



# Jihad in the West: The Rise of Militant Salafism

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## Introduction

This book is concerned with Western militant Salafism. It is not alone. Terrorism, and particularly this form, is currently the subject *du jour* in a discipline where few phenomena capture the public imagination for a sustained period. Spurred particularly by the 2001 attacks on the United States, heightened by further killings in Madrid, London and Amsterdam, and fuelled by frequent stories of numerous other threats planned or prevented, militant Salafism has become one of the most prominent and controversial issues in contemporary politics. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the significance attached to this topic, disagreements continue to rage over such matters as the role of religion, political grievances, levels of social integration and the extent and nature of the threat posed by this form of terrorism. Indeed, even the foremost analysts in the field cannot agree on the most basic elements of militant Salafism and the threat it offers. As *The New York Times* recently noted, a bitter

struggle between two powerful figures in the world of terrorism has broken out, forcing their followers to choose sides. This battle is not being fought in the rugged no man's land on the Pakistan-Afghan border. It is a contest reverberating inside the Beltway between two of America's leading theorists on terrorism and how to fight it, two men who hold opposing views on the very nature of the threat.<sup>1</sup>

For his part, Marc Sageman claims that militant Salafism is now devoid of an overarching, hierarchical structure. He argues that al-Qaeda is little more than an idea and that there remains little of al-Qaeda that might be recognisable as a functioning organisation capable of attacking the United States.<sup>2</sup> Al-Qaeda has been replaced

<sup>1</sup> Cited in E. Sciolino and E. Schmitt, 'A Not Very Private Feud over Terrorism', *New York Times*, 8 June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> This point was also made some time ago by Jason Burke; see J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*. London: Penguin, 2003.

with self-organising, independently directed groups that take their inspiration but no directive from the likes of Osama bin Laden.<sup>3</sup> Bruce Hoffman disagrees. He approvingly cites a recent Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report that claimed al-Qaeda ‘is and will remain the most serious threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities’.<sup>4</sup> For Hoffman, al-Qaeda constitutes a real and present danger as it directs attacks against the United States and other targets throughout the world. Such debates matter greatly, helping to dictate where very considerable resources and efforts might best be dedicated. Policies will be decided, resources diverted and ultimately lives lost or saved on the basis of understandings of militant Salafism and how those understandings are in turn acted upon. As Sciolino and Schmitt note in the case of the United States and the Sageman/Hoffman debate, ‘Officials from the White House to the C.I.A. acknowledge the importance of the debate of the two men as the government assesses the nature of the threat. Looking forward, it is certain to be used to win bureaucratic turf wars over what programs will be emphasized in the next administration.’<sup>5</sup>

Indeed Sciolino and Schmitt’s judgement on one of many debates between two of the numerous figures in the field is to understate the significance of efforts to shed light on militant Salafism. The phenomenon is a genuinely significant one with consequences that are far greater than the bureaucratic politics of any one country. Wars have been fought, atrocities committed and lives ruined in the name of promulgating and preventing a particular, violent, interpretation of Islam. As long as militant Salafism continues, people will be seriously and adversely affected – whether through the militancy itself, measures aimed at countering it, or the more routine corrosion of relations in and between communities. As such, an understanding of militant Salafism is of real and pressing importance. Unfortunately, as the debate noted above indicates, the level of public, academic and political interest has not heralded a concomitant level of understanding.

<sup>3</sup> See M. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> B. Hoffman, ‘The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama Bin Laden Still Matters’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Sciolino and Schmitt, ‘A Not Very Private Feud over Terrorism’.

How then are we to understand this phenomenon? The first stage is to detail what it actually is. This might appear straightforward enough, and yet so much has been written which unnecessarily conflates, deliberately obfuscates and unwittingly confuses, that in fact this is all too rarely the case. The second stage is to understand how and hopefully why this phenomenon is occurring. Theory plays a key role here, or at least it should. However, along with clarity and precision, it too is all too often conspicuously absent. It is not that theory must be an unduly laboured approach, a Ph.D. thesis writ large (inaccessible theories applied to obscure topics). There is, though, a real need for insightful theorising in the study of militant Salafism, something to make meaningful sense of that data which exists and point to that which is required. Thankfully, there are several theories that offer real potential in shedding much-needed light on this phenomenon. The problem is not their existence, but a failure to apply them.

This book is an effort to offer a clear and informed exploration of militant Salafism, one framed by a relevant and revealing theoretical approach and supported by an appropriate level of empirical evidence. To do so, the first chapter outlines what militant Salafism actually is. It details the particular militant identification, the metanarrative according to which militant Salafists act. Two factors are of primary importance, both of which are detailed: political grievances and religious interpretation. [Chapter 2](#) then examines one of the main approaches purporting to explain the phenomenon – alienation. This very popular approach argues that militancy is best understood as being a response to some (often unspecified) notion of alienation. Despite the dominance of this approach in the study of militant Salafism in the West, it brings with it substantive problems that should provoke questions as to whether its popularity is merited. Thankfully, there are preferable alternatives, one of which is detailed in [Chapter 3](#). It is an approach that borrows liberally from some theorists whose ideas and observations have been very usefully applied in other contexts but, to the detriment of the field, not in any sustained way to militant Salafism. Central to this approach is the notion of the political imaginary. That it has been applied only rarely and in little detail to this topic is somewhat curious, given its centrality in the transformation of Western militants. For the majority of them, the growth of their militancy was a dramatic departure from their previous beliefs,

occurred over a short period of time, and was made with only a tangential relationship with those people and events around the world that they would claim motivated them. The leap from non-militant Westerner to militant Salafist is made possible by the exercise of the political imagination which produces an imagined world of *ummah*<sup>6</sup> versus West. Thus to understand how (and therefore something as to why) this may be happening, we must turn our enquiry and focus our analysis on the political imaginary, an increasingly important aspect of political life in the production of what is collectively imagined rather than lived. It is the essential foundation of imagined worlds where commonalities are posited and affinity expressed amongst and between people who may never meet, and for whom some supposed shared social facts assume a significance that is as socially constructed as others that are ignored. Militant Salafism is built on just such a construction.

If the political imaginary is important, so too are those forces that give rise to it. Accordingly, this book affords a chapter to each of the forces upon which the militant Salafist imaginary depends most – media and movement. These conditions of possibility permit the production of the militant Salafist worldview, the metanarrative of innate and sustained Western hostility waged against Islam and its practitioners, and the notion that it is religiously mandated to respond with force. Each chapter explores the way in which those two forces exert their effect on militant Salafism and offers empirical evidence as to how it does so. Thus [Chapter 4](#) details the use and importance of hypermedia in the lives of militant individuals and groups and an analysis of its impact on the militants surveyed. Within this the role of images – depictions of beheadings and explosions, of dead bodies and willing martyrs – is of crucial significance. Images permit a degree of ascription of meaning on the part of the consumer that other forms of media cannot match. As a result, distant viewers are able to accommodate these events within a particular narrative and then project themselves into that narrative as an active participant. Those images play a significant role in allowing disconnected people to imagine themselves united with one another and involved in the same global struggle. [Chapter 5](#) then discusses the extensive movement in the lives

<sup>6</sup> *Ummah* (derived from *umm*, meaning mother) is the Arabic word for community. It is used to denote the worldwide community of the faithful.

of militant Salafists in the West – including a database of 250 Western militants – and the consequences it heralds in facilitating particular identities. In a more static environment, social life will be informed and reflective of highly local activity. Movement releases constraints on the way in which people may imagine themselves politically.<sup>7</sup> It is certainly of crucial importance to the militant Salafist political reimagining of a global community of which they are a part. Finally, Chapter 6 offers an explanation as to why, when it comes to militant Salafism, the effect of global forces experienced by almost everyone has a transformative effect on a very small section of society. In large part the answer is that whilst the militant narrative is taken to an extreme in militant Salafists, elements of it are present, albeit in a more nuanced and non-militant form, in many Muslim communities in the West. Militant Salafism taps into a narrative of religious unity and Western hostility to Islam. It builds upon existing notions and beliefs that are then taken, reformulated and amplified by militants. This process is ably assisted by two intermediaries of particular importance – radical preachers and small groups cut off from wider society.

However, before turning to these chapters, a little more is required as to the choice of subject and the terminology employed in trying to better understand it.

## Language

There is a multitude of terms in the literature used in place of what is here called militant Salafists/ism, and so this particular choice should briefly be explained. Militant is largely uncontroversial, denoting the use of violence. The designation Salafist/ism requires a little more explanation. Salafism is derived from the Arabic for predecessor or ancestor. It is a literalist interpretation within Sunni Islam that holds

<sup>7</sup> A number of writers have written on this topic. Amongst the best are: A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991; D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. London: Blackwell, 1991; D. Harvey, 'From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity', in J. Bird (ed.), *Mapping the Futures: Local Culture, Global Change*. London: Routledge, 1993; and J. Scholte, 'The Geography of Collective Identities in a Globalizing World', *The Review of International Political Economy* 73(3) 1996.

that innovation from the Islam practised by the prophet Mohammed and his contemporary followers is a deviation from Islam. As should be clear from that description, in no way is Salafism synonymous with militancy. Prefacing it with the word militant therefore differentiates the militants being studied here from their pious counterparts. The considerable advantage of this term, one that more than compensates for its admitted awkwardness, is that it largely avoids the all too common reification and artificial amalgamation of a diverse set of incidents.

### **Why militant Salafism in the West?**

This particular work is concerned only with militant Salafism in the West. As such, it examines only those either born or who have lived for a considerable time in the West. Whilst very much a minority ideological movement within Islamism, itself a subset of Islam, as with all religious sects, militant Salafism is nonetheless far from a monolithic movement. Whilst there are similarities in the ideology and aims of geographically diverse groups who might consider themselves (or be considered by others) to be militant Salafists, there are also substantial and significant differences between them. Similarly the story of those born and raised in Western urbanity is quite different from those who may have personally endured the horrors of desperate poverty or conflict, or extreme religious indoctrination elsewhere. These alternative contexts and ideologies risk being ignored if a study of militant Salafism offers no geographical differentiation. There is therefore good reason for placing limits on any study examining militant Salafism – in this case, to look only at its manifestation in the West. A broader remit would have to substitute nuance and precision for generalities, and it is unclear that such a trade-off is a sensible one. As an example of the result of restricting the scope of the study in this way, of those who directly attacked the United States in 2001, only Mohammed Atta, Ziad Jarrah and Marwan al-Shehhi, those who earlier lived in Hamburg and Hani Hanjour who lived in the United States are included here. Others who lived in the West and who sought to be a part of the attacks, or who offered assistance to those who were, are also included, men such as Said Bahaji, Ramzi bin al Shibh and Mohammed Zammar. However, those who flew from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to join their accomplices in



the attacks are not. Looking at Western militants, and being explicit in doing so, produces an examination of similar cases rather than conflating those whose methods may mask considerable differences. On the other hand, it did not make sense to limit the survey to those who attacked targets in the West. There are many examples of individuals who have launched attacks in the West and who had previously considered and even attempted attacks elsewhere. The reverse of this is also true – militants have attacked other parts of the world, having previously planned attacks in the West. Thus for example some of the men who fled Spain having bombed a train station in Madrid made their way to Iraq to fight with insurgent forces there;<sup>8</sup> a videotape of the leader of the cell that attacked the London transport system in 2005 showed him bidding farewell to his young daughter before travelling to fight in Afghanistan. He apparently did not make it further than Pakistan and returned a few months later when he began to plan the London attack;<sup>9</sup> and members of cells in both Germany and the Netherlands sought to fight in numerous other arenas before ultimately attacking the United States and the Netherlands respectively.<sup>10</sup> For these and many other militants, jihad might have been waged in Chechnya, Iraq, Paris or Los Angeles. It is the target and the cause, rather than geographical location, that is of significance. This is reflected in the choice of who is included in this study. On the other hand, those who participated in conflicts in what might be called defensive jihad, military action to repel an invading force, have been excluded. Whilst there is considerable overlap between support for jihad against Americans in Iraq and against Americans in the United States, this is not always the case. To have included those committed only to the former would have muddied the focus unduly.

Now the use of language is clear, the task is to bring a similar clarity to that to which the language is being applied: what is a militant Salafist?

<sup>8</sup> R. Cowan *et al.*, ‘Bus Bomb Clues May Hold Key to Terror Attack’, *The Guardian*, 11 July 2005.

<sup>9</sup> H. Siddique, ‘“Take Care of Mummy”, July 7 Ringleader Told Daughter’, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2008.

<sup>10</sup> A. Benschop, ‘Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold’, 2004, available at [www.sociosite.org/jihad\\_nl\\_en.php](http://www.sociosite.org/jihad_nl_en.php), and T. McDermott, *Perfect Soldiers. The 9/11 Hijackers: Who They Were, Why They Did It*. New York: Harper, 2005.

# 1 *Mad mullah or freedom fighter? What is a militant Salafist?*

If we are to begin to effectively study militant Salafism, we must first establish precisely what it actually is. Militant Salafism cannot be like pornography – allegedly recognisable but indefinable. Rendering the task here considerably easier is the willingness amongst militants themselves to offer explanations as to whom and why they are fighting, explanations that go a long way in explaining what militant Salafism is.

There are two main elements that are of crucial importance in explaining militant Salafism – the religious and the political. Each is explored below. Both are very important elements of militant Salafism, but they do not by themselves explain this particular militancy. There is a tendency amongst too many writing in this field to either dismiss the claims made by militant Salafists or uncritically regurgitate them. Their explanations should be taken seriously, but they also need to be placed in an appropriate context, specifically the particular metanarrative of what it means to be a Muslim.

## **Politics and its politicisation**

Many of the more experienced and accomplished observers of Salafist militancy draw attention to its political metanarrative of Muslim suffering, the persecution of the *ummah*. Jason Burke, for example, argues that ‘Islamic militants’ main objective is not conquest, but to beat back what they perceive as an aggressive West that is supposedly trying to complete the project begun during the Crusades and colonial periods of denigrating, dividing, and humiliating Islam’.<sup>1</sup> They perceive a global conflict, one in which they feel compelled to participate. As Wiktorowicz and Kaltner write, militant Salafism is therefore best understood as:

<sup>1</sup> Burke, ‘Think Again: Al Qaeda’, p. 18.

defensive measures to protect the Muslim community from outside aggressions and crimes against Islam: support for Israel against the Palestinians; support for Serbian genocide against Bosnian Muslims; support for India against the Kashmiris; the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan; actions in East Timor; support for Philippine aggression against Muslims in the south.<sup>2</sup>

The most (in)famous of militant Salafists, Osama bin Laden, accepts that such a list of grievances is valid, that a war is being waged by the West against the Muslim world. In one interview he articulated his belief that ‘Our [the Muslims]’ enemy is the crusader alliance led by America, Britain and Israel . . . Our hostility is in the first place, and to the greatest extent, levelled against these world infidels, and by necessity the regimes which have turned themselves into tools for this occupation’.<sup>3</sup>

Other militants concur that violent jihad is a legitimate response to aggression currently directed against Muslims. Richard Reid sought to blow up an airliner flying between Paris and Miami in late 2001. After his arrest and conviction, Reid argued in a letter that he made

no apologies for my activities nor those of my associates and I state that if people want the attacks on the West to stop then they should start looking to their own selves because as far as we’re concerned whoever supports the American government’s activities in the Muslim world or helps them in that by any means is equally responsible for those acts and thus such people have no one but their own selves to blame for the attacks on American interests and such attacks will not be stopped unless the Americans stop their oppression of the Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Mohammed Siddique Khan has been characterised as the lead bomber in the 2005 attacks on the London transport system that killed 52 people and injured many more. He expressed similar sentiments to those above in justifying the killing of civilians. In a video released shortly after the attacks he explained:

Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and

<sup>2</sup> Q. Wiktorowicz and J. Kaltner, ‘Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qaeda’s Justification for September 11’, *Middle East Policy Council* 10(2), 2003, pp. 84–5.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Osama bin Laden, cited in R. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House, 2005, p. 120.

<sup>4</sup> N. Young, ‘Understanding Insanity,’ *The Firm*, December 2007.

avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters . . . Until we feel security, you will be our targets. And until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people we will not stop this fight . . . Now you too will taste the reality of this situation.<sup>5</sup>

A Pakistani cousin of one of Khan's accomplices, Shehzad Tanweer, describes him as similarly motivated by the plight of co-religionists: 'Whenever he would listen about sufferings of Muslims he would become very emotional and sentimental . . . He was a good Muslim . . . he also wished to take part in jihad and lay down his life. He knew that excesses are being done to Muslims.'<sup>6</sup> Tanweer also featured in a video. This was released a year after the attacks and featured both the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri and the US-born Adam Gadahn. In it, Tanweer offered the following message:

To the non-Muslims of Britain, you may wonder what you have done to deserve this. You are those who have voted in your government, who in turn have, and still continue to this day, continue to oppress our mothers, children, brothers and sisters, from the east to the west, in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chechnya. Your government has openly supported the genocide of over 150,000 innocent Muslims in Falluja . . . You have offered financial and military support to the U.S. and Israel, in the massacre of our children in Palestine. You are directly responsible for the problems in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq to this day. You have openly declared war on Islam, and are the forerunners in the crusade against the Muslims . . . What you have witnessed now is only the beginning of a series of attacks, which, *inshallah*, will intensify and continue, until you pull all your troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, until you stop all financial and military support to the U.S. and Israel, and until you release all Muslim prisoners from Belmarsh, and your other concentration camps. And know that if you fail to comply with this, then know that this war will never stop, and that we are ready to give our lives, one hundred times over, for the cause of Islam. You will never experience peace, until our children in Palestine, our mothers and sisters in Kashmir, and our brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq feel peace.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> BBC, 'London Bomber: Text in Full', *BBC News Website*, 1 September 2005.

<sup>6</sup> D. McGrory and Z. Hussain, 'Cousin Listened to Boasts About Suicide Mission', *The Times*, 22 July 2005.

<sup>7</sup> MEMRI, 'Al-Qaeda Film on the First Anniversary of the London Bombings Features Messages by Bomber Shehzad Tanweer, American Al-Qaeda Member Adam Gadan and Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri', *MEMRI TV monitor unit*, 8 July 2006, available at [www.memritv.org/clip/en/1186.htm](http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/1186.htm).

Al-Zawahiri added that ‘What made Shehzad join the camps of Qaeda Al-Jihad was the oppression carried out by the British in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. He would often talk about Palestine, about the British support of the Jews, and about their clear injustice against the Muslims.’<sup>8</sup> In similar terms, Gadahn noted:

It’s crucial for Muslims to keep in mind that the Americans, the British, and the other members of the coalition of terror have intentionally targeted Muslim civilians and civilian targets, both before, as well as after September 11th. In both the first and second Iraq wars, as well as in their forays into Somalia, the Sudan, and Afghanistan, just to give you a few examples... They have targeted civilians for assassination and kidnapping. They kidnapped any non-Afghans they found, and shipped them off to Guantanamo or worse. Many were handed over to the American- and British-backed despotic regimes of the Islamic world, to be brutally interrogated. And with the blessing and support of that notorious Afghan-killer Hamid Karzai, they’ve murdered thousands of Afghan civilians as they slept in their beds, travelled on the roads, attended weddings, and prayed at the mosques. I know they’ve killed and maimed civilians in their strikes because I’ve seen it with my own eyes. My brothers have seen it. I’ve carried the victims in my arms, women, children, toddlers, babies in their mothers’ wombs. You name it, they’ve probably bombed it. I could go on and on – and that’s just Afghanistan. We haven’t talked about American and British atrocities in the two Iraq wars.<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, Mohammed Bouyeri murdered the Dutch writer and director Theo van Gogh. Van Gogh was a descendant of the brother of the artist Vincent van Gogh, as well as a prominent writer and film-maker in his own right. Bouyeri first shot van Gogh on a busy Amsterdam street and then tried to behead him with a knife. As the militancy which culminated in this murder had developed, Bouyeri wrote a great deal on the Internet. One of his pieces is instructive in its concern for the disadvantageous position of the global Islamic community relative to its past glories, something for which he held the unIslamic practices of its leaders and the hostility of the West responsible. In March 2004 he wrote a piece called ‘To catch a wolf’ which recounted one method with which Inuits apparently hunt. First, we are told, they rub the knife with animal blood before freezing it. This is repeated until the knife is entirely covered with frozen blood. It is then stuck in the snow.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

A wolf will smell the blood and lick it from the knife. Its desire for blood overrides the pain from cutting its own tongue as it does so. Eventually the wolf bleeds to death. For Bouyeri, the wolf represented the *ummah*. He argued that since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the caliphate with it, the enemies of Islam have engaged in a project to destroy Islam. As a result of the hostility of the West and the weakness of too many Muslims, the *ummah* that was once so powerful is now 'a dead drunk frustrated nation, begging for a piece of bread at the pavement of the West'.<sup>10</sup>

For militant Salafists, 'the suffering and humiliation of Muslims around the world are not unconnected episodes, but a chain in a series of transgressions by the "Crusader-Zionist" alliance against Islam and Muslims'.<sup>11</sup> That aggression is alleged to continue around the world today. As such, as the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who headed the militant Salafist efforts in Iraq before his death, argued: 'Our Jihad in Iraq is the same as in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Chechnya, and Bosnia.'<sup>12</sup> In response, true Muslims are called upon to defend fellow Muslims. As Ramzi bin al Shibh, a member of the Hamburg cell who sought to participate in the attacks that group made on the United States in 2001, sermonised, 'The problem of Jerusalem is the problem of the [Muslim] nation. That's also the problem of every Muslim everywhere. Whenever possible and during each jihad a Muslim has to remind his comrades about that. He has to remind him of the problem of the nation, the beloved nation.'<sup>13</sup>

That jihad in defence of global co-religionists dominates the thoughts and words of militant Salafists is apparent from an examination of the numerous websites established for this constituency, by listening to recordings of sermons given by radical preachers, or watching the justifications offered in videos recorded by militant Salafists. It is also summarised anecdotally by Mohamed Sifaoui, an Algerian journalist who spent several months in a militant milieu as part of an assignment. He described the priorities and concerns of

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Benschop, 'Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold'.

<sup>11</sup> M. Hafez, 'Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq: How Jihadists Frame Suicide Terrorism in Videos and Biographies', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 2007, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> From a montage entitled 'And Worship Shall be Only for Allah' issued in June 2005, cited in Hafez, 'Martyrdom Mythology in Iraq'.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in McDermott, *Perfect Soldiers*, p. 82.

Karim Bourti, a militant whose trust and confidence he had earned: 'Karim led the prayers. Before he began, he asked all the faithful to make invocations for "the victory of the brother mujahidins".<sup>14</sup> In every act, he made sure he mentioned the "holy war". I noticed that throughout the period I was in touch with him, his whole life was centred on this question.'<sup>15</sup>

However, this does not mean that militant Salafism is solely an unmediated response to Western foreign policy, despite such an approach enjoying a certain currency. Such forays into the mists (and myths) of time are certainly significant, but to accept them entirely is to misunderstand the nature of the construction of identity. The relevance of politics here is not in the reaction of Muslims to grievances, but in the framing of the world and the events in it as a battleground between two diametrically opposed forces. Militant Salafism cannot be explained only in the roll-call of allegedly unjustified military involvement overseas – an intuitively attractive argument, but not one that withstands more careful scrutiny. There are four main reasons for this.

First, whilst there are many terrible circumstances endured by Muslims, victims of deprivation and despotism, and whilst non-Muslims are sometimes culpable, such culpability falls considerably short of militant claims. For that, three additional steps must be taken. First, one has to ignore, trivialise or justify aggression committed by Muslims. Second, there must be an exclusive focus on a relatively small number of conflicts where Muslims are the victims. Third, the complexity of individual situations and the diversity of explanations for different situations must be reduced to a simplistic and constant attribution of blame on Western policy and people. This is possible because for militant Salafists it is not individual events that are important, but rather the metanarrative of Muslim suffering through which all events are seen. Marshalling partial truths and some legitimate grievances, militant Salafists assume for all Muslims the role of victims, and for all non-Muslims the role of aggressor. Militant Salafism is crude Marxism, with class being replaced with religion in

<sup>14</sup> From the Arabic meaning strugglers. It has widely assumed a religious and military significance. In this book a mujahideen (as it is usually spelt) is one who wages militant jihad.

<sup>15</sup> M. Sifaoui, *Inside Al Qaeda: How I Infiltrated the World's Deadliest Terrorist Organization*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, p. 89.

the explanation as to how the world operates. For militant Salafists, the diverse conflicts in distant parts of the world are given meaning through the discourse of the West attacking Muslims.

Secondly, the concern of militant Salafists for the suffering of fellow Muslims appears of significance only to the extent to which it legitimates a violent response. Otherwise, if the concern was genuine, one might anticipate militants had made strenuous efforts in the past to improve the lives of those in whose name they claim to be acting, that their militancy represented the last resort. This is very rarely the case. Precious few militant Salafists engage in efforts to help their co-religionists by working with genuinely humanitarian projects (those that do not include jihad). For example, many militants claimed the invasion of Iraq justified a violent response. However, precious few undertook any preventative efforts as it became increasingly clear that an invasion was likely. A few are known about<sup>16</sup> and doubtless there are more who are not, but this is undoubtedly a drop in the militant ocean. The vast majority make a rapid leap from non-involvement in any sort of politics, to the adoption of the militant Salafist metanarrative and the extreme violence it espouses, not engaging on the way in any efforts to alleviate the suffering of the *ummah*.

Thirdly, the chronology of events offers little support for the idea that militancy is enacted in defence of Muslims and Muslim countries. Despite claims to have been motivated primarily by Iraq, two of the London bombers, Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, were amongst those cheering when the planes hit the World Trade Center two years before the US-led invasion.<sup>17</sup> Many of the key architects and members of the Madrid cell were supporters of militant movements in North Africa and Spain, again predating either Afghanistan or Iraq, the alleged motivation for their attacks on the capital's commuters.<sup>18</sup> The idea that the invasion of Iraq had led to their attack is further undermined by a second attempted attack even after it was apparent that the Socialist Party, committed to a quick

<sup>16</sup> Muktar Ibrahim claimed he and Yassin Omar protested the attack; see BBC News, '21/7 Plan "was Iraq War protest"', *BBC News Website*, 19 March 2007.

<sup>17</sup> E. Vulliamy, 'The IT Man who tried to stop the 7/7 Bombers', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2006.

<sup>18</sup> P. Finn and K. Richburg, 'Madrid Probe turns to Islamic Cell in Morocco', *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2004.



withdrawal of its troops, would be elected to government. When that became clear, the terrorists simply added a new demand. In a similar vein, as Roy notes, Bin Laden ‘mentioned the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as justification for the attacks on 11 September, but no longer refers to it’.<sup>19</sup> In fact, of late, he has discovered the political rewards in doing so, but it is very difficult to make the case that it represents a key motivating cause for him. It is not Iraq, Afghanistan or Bosnia that is the motivation for militancy, it is all of them and a whole series of other alleged examples of Western aggression.

That is not to say that the various conflicts so often cited by militants have no effect on militant Salafism – they do. Rather, it is that it is the overarching narrative and not the individual conflicts that is more significant. It is this point that Aaronovitch is making when, in reference to those who advance the idea that military action in Iraq, Afghanistan and Bosnia represents additional chapters in a tale of perpetual hostility, he asks us to:

Note how the ‘more recent oppression’<sup>20</sup> is supposed just to be a fact. And we know to whom it refers and to whom it doesn’t. The elected Government in Iraq, the Shia majority, the new fact of Kurdish rights in that country, don’t count. All these peoples are de-Muslimified for the purposes of victimology. And that happens because they simply don’t fit the narrative. The Sunnis of Iraq are imagined to be ‘us’, but the Shia and the Kurds aren’t. The bombed villagers of Afghanistan are ‘us’, the liberated women aren’t. The Kosovan Muslims aren’t, either, though you can bet they would have been had Nato not intervened to save them. As it is, they too have disappeared from Muslimhood. This is not some kind of rhetorical point I’m making. It simply is not an accident – in psychological terms – that anything that conflicts with the Grievance is discounted, and anything that contributes to it is emphasised. Consider the narrative of Saddam. There were basically three options. One, do business with him. That equals propping

<sup>19</sup> O. Roy, ‘Britain: Homegrown Terror’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 5 August 2005. Similarly, Bin Laden and many works on him emphasise the role of US troops in Saudi Arabia in transforming him from local fighter to international militant. In truth, however, as Roy notes, he ‘has been an internationalist fighter since the early 1980s and has never concealed his hostility to the West, even when fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. While he was shocked by the Saudi royal family’s appeal to the US in 1991, that changed his attitude to the Saudis (with whom he was previously on good terms), rather than to the US, which he has always hated.’

<sup>20</sup> The words of a journalist he cites, who refers to the Iraq war in these terms.

up un-Islamic tyrants. Two, use sanctions against him. That equals murdering Muslim children. And three, topple him. Ditto plus. All options, bar none, are added to the Grievance.<sup>21</sup>

He is perfectly right. Politics matter to the militant Salafist only if they can be accommodated within a framework of armed conflict between two imagined entities – Islam and ‘the West’.

Finally, as one commentator argues, ‘it is reductive and finally inadequate to think of terrorist acts as only a political response to political facts, past or present’.<sup>22</sup> In a superb article, Tololyan criticises what he terms ‘politicization’, a practice to which the discipline of political science and the study of terror appear particularly disposed. He defines this as the effort

to turn enormously complex events into mere, or only, or just, *political* facts that can be seen as motivating other political acts, including terrorism ... Whether the causes be genocide, loss of sovereignty or loss of land, when they result in terrorism the model is the same at its core: one set of events, described as political, functions as a ‘cause’, creating among its victims a set of agents who are motivated either by politics or by pathology to commit another set of acts described as terrorist.<sup>23</sup>

In the case of militant Salafism, such politicisation is the claim that the phenomenon is best understood as a direct military response to the various conflicts – Iraq I and II, Bosnia, Afghanistan etc. They certainly are significant, but that significance is not the result of a direct causal relationship between foreign policy operations and militant Salafist attacks. It is not the individual events, the push and pull of political fact giving rise to political fact, that matter here, but rather the metanarrative of which they are a part. Political events, the catalogue of conflicts that have Muslims enduring the effects of Western foreign policy, are accommodated in this broader understanding of world events.

Atrocities are committed, wars are waged, people killed. Why such horrors occur is less easy to demonstrate. Alternative explanatory

<sup>21</sup> D. Aaronovitch, ‘Nursing a Grievance, Blinded by Narcissism – Such Ordinary Killers’, *The Times*, 19 July 2005.

<sup>22</sup> K. Tololyan, ‘Cultural Narrative and the Motivation of the Terrorist’, in D. Rapaport (ed.), *Inside the Terrorist Organization*. London: Frank Cass, 2001, p. 227.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 219.

discourses are constructed to explain such events.<sup>24</sup> As Purvis and Hunt write, ‘earthquakes occur, and their occurrence is independent of consciousness; but it is their construction in discourse that determines whether they are “movements of tectonic plates” or manifestations of “the wrath of the gods”’.<sup>25</sup> Militant Salafism represents one example of this accommodation of facts into an existing discourse. For its exponents, the conflicts in Srebrenica, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia are given meaning through the discourse of the West attacking Muslims, conceived of as a global community. Accepting that this represents only one way of viewing these various series of events brings us closer to an appreciation of the particular worldview, the discursive construction that forms the foundation of militant Salafism.

### Interpreting religion

Relatively few serious analysts point to religion as an explanation for militant Salafism. At first glance this may seem counterintuitive, but given that many who do, offer simplistic and reductive accounts, that reluctance becomes a little more comprehensible. This section seeks to bring religion back in, but to do so in a way that contextualises its importance. As such, what is significant here is not some reified idea of a particular religion, but rather religious culture.

Of course, those who are militant Salafists claim that their action is motivated by the teachings of Islam. They argue that they are living, dying and killing in accordance with religious duty. Siddique Khan, in the video in which he featured, explained:

I and thousands like me are forsaking everything for what we believe. Our driving motivation doesn't come from tangible commodities that this world has to offer. . . . Our religion is Islam – obedience to the one true God, Allah, and following the footsteps of the final prophet and messenger Muhammad. . . . This is how our ethical stances are dictated.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For useful illustrations of this in the context of the conflict in Bosnia, see L. Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge, 2006, and D. Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and Politics of Identity*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> T. Purvis and A. Hunt, ‘Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology, Discourse, Ideology. . .’, *British Journal of Sociology* 44(3) 1993, p. 492.

<sup>26</sup> BBC, ‘London Bomber: Text in Full’.

And his co-conspirator Tanweer called on his fellow Britons to heed the call of Allah:

We are 100% committed to the cause of Islam ... Oh Muslims of Britain ... Your duty is to Allah, to His messenger, and to those who are weak and oppressed. As Allah says, in *Surat Al-Touba*: ‘Oh you who believe, what is the matter with you, that when you are asked to march forth in His cause, you cling heavily to the earth. Are you pleased with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But little is the enjoyment of this world as compared to the Hereafter.’<sup>27</sup>

The aforementioned Mohammed Bouyeri claimed at his trial that his actions were the result of an injunction that commanded Muslims to kill those who insult the prophet.<sup>28</sup> A similar religious motivation appeared evident when a letter was shown at the trial of the man who had plotted to simultaneously blow up a transatlantic plane along with Reid. In the letter, Sajiid Badat wrote to his parents that he had ‘a sincere desire to sell [his] soul to Allah in return for paradise’.<sup>29</sup> According to the argument made by militants, they do what they do because they are Muslims, and the faith demands the lifestyle and actions they pursue. Militant Salafism is the enactment of an effort to live according to their interpretation of the prescriptions of Islam.

The actions of militant Salafists appear to afford greater credence to such claims, with many examples of men and women determined to go to their death in accordance with a particular interpretation of Islam they have adopted. One mujahideen leader in Afghanistan recalled the experience of fighters who appear to embody just such a desire: ‘They fought all day then when I went to relieve them in the evening the Arabs were crying because they wanted to be martyred. They were saying, “I must have committed some sin for Allah has not chosen me to go to heaven.” I told them that if they wanted to stay ... and fight then I wasn’t going to stop them. The next day they were killed.’<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> MEMRI, ‘Al-Qaeda Film’.

<sup>28</sup> BBC, ‘Van Gogh Suspect Confesses Guilt’, *BBC News Website*, 12 July 2005.

<sup>29</sup> V. Dodd, ‘Former Grammar School Boy Gets 13 Years for Shoe Bomb Plot’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Mohammed Din Mohammed, cited in J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, p. 76.

In a similar vein, a journalist and author of a book on militant Salafism recounts how:

Mansoor al-Barakati, a Saudi from Mecca...travelled to Afghanistan in 1987 to bring home a younger brother who had gone for jihad. When he crossed the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan he felt his 'heart shake' with the feeling of entering a divine place. Giving up his search for his brother, al-Barakati travelled to Jalalabad, training at one of bin Laden's camps for two months. From there he moved to the deserts around Kandahar, which saw some of the worst fighting of the war. Al-Barakati distinguished himself by exceptional acts of heroism, rising to become the leader of the Arab *mujahideen* in the area. During the summer of 1990, a 120 mm rocket hit the rooftop of a house on which al-Barakati was sitting. Bleeding heavily he was taken to Pakistan for medical attention. On the way he pleaded for death, crying, 'I really am fed up with this worldly life. I really love Allah.'<sup>31</sup>

Within that religious discourse, the idea of martyrdom enjoys a privileged position. Bergen retells a story told to him by the Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai of how 'the Arabs would pitch white tents out in the open in the hopes of attracting Soviet fire, hoping for martyrdom. I saw one person who was crying because he survived an air attack.'<sup>32</sup>

In support of their claims of religious piety, militants frequently point to the several *ayat* (Qur'anic verses) which demand violent action. Examples are not hard to come by, and include the injunctions 'Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush'<sup>33</sup> and 'Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and the Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, [even if they are] People of the Book.'<sup>34</sup> The argument is that Islam contains within its teachings demands for violence against non-believers, a point which unites unlikely bedfellows.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> P. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama Bin Laden*. London: Phoenix, 2001, pp. 61–2.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in *ibid.* p. 12. <sup>33</sup> Qur'an, Sura 9:5.

<sup>34</sup> Qur'an, Sura 9:29. The 'People of the Book' refers to Christians and Jews.

<sup>35</sup> Apart from the militants themselves, vociferous opponents of Islamism and sometimes Islam also agree, most contentiously shown, perhaps, by Geert Wilders in his short film *Fitna*.

Why, then, should this not be accepted as a genuine and complete explanation? Such passages (and others that offer similar injunctions) are regularly drawn upon by militant Salafists as justification for their actions, and they appear clear enough. The problem is, to cite Islam, or any religion, suggests that it is an entity that can be definitively identified and understood. Whilst there exists a body of texts that together form the tenets of the Islamic faith, it is also the case that these must be interpreted. In an assertion of fundamental and religious righteousness, militant Salafists proclaim that 'Islam is something analogous to a computer programme and that by reading its operational code (the Qur'an and *hadiths*) one can discover who is a Muslim and what they should (or should not) do'.<sup>36</sup> This is nonsense. The violent *ayat* that militants claim offer no scope for alternative interpretations are interpreted – as are all religious understandings that depend upon texts and historical lessons. This can and does produce significant differences. The Egyptian Sheikh Mohammad Sayed Tantwai, for example, emphasises the context in which such verses were written. They are, for Tantwai and many others, not to be taken as universals, but seen in their historical context. They do not appeal for continuous warfare waged against non-believers, but allowed Mohammed to defend himself at Medina.<sup>37</sup> Clearly those examined here would disagree, but that is because of alternative understandings born of different interpretations. They would argue that the Qur'an is the word of God delivered directly through the prophet Mohammed, and that interpretation is a deviation from that word. However, the problem with such a view is plain when an apparently clear injunction to violence, such as 'Kill them wherever you find them. Drive them out of places from which they drove you . . . Fight against them until idolatry is no more and Allah's religion reigns supreme',<sup>38</sup> is contained within the same passage as the instruction 'Fight for the sake of Allah against those who fight against you, but do not be violent, because Allah does not love aggressors.'<sup>39</sup> Faced with both injunctions, those who reject interpretation embrace irrationality.

<sup>36</sup> S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, 2nd edn. London: Zed Books, 2003, p. viii.

<sup>37</sup> T. Munthe, 'Terrorism: Not Who but Why?', *Open Democracy*, 20 July 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Qur'an, Sura 2:190–2. <sup>39</sup> Qur'an, Sura 2:109.

It is also worth noting that the same writings that are used to justify violent jihad today have existed for the best part of two millennia. Despite this there has been a marked lack of such a conception of violent jihad throughout most of that time and in most parts of the world. This is, and always has been, a minority position. This would suggest that the words themselves are less significant than the receptivity of the listeners and persuasiveness and form of the message. One writer echoes many others when he notes that, for over a thousand years:

Muslims who clearly considered themselves 'good Muslims' have been living in close social, political and economic harmony with their Jewish and Christians neighbours. The Muslim treatment of Jews, as is often and rightly repeated, reveals religious tolerance to be the norm rather than the exception. Andalusia is the obvious example, but there are others: the Abbasids in Baghdad, the Fatimids in Cairo, and the Ottoman Turks (who welcomed the Sephardi Jews expelled by Spain in 1492).<sup>40</sup>

To look to religious texts and teachings for unchanging and unmediated explanations for terrorism is an unhelpful line of enquiry. As many injunctions against violence can be found as those arguing for the contrary, and for each, wholly divergent arguments can be found as to the real meaning they offer. The role for religion in militant Salafism lies rather in the particular narrative – informed but not dictated by religion and moulded together with political understandings – that is accepted by militants. Both the religious and the political aspects of militancy must be understood as having been accommodated in a very particular narrative, one which sees the West as hostile to the *ummah* of which the militant Salafist is part, a position to which (their interpretation of) Islam dictates a violent response.

Militant Salafism is a movement inspired by a religious and political metanarrative that demands militancy in the face of alleged Western hostility towards Islam. A militant Salafist is someone who considers their identity as a Muslim as paramount and holds that Muslims face hostility and aggression to which they have a duty to respond with violence.<sup>41</sup> An identification as a particular type of Muslim assumes

<sup>40</sup> Munthe, 'Terrorism: Not Who but Why?'

<sup>41</sup> As Laustsen and Wæver note, it is this additional step, the idea that the identity is threatened, that differentiates 'conservatives' from 'fundamentalists'. See C. Laustsen and O. Wæver, 'In Defence of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization', *Millennium* 26(3), 2000, p. 722.

a privileged position upon which the idea of a global battle between the forces of Islam and those hostile to them is constructed. The two are mutually constitutive – the more entrenched the idea of an existential battle, the more determined the notion of I/We as a particular manner of righteous Muslim(s). Once this move is made, once a threatened Islamic identity and the need to respond violently have been established, there is actually little left in the puzzle of militant Salafism. The interesting questions thus concern how the formation of such an identity is possible and why certain communities are particularly susceptible to it. This question will be addressed in due course. First, we shall explore how many others answer that question.