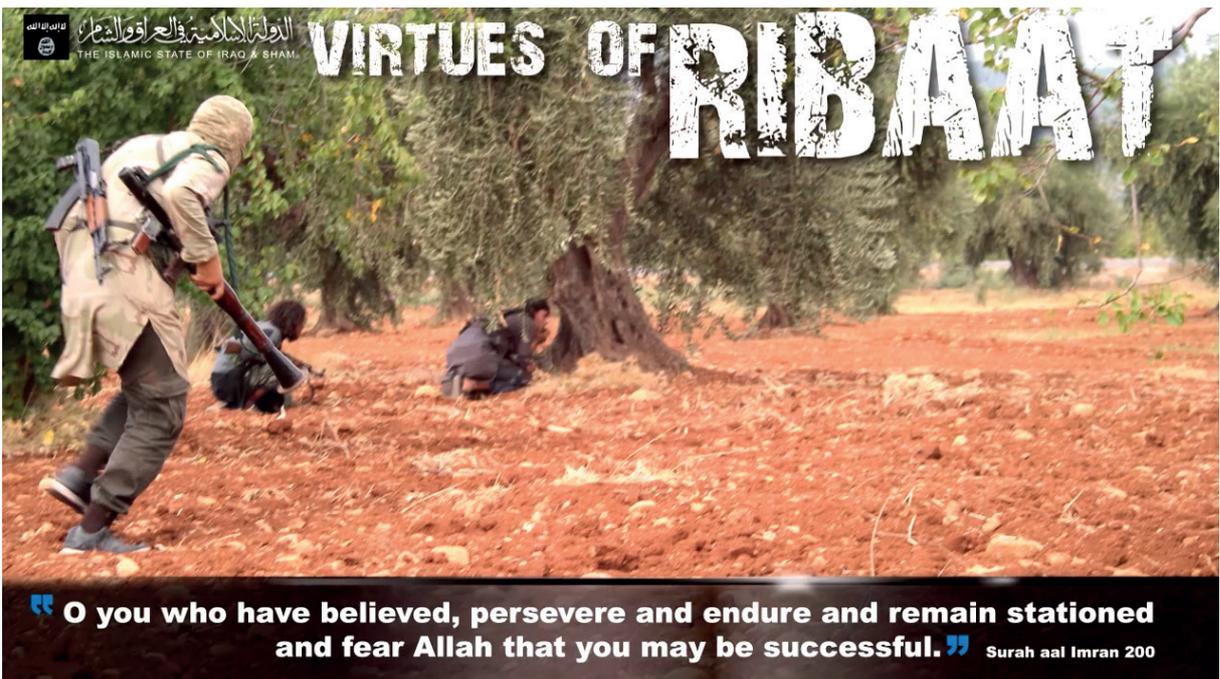
VIRTUES OF SWORDS



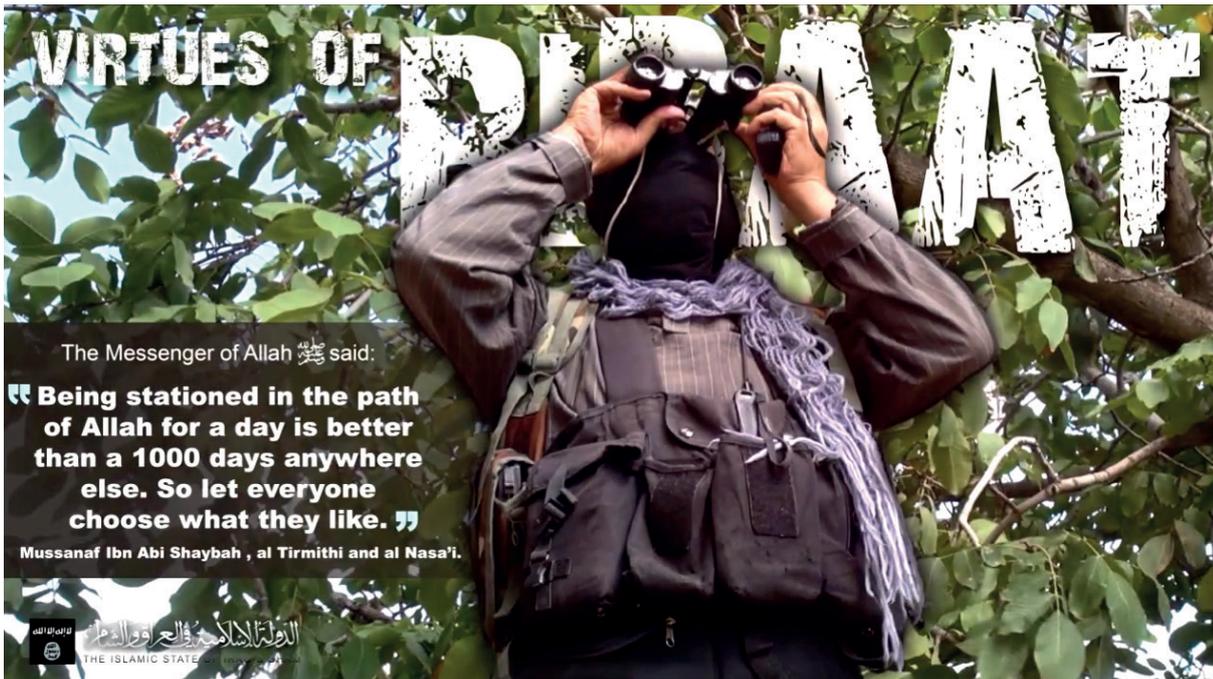
The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:
“ Don't desire meeting the enemy but when you do be firm, and realize that Paradise is beneath the shadow of swords. ”
Bukhari and Muslim

الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام
THE ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ & SHAM

VIRTUES OF RIBAAT



“ O you who have believed, persevere and endure and remain stationed and fear Allah that you may be successful. ” Surah aal Imran 200



These pictures had been created specifically for an English-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking audience, and by it, transmitting some core jihadi motivational sources from the Quran, hadith (statements by prophet Muhammad) and renown hadith collectors. These may be thought of as ‘militaristic’ showing ‘scenes of combat’ utilizing a ‘funky font’ as is often the case in an OTS approach. However, more importantly, the title of each image originates from the headings of sections in the ‘Book of Jihad’ by 14th / 15th Century writer known as Ibn Nuhaas.⁶⁵ Each heading introduces important concepts from within the Salafi-Jihadi mindset, which is beyond the scope of this article to cover. It will, however, suffice to show the book is a core text of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, currently in use as part of recruitment efforts as well as recommended reading by both IS and AQ and individuals on both sides of the Salafi-Jihadi nexus.

The original book (running to over 1200 pages in Arabic) is also available in English via text and audio translation by Salafi-Jihadi writer Anwar al-Awlaki. The Indian National Investigation Agency have claimed at trial that the Book of Jihad “was used by Islamic State (IS) operatives to inspire Keralites to join the terrorist group”.⁶⁶ Likewise, Abu Dujana al-Khurasani, the AQ double agent who killed CIA agents at Forward Operating Base Chapman quoted extensively from the book in the final part of his farewell speech. It has been recommended as a useful source of bedtime stories for ‘lion cubs’ in IS magazine Dabiq (issue 11) and in 2008 the AQ media foundation GIMF released a 397 page ‘abridged’ version in Arabic. On the Salafi side of the nexus, contemporary Saudi scholar Salih ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi has recommended it saying the “best book on jihad is by the Imam, the martyr, Ibn Nahhas who attained martyrdom in jihad against Crusaders”. An abridged version of the book which is available in bookstores throughout the Middle East was retrieved by an Austrian investigative journalist when he visited the former IS stronghold in Mosul, the al-Salam hospital. The book was handed out by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq to aspiring students of knowledge.⁶⁷

These are not images of tanks and guns with some religious quote on them which must be ‘whittled away’ before the true meaning can be uncloaked. Instead, given the rhizomatic nature of the Salafi-Jihadi movement, each one of these images connects to a vast array of further material on the subject which an interested individual could access on- or offline as their circumstances dictate. To produce a comprehensive interpretation, evidence-based approaches recognize the interconnections between text, audio, and video which are exploited by the Salafi-Jihadi movement to express their intended meaning to the target audience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Jihadi networks consist of, in some cases, intellectually high-quality writings and a large number of images and videos. It is the textual layer that has an essential role. The libraries of what Jihadis write, share, curate, and host in a meticulous repository bibliotheca⁶⁸ has been fashioned over many decades (offline) and during the past two decades at the least online. This has led to the creation of a global interwoven fabric enabling the target audience to understand visually conveyed codes, reference points, and theological key words and concepts.

This is the challenge we face, as we stand 20 years after 9/11 and failing in the War on Terror: how can we break the cycle of violence and recruitment, the spread of the Salafi-Jihadi mindset and especially the theology of violence into Africa and South-East-Asia. How long can we continue to engage without deploying a proper understanding, evidence-based analysis and using the tools of forensic linguistics to clearly identify and outline the ecosystem of pro-jihadi Salafi writings and the Salafi materials and clerics that are of importance and use to Salafi-Jihadis?

The Salafi materials are often quick and easy to find online - and in several languages. This enables jihadis to attain credibility as a religious movement fighting for ultraorthodox theological parameters while the networks online on the Salafi side of the nexus are rarely taken down or pushed offline. This reality strengthens Salafi-Jihadi networks online as it is one column, upon which they can rely to repopulate their content and continue to attract consumers of the Salafi world to their 'enhanced' world where religion is applied by force and based on theological constants and commandments that are explained in a soft-power fashion within the Salafi networks.

Where Salafis share and curate historical materials about the attaining of martyrdom and entry to paradise, jihadis demonstrate its application. A reward for any jihadi is well described in religious sources and carried by centuries of Sunni Islamic scholarship, predominantly from the Arab Peninsula. Sunni Muslims following the "prophetic methodology" are distinctly outlined in the Arabic scholarly literature with jihadis demonstrating the application of that theology for the full-HD camera lens. These productions detail almost every and any aspect of life and has distinct guidelines that are projected by authoritative writers, radio programs and, of course, in thousands and thousands of videos.

For policymakers in the West, it has to be clear that fads, fantasies and other focal points which stem from applying a Western analytical lens create an unhelpful caricature of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. Too infrequently have OTS researchers been asked to prove their assertions through quoting relevant Salafi-Jihadi texts. The resulting caricature intertwined with political expediency has caused the Salafi-Jihadi movement to be written off as defeated when it was clear to anyone with genuine access to the primarily Arabic-speaking network that the movement was very much still active.

To move forward, evidence-based research is vital. Time and time again, Muslim counter radicalisation practitioners have claimed that their insight and experience of the importance of religion and ideology have continuously been dismissed and ignored. That this subject lacks prioritisation, investment, and research funding further diminishes the apparent value and relevance to the OTS-policy feedback loop, all while the Salafi-Jihadi movement relentlessly exploits it.

We must recognize that Muslims in all cultures, languages and traditions, are the main target audience for the Salafi-Jihadi movement. The jihadi and Salafi outlets supporting the jihadi mindset are predominantly (but not exclusively) published in Arabic. Therefore, it is the Arabic-speaking,

theologically grounded lens, not the white neocolonialist ethnocentrism that is published and widely accepted within OTS, which must frame a progressive evidence-based interpretation of the purpose, strategy, and tactics of the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

Therefore, a meticulous knowledge of the sources of the Salafi-Jihadi material, the Arabic scripts and the relevant translations into other languages, is required in order to clearly identify problematic theological content and to be able to consistently counter both militant and pro-, yet non-militant endeavors.

That said, the future struggle against the Salafi-Jihadi movement must also apply appropriate nuance as there are points where Salafi-Jihadi theological interpretations overlap with those adopted by communities which follow other interpretations of Islam. Such nuance is required as it would be a mistake to confuse the intended target audience of the Salafi-Jihadi movement with some form of collective responsibility. For most Muslims worldwide, the understanding of Salafi-Jihadi theology and the supporting Salafi framework has no legitimacy, holds no authority, and is neither followed nor applied. Despite this, Muslims are often accused of co-conspiracy, being sympathizers or even actual supporters when jihadi terror attacks happen. This is a callus cry that populist lobbies are keen to exploit and drive, but one that lacks any evidence-base. A reading of Salafi-Jihadi scholars makes it crystal clear; Muslims not living to Salafi-Jihadi standards are defined as apostates. Apostacy is an accusation that calls for the death sentence in Salafi-Jihadi theological commitment. As such, from an evidence-based forensic linguistic standpoint, Salafi-Jihadis do not consider most Muslims as supporters nor co-conspirators, but people who must be killed for their beliefs. In the next 20 years we must ensure they are treated as such by those responsible for counterterrorism.

Disrupting the specific ideas or concepts around which the Salafi-Jihadi movement coordinates, requires evidence-based clarity about those theological concepts. As such, delivering progress within the struggle against the Salafi-Jihadi movement, means taking a forensic linguistic approach to locating the intended meaning from the vast archive of text and audio-visual material produced and curated by the Salafi-Jihadi movement. It must focus on the meaning intended by the Salafi-Jihadi movement and understood by the target audience, whose contextual understanding is intricately linked to a specific theological interpretation based on Arabic language and culture, not the labels applied in a predominantly male, white ethnocentric, Western-centric OTS-policy feedback loop.⁶⁹

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