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What Does It Take to Be a “True Muslim”?

Implications for Efforts to Counter al-Qa’ida’s Violent  
Extremist Narrative – written by Portia S. Stevenson



The Center for Counterterrorism Studies

## Report Documentation Page

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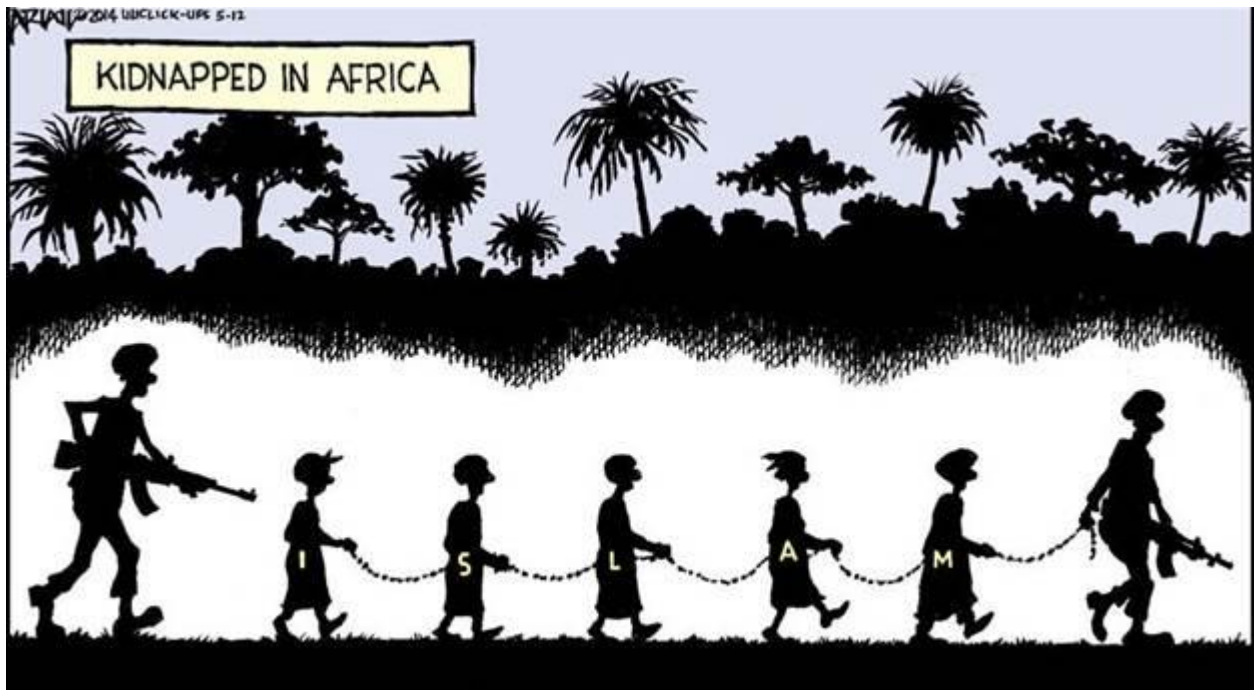
LTG Samuel Vaughan Wilson epitomizes the warrior, scholar, diplomat. During his 37 year active military career, LTG Wilson rose through the ranks from private to lieutenant general by constantly volunteering for the hardest jobs at the cutting edge of doctrine and technology. He relayed the vast knowledge he gained from experience to rising Army leaders during his numerous periods as an instructor. His innovative thinking led him to conduct foundational work in the doctrine for low intensity conflict, through which he created the phrase counterinsurgency. His last five years on active duty, LTG Wilson worked directly in the intelligence community culminating as the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. LTG Wilson also excelled as a statesman through his involvement with the Department of State's U.S. Agency for International Development under the terms of the Participating Agency Service Agreement. Following his military service, LTG Wilson began teaching at Hampden-Sydney College in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia. During this time he consulted with leaders in the intelligence community, legislators, and U.S. presidents. He served as a member of the Holloway Commission following the Iranian hostage rescue attempt and later facilitated the drafting and passage of the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Act creating the United States Special Operations Command and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict.

# What Does it Take to Be a “True Muslim”?

## Implications for Efforts to Counter al-Qa’ida’s Violent Extremist Narrative

Portia Shah Stevenson

THIS PAPER IS UNCLASSIFIED.



“A cartoonist's take on the common refrain that extremist groups such as Boko Haram have 'hijacked' Islam.” -Unknown analyst [Image by Robert Ariail]

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## Introduction

Despite military targeting successes against al-Qa‘ida (variant: al-Qaeda) leadership over the last 14 years, al-Qa‘ida’s network and influence continues to grow. More significantly, its narrative has been gaining traction, reaching target audiences in far-flung areas across the globe, contributing to the radicalization of more young individuals, and generating a greater number of recruits for al-Qa‘ida and its affiliates and adherents (AQAA). As a result, we find a recruiting pool today that’s larger and more easily accessible compared to that of 14 years ago. This recruiting pool and deep bench developed from a group of Islamist extremists with whom AQAA shares its underlying ideology: Salafism. The Salafi movement offers Salafi-Jihadists like AQAA fertile ground planted with seeds of extremists who, with comparatively little indoctrination by way of narratives, may become ready to make the jump from non-violent extremism to violent extremism (in this case, from non-violent Salafism to Salafi-Jihadism).

This paper addresses this issue and surrounding dynamics within the Muslim community, some of which have been observed first-hand by the Muslim author of this paper. It begins by providing the reader with an overview of al-Qa‘ida’s narrative. It then presents AQAA’s foundational ideology as well as insights from historically influential scholars who have impacted and shaped today’s Salafi-Jihadist groups. Later, this paper will discuss a mixture of counternarratives, to be used in various combinations as custom-designed solutions for specific communities in which stakeholders will implement the counternarratives. It will also introduce moderate Muslim scholars and activists who support those counternarratives and, correspondingly, shall illustrate the differences between mainstream orthodox Sunni Muslims and Salafists. Worth noting, this paper uses the terms “moderate”, “traditional”, and “mainstream” interchangeably to refer to orthodox Sunni Muslims. *Orthodox Sunni Muslims comprise only*

those who follow the Ash'ari or Maturidi creeds and who belong to one of the traditional four schools of jurisprudence – Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, or Hanbali. Lastly, this paper will highlight a model in which many of the proposed counternarratives and methods have proven fruitful.

## What is al-Qa'ida's narrative?

Al-Qa'ida (AQ) essentially imparts the narrative that “Islam is under attack”<sup>1</sup> and that governments all over the world are exploiting Muslims. In their narrative, these rulers include Muslim and non-Muslim ones alike, wherein Muslim governments serve as puppets for non-Muslim superpower countries.<sup>2</sup> AQ senior leadership (AQSL) appeals to the emotions and identity of Muslims and presents itself as a proponent of Muslim rights, standing up to powerful governments<sup>3</sup> and authorities as if they are defending Muslims across the globe from the supposed bullying of “puppet-masters.” AQ further strives to convince Muslims that the world would be a better place under the rule of an Islamic caliphate,<sup>4</sup> as in the times of the first four caliphs (*khalifas*) of Islam – Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali.

Like previous Salafist-Jihadist ideologues upon whom AQSL draws legal justification for its violent actions, AQ's ideologues, like Ayman al-Zawahiri, assert that violent *jihad* (struggle) is required to defend Islam and to bring the global Muslim community out from its “oppressive” state. AQ treats *jihad* as the sixth pillar of Islam and argues that violent *jihad* is a duty and obligation for every Muslim. They further advocate that this *jihad* must continue until the world

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<sup>1</sup> Philipp Holtmann, “Countering Al-Qaeda's Single Narrative,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7 no. 2 (2013), accessed May 25, 2014, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/262/html> (accessed May 19, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, (New York: Verso, 2005), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 81-82.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, 121.

witnesses the reinstatement of a global Islamic caliphate with societies living in accordance with *shari‘a* (Islamic law).

## Evolution of the AQ Narrative: The Salafist-Jihadist Movement

### Salafism

The narratives of AQAA stem from the Salafist ideology. Salafism (and variations thereof known by names such as Kharijism, Takfirism, Wahhabism, and Deobandism)<sup>5 6</sup> is a puritanical, literalist movement within the Sunni sect of Islam, advocating a return to the way the religion was practiced in the first few centuries of Islam.<sup>7</sup> Salafi scholars contend that Islam has not been understood or practiced properly since that time.<sup>8</sup> Certain Islamic scholars view Salafism as a sect of its own.<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that although Salafis are considered extremist by moderate Muslims,<sup>10</sup> not all Salafis advocate violence,<sup>11</sup> in the same way that not all extremists of any religion or ideology adopt violence. Salafism is the ideology that gave birth to the Salafist-Jihadist movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay* (New York: Islamic Publications, 2002), 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> Dr Abdul-Haqq Baker, *Extremists in Our Midst: Confronting Terror* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Baker, *Extremists in Our Midst*, 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> Nuh Ha Mim Keller, “Who or what is a Salafi? Is their approach valid?” 1995, <http://www.masud.co.uk/islam/nuh/salafi.htm> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> For an extensive discussion on the Salafi/Wahhabi movement, origins thereof, and the difference between mainstream Muslims and the Salafis, read: Jamal Effendi al-‘Iraqi al-Sidqi al-Zahawi, *The Doctrine of Ahl al-Sunna Versus the “Salafi” Movement*, trans. Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani (Chicago: KAZI, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Shaykh Abdul Aziz Aal Al Shaykh, “The Muftee Shaykh Abdul Aziz Aal Al Shaykh on the September 11, 2001 Attacks in New York,” *Islam Against Extremism*, September 2011, <http://www.islamagainstextremism.com/articles/oyagpp-the-muftee-shaykh-abd-al-azeez-aal-al-shaykh-on-the-september-11-2001-attacks-in-new-york.cfm> (accessed May 20, 2014).



AQSL frequently cites select Salafi scholars and ideologues to justify their violent activities.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we can only fully comprehend AQAA’s philosophy, messages, and the framework within which they operate by establishing an understanding of influential Salafi ideologues, some of whom are discussed below.

### Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya

Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) was a Damascus-based 13<sup>th</sup> century Salafi Muslim scholar and reformer, revered by Salafists today as one of the greatest Islamic scholars in history. He spent many years of his life imprisoned, because his Muslim contemporaries (comprising Islamic scholars and the Muslim community at large) viewed him as deviant in his scholarly conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Ibn Taymiyya believed that the Mongol defeat of the Abbasid Empire and the caliphate was a direct result of Muslims neglecting their religious duties and the failure of Muslim leaders to uphold *shari‘a*; they had fallen away from the true practice of Islam.<sup>14</sup> The Mongols later converted to Islam, posing a problem for Ibn Taymiyya as he lacked justification for revolting against a Muslim ruler who did not interfere with the ability of his citizens to practice the religion. Nevertheless, because the Mongols did not implement *shari‘a*, Ibn Taymiyya formulated an argument wherein he contended that the Mongols were only Muslim in name, and not true, practicing Muslims. He therefore issued a *fatwa* (religious edict or decree) against them, establishing a model of *jihad* against one’s own “apostate”

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<sup>12</sup> Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, “Ayman Al-Zawahiri: The Ideologue of Modern Islamic Militancy” (white paper, US Air Force Counterproliferation Center, Air University, 2004), 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveler [‘Umdat as-Salik]: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, trans. Nuh Ha Mim Keller (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 1994), <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/misc/ibntaymiyya.htm> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Abdel Bari Atwan, *The Secret History of Al Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), 71.

governing authorities.<sup>15</sup> This was significant, because declaring *jihad* against one’s own government was deemed heretofore unacceptable and unprecedented.

Ibn Taymiyya essentially provides justification for modern-day jihadists to revolt against rulers who those jihadists perceive as apostates. One of Ibn Taymiyya’s books, *Al-Siyasah Al-Shariyah [The Islamic Polity]* is considered “a staple of every Islamic militant and [...] proposes such concepts as a social compact between the governor and the governed based upon piety.”<sup>16</sup> Feeling an affinity for the scholar, AQAA frequently quotes Ibn Taymiyya in their proclamations and statements, the most prominent of which is the 1996 Declaration of Jihad by Osama bin Laden against the United States.<sup>17</sup>

### Sayyid Qutb

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), an admirer of Ibn Taymiyya, was an Egyptian school teacher who developed a distaste for the United States over the course of two years as a university student there.<sup>18</sup> Upon his return to Egypt in the early 1950s, Qutb became a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). In October 1954, the Egyptian government disbanded MB and arrested and imprisoned Qutb along with over 400 other members. In prison, he wrote his most well-known book *Ma’alim fi’l-Tariq [Milestones]*, which outlines a narrative and framework for Muslims to rise up and bring about the creation of an Islamist state.<sup>19</sup> Because of the content of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, “Ayman Al-Zawahiri: The Ideologue of Modern Islamic Militancy” (white paper, US Air Force Counterproliferation Center, Air University, 2004), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Usama bin Ladin, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” August 23, 1996, [http://www.terrorismfiles.org/individuals/declaration\\_of\\_jihad1.html](http://www.terrorismfiles.org/individuals/declaration_of_jihad1.html) (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 145.

<sup>19</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2001), 4-6.

the aforementioned book, the Egyptian government rearrested Qutb and returned him to prison. In his lifetime, Qutb spent over ten years in prison.<sup>20</sup>

In his writings, Qutb removed the restriction of *jihad* to self-defense, contending that self-defense meant “the defense of man against all those forces that limit his freedom.”<sup>21</sup> Qutb argued that Muslims had fallen away from true belief and, along with non-Muslims, were living in a state of *jahiliyya* (barbarism/pre-Islamic ignorance).<sup>22</sup> As a result, “true Muslims”, unlike the vast majority who were hypocrites, would need to protect themselves by staying away from the world of *jahiliyya*. Additionally, these true Muslims, as opposed to the hypocritical majority of Muslims, would eventually have to wage *jihad* against their *jahili* governments and replace them with Islamic governments that would practice and implement *shari‘a*. Qutb sought to remove the Egyptian government from power in favor of a *shari‘a*-practicing true Islamic state. In 1966, Egyptian authorities executed Qutb for plotting to assassinate then-Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. A review of Salafi literature by the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center at West Point revealed that Qutb was the most widely-cited ideologue by the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>23</sup>

### Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj

Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj (variant: Farag) (1954-1982) was a puritan who, like Qutb, was executed for committing acts of terrorism in Egypt. He was the theoretician behind the 1981 assassination of former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Faraj considered *jihad* to be the sixth pillar of Islam and felt that Muslims had been neglecting that duty of *jihad*. He deemed it

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<sup>20</sup> Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Kamran Bokhari and Farid Senzai, *Political Islam in the Age of Democratization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 103.

<sup>22</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Heffelfinger, *Radical Islam in America* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2011), n.p.

obligatory for Muslims to wage combative *jihad* against Muslim heretic rulers, all of whom he considered infidels.<sup>24</sup>

### Nasiruddin al-Albani

Nasiruddin al-Albani (variant: al-Albaani) (1914-1999) was a popular 20<sup>th</sup> century Salafi scholar who received no *ijaza* (authorization of scholarship) from a recognized hadith scholar or institution as traditional Islamic educational processes require.<sup>25</sup> He was deemed to be a deviant innovator by traditional mainstream Islamic scholars.<sup>26</sup> Al-Albani was a watch repairman who had abandoned formal education following elementary school, and taught himself most of the Islamic knowledge he possessed. He was criticized greatly by mainstream scholars because of his controversial approach to *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and stance against following one of the traditional four schools of thought. A number of Sunni scholars – such as Habib al-Rahman al-A‘zami (Indian), Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti (Syrian), ‘Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn al-Siddiq al-Ghumari (Moroccan), ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn Muhammad ibn al-Siddiq al-Ghumari (Moroccan), ‘Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda (Syrian), Muhammad ‘Awama (Egyptian) and others – have written about al-Albani’s aberrations and negative innovations and have questioned his scholarship. In addition to his unorthodox legal rulings, al-Albani, like other Salafists/Wahhabists, considered Ash‘aris, Maturidis, and Sufis as deviant from true Islam and

<sup>24</sup> Abd al-Salam Faraj, *Al-Faridah al-Ghaibah [The Neglected Duty]*, trans. Mark Juergensmeyer, n.d., 199, [http://www.juergensmeyer.com/files/Faraj\\_The\\_Neglected\\_Duty.pdf](http://www.juergensmeyer.com/files/Faraj_The_Neglected_Duty.pdf) (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Sayf ad-Din Ahmed ibn Muhammad, *Al-Albani Unveiled: An Exposition of His Errors and Other Important Issues* (Amman: Imam al-Nawawi House, n.d.), 6, [http://al-adaab.org/home/images/stories/pdf/al\\_albani\\_unveiled.pdf](http://al-adaab.org/home/images/stories/pdf/al_albani_unveiled.pdf) (accessed May 25, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Gabriel Fouad Haddad, “Al-Albani – Chief Innovator of Our Time,” As-Sunnah Foundation of America, n.d., <http://sunnah.org/wordpress/2008/07/18/al-albani-chief-innovator-in-our-time/> (accessed May 10, 2014).

even insinuated that they were infidels.<sup>27</sup> Al-Albani was a self-proclaimed scholar who remains highly popular amongst Salafist-influenced youth across the globe.

### **Orthodox Sunni Muslims in Relation to Salafis**

Contrary to Salafis, mainstream Muslims follow one of the four *madhhabs* (schools of jurisprudence) and espouse the Ash‘ari or Maturidi creeds.<sup>28 29</sup> Furthermore, they believe only *mujtahids* (scholars authorized to interpret Islamic law and make juridical decisions) can practice *ijtihad* (independent reasoning).<sup>30</sup> Traditionally these *mujtahids* typically do so only on current matters not addressed by the founders of the four schools or those that require readdressing because of changes in times and circumstances. Salafis, on the other hand, contend that each individual, irrespective of the level of knowledge they possess, has the right to conduct *ijtihad*. They therefore assert that one is not obligated to practice *taqleed* (“imitation” or following one of the four traditional schools of jurisprudence). Additionally, Salafis condemn the Ash‘ari and Maturidi theology and instead follow their own as delineated by their own deviant scholars such as Taqi ad-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya. The difference in views on creed (‘*aqida*) and *taqleed/ijtihad* is what primarily distinguishes the Salafists from mainstream Sunni Muslims.

Mainstream scholars might have disagreements on various subjects outside of creed and *taqleed/ijtihad*, such as social issues and methods of carrying out certain religious duties. Despite these differences, they respect each other’s viewpoints and encourage the strength of diversity in

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University, 2013), 106.

<sup>28</sup> Nuh Ha Mim Keller, “Kalam and Islam,” January 4, 2005, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/kalam.htm> (accessed May 11, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine: Beliefs* (Mountain View, CA: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1998), 45.

<sup>30</sup> Andreas Christmann, “Islamic scholar and religious leader: A portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Būti,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 9 no. 2 (2007): 156, accessed May 25, 2014, DOI: 10.1080/09596419808721146.

that regard. Nations would benefit from leveraging productive facets of mainstream Sunni scholars, ideologues, and leaders like those summarized below.

### Shaykh Dr. Tahir ul-Qadri

Shaykh Dr. Tahir ul-Qadri is a Toronto-based Sunni Muslim scholar, spiritual leader and founder of Minhaj ul-Quran International, an organization with a presence in over 90 countries worldwide and particularly popular amongst ethnic Pakistanis and Indians.<sup>31</sup> In 2010, Dr. Qadri released a 500-page *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings*, where he discusses extensively, from an Islamic perspective, the unlawfulness of killing, torturing, and conducting terrorism against Muslims and non-Muslims alike.<sup>32</sup> In the *fatwa*, Dr. Qadri draws upon Islamic sources and references from historically renowned Muslim scholars, citing their verdicts against terrorism and rebellion. Interestingly, Dr. Qadri also recounts statements against terrorism by contemporary Salafist scholars to dissuade those who give credibility to Salafi scholars and may comprise the recruiting pool from which violent Salafists like AQAA recruit jihadist potentials. Shaykh Tahir ul-Qadri's *Fatwa* is a must-have for any community-based countering violent extremism (CVE) curriculum.

### Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani

Shaykh Hisham Kabbani is a Lebanese-American Sunni Muslim leader and Sufi teacher with transnational influence in Muslim communities across the globe. He came to the fore of public debate in the United States in 1999 when he admonished the U.S. government about the

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<sup>31</sup> Minhaj-ul-Quran International, “A Profile of Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri,” n.d., <http://www.minhaj.org/english/tid/8718/A-Profile-of-Shaykh-ul-Islam-Dr-Muhammad-Tahir-ul-Qadri.html> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Shaykh Dr. Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri, *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings* (London: Minhaj ul-Qur'an International, 2010), <http://www.minhajbooks.com/english/Download/bid/376/Fatwa-on-Terrorism-and-Suicide-Bombings-by-Shaykh-ul-Islam-Dr-Muhammad-Tahir-ul-Qadri.html>.

rise of extremist influence in the country.<sup>33</sup> Speaking at an open forum before the U.S. Department of State, he highlighted that extremists had “hijacked” national organizations, mosques and student groups, spreading their extremist ideology (Salafism) to young, impressionable minds, and were presenting a version of Islam with which mainstream Muslims disagreed. This statement by Shaykh Kabbani sparked an internal dispute within the Muslim community, between national Salafi-controlled Muslim groups and Shaykh Kabbani’s organization, Islamic Supreme Council of America (not to be confused with “Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq” or other organizations bearing a similar name).<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, this debate took place two-and-a-half years before al-Qa’ida’s attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Shaykh Kabbani had forewarned Americans (including Muslim Americans) of the erroneous path down which many Muslim Americans were unwittingly being led by Salafists. Due to Salafi propoganda to the contrary, however, he had initially been written off as an alarmist until after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, had transpired. Shaykh Kabbani has remained a proponent against violent extremism since the early 1990s.<sup>35</sup>

In 1999, Shaykh Kabbani, in conjunction with Shaykh Seraj Hendricks, a leading Islamic scholar in Cape Town, South Africa, issued a legal ruling on *jihad*, addressing legalities and conditions required for war and combative *jihad*, the Islamic concept of “greater *jihad*”, and

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<sup>33</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, “Islamic Extremism: A Viable Threat to U.S. National Security,” January 7, 1999, <http://islamic supremecouncil.org/media-center/domestic-extremism/63-islamic-extremism-a-viable-threat-to-us-national-security.html> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Schwartz, “CAIR and That 80 Percent,” *Center for Islamic Pluralism*, December 20, 2006, <http://www.islamicpluralism.org/150/cair-and-that-80-percent> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> Defend Democracy, *A Sufi Muslim Takes on Wahhabism*, December 12, 2004, <http://www.islamic supremecouncil.org/media-center/isca-in-the-news/35-a-sufi-muslim-takes-on-wahhabism.html> (accessed May 10, 2014).

misconceptions surrounding the topic.<sup>36</sup> The decree essentially relates that *jihad* in the name of religion is not allowed, since, according to one criterion, for instance, no one leader for the entire global Muslim community exists (like the Catholics have with the Pope). In other words, in this day and age, there is no figurehead who has the authority to declare *jihad* on behalf of Muslims. The *fatwa*, in summary, condemns combative *jihad* and terrorism and therefore considers Usama bin Ladin’s (variant: Osama bin Laden) call to *jihad* nonbinding.

### Timothy Winter (Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad)

Timothy Winter (now known as Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad) is a Cambridge-based UK-born Sunni Muslim convert, speaker, writer, researcher and academic, and frequently referred to as “Britain’s most influential Muslim”.<sup>37</sup> Winter’s expertise lies in Islamic theology<sup>38</sup> and interfaith activity. He currently serves as the Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College, an institute that trains imams for British mosques.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, he is a Lecturer of Islamic Studies at Cambridge University’s College of Divinity, and Director of Theology Studies at Wolfson College.<sup>40</sup> Winter is a champion of moderate Islam and works to make mainstream scholarly publications available to the English-speaking community across the globe. For instance, he has translated into English one of the most renowned publications from the great scholar Imam Abu

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<sup>36</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani and Shaykh Seraj Hendricks, *Jihad: A Misunderstood Concept from Islam*, 1999., <http://islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/5-jihad-a-misunderstood-concept-from-islam.html> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> The Independent, “Timothy Winter: Britain’s most influential Muslim – and it was all down to a peach,” *The Independent*, August 20, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/timothy-winter-britains-most-influential-muslim--and-it-was-all-down-to-a-peach-2057400.html> (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> University of Cambridge, Wolfson College Cambridge, “Mr. Tim Winter MA,” n.d., <http://www.wolfson.cam.ac.uk/people/mr-timothy-winter> (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Cambridge Muslim College, “People,” Cambridge Muslim College, 2014, <http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/about/people/> (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Masud Ahmed Khan, “About Abdal Hakim Murad,” Abdal-Hakim Murad – Official Online Articles, n.d., 12, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/> (accessed May 24, 2014).



Hamid al-Ghazali: *Ihya Ulum al-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)*.<sup>41</sup> Murad has been a vocal critic of Usama bin Ladin and AQAA’s violent actions, heresies, and their rejection of traditional Muslim scholarship.<sup>42</sup> He has also promoted a positive congruent interpretation of a Muslim British identity wherein he argues how well the religion and country harmoniously complement and support one another.<sup>43</sup>

### Maajid Nawaz

Maajid Nawaz is a former radical member of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). After being arrested by Egyptian authorities in April 2002 for his involvement with HT, and spending approximately four years in prison, Nawaz became disenchanted with the organization and left it in 2007.<sup>44</sup> He subsequently formed a counter-extremist think tank called the Quilliam Foundation, for which he holds the title of Co-Founder and Chairman.<sup>45</sup> Quilliam functioned as the platform from which Nawaz would disseminate counternarratives to violent extremism.<sup>46</sup> Nawaz’s experiences would serve as useful counter radicalization case studies for members of youth communities who might be walking the fine line between non-violent extremism and extremist violence.

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<sup>41</sup> Khan, “About Abdal Hakim Murad.”

<sup>42</sup> Timothy Winter, “Bin Laden's violence is a heresy against Islam,” Abdulhakim Murad on violence – Colgate University, n.d., <http://groups.colgate.edu/aarislam/abdulhak.htm> (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Abdal Hakim Murad, “British and Muslim?” September 17, 1997, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/british.htm> (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Maajid Nawaz, “Why Leave the Radicals?” *Quilliam Foundation*, June 16, 2008, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/uncategorized/why-leave-the-radicals/> (accessed May 25, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Quilliam Foundation, “Maajid Nawaz: Co-Founder & Chairman,” *Quilliam Foundation*, 2014, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/about/staff/maajid-nawaz/> (accessed May 25, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot, 2013), 220.

## Implications for Countering AQ’s Narrative

### Method

For counternarratives to be effective, they must have mainstream orthodox Sunni religious leaders taking the lead, quoting early and contemporary Islamic scholars influential in the regions, nations, and communities in which these counternarratives will be disseminated. These religious figures and leaders must emphasize AQ’s ideology (Salafism) as being deviant and the violent tactics of Salafi-Jihadists as being unlawful in *shari‘a*. In regions like the Gulf, and more specifically, Saudi Arabia, non-violent Salafist scholars would have to take the lead in condemning violent forms of Salafism (Salafism-Jihadism), as opposed to Salafism/Wahhabism as a whole, since Wahhabism is a state-sponsored and nationally espoused ideology there. In other countries, however, a more effective and lasting solution would be for Muslim communities therein to criticize Salafi ideology overall and send it back to the fringes as it had been throughout Islamic history. A one-size-fits-all<sup>47</sup> approach will yield counterproductive aftereffects, so it is important to plan effectively by studying those potential communities and consulting national, provincial/state, community level stakeholders early on in the process.

### Content

Counternarratives should cover topics pertaining to Islamic laws and perspectives on:

- combative *jihad*,<sup>48</sup>
- suicide bombings;

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<sup>47</sup> Global Counterterrorism Forum, “Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism,” *Global Counterterrorism Forum*, 2013, <http://www.thegctf.org/documents/10162/88482/Final+Ankara+Memorandum.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> For example, the narrative provided in: M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, *Islam & World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (Philadelphia: The Fellowship Press, 1987), 80-81.

- killing of innocents;
- definition of “innocents”;
- obligation to obey the laws of the country in which a Muslim resides;
- patriotism;
- spirituality and Sufism, and emphasizing and nurturing emotions of love (and embracing others) vice those of hate (and destroying others);<sup>49</sup>
- figurative versus literalist interpretations of portions of the Qur’an;
- tolerance and functioning in a gray world vice the espousal of black-and-white (Manichaeic) world views;<sup>50</sup> and
- religious ramifications and consequences (in the afterlife, for example) for those who engage in violent activities.

Additionally, counternarratives could also touch upon social and political topics, along with speculations, affecting global Muslim communities, to include rational refutations of conspiracy theories and rumors, interfaith and intercultural similarities amongst the Abrahamic faiths, diversity and pluralism, and an emphasis on family obligations<sup>51</sup> (to include the encouragement of women and elders in families to hold their family members accountable for their whereabouts).

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<sup>49</sup> For a greater understanding of this topic, see: Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

<sup>50</sup> For a brief discussion of a jihadist’s Manichaeic world view, see: Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007), 43.

<sup>51</sup> R. Kim Cragin, “Resisting Violent Extremism: A Conceptual Model for Non-Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26 no. 2 (April-June 2014): 348.

## Key Considerations

Counternarratives should attack the credibility of Salafist scholars and ideologues and combat those perspectives by quoting influential mainstream Islamic scholars and leaders who refute those viewpoints instead. The vessels through which these messages can be disseminated are the likes of mainstream Muslim individuals mentioned in the previous section. Just like followers of other religions, most Muslims do not understand the intricacies of religion and rely on scholars to teach them Islamic concepts, rulings, and religious duties.<sup>52</sup> Those sufficiently literate will pick up easily-accessible literature available at their local mosques and absorb those materials. In light of the fact that many mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslim organizations receive funding, resources, and imams from Saudi Arabia,<sup>53</sup> many Muslims have easy access to Salafist materials and religious figures. Muslims therefore hear a loud, outsized Salafist voice. Moderate mainstream viewpoints on the other hand are not as ubiquitous and easily accessible, primarily due to deficient funding, resources, and tech-savviness. As a result, Muslims, particularly those in the West, hardly receive the moderate voice.

Additionally, most mainstream Muslim scholars publish their writings in Arabic, and English translations of that literature are rare. Young impressionable minds accept the aforementioned Salafist scholars as legitimate sources and deem them more factual than concepts of religion taught to them by their typically moderate parents, most of whom do not know Arabic or religious documents. Having greater exposure and access to mainstream moderate scholars

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<sup>52</sup> Ed Husain, “A Global Venture to Counter Violent Extremism,” Policy Innovation Memorandum No. 37, September 2013, [http://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/global-venture-counter-violent-extremism/p30494?cid=rss-fullfeed-a\\_global\\_venture\\_to\\_counter\\_vi-090913](http://www.cfr.org/radicalization-and-extremism/global-venture-counter-violent-extremism/p30494?cid=rss-fullfeed-a_global_venture_to_counter_vi-090913) (accessed May 24, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 149.

and viewpoints would mitigate the indoctrination of such active Muslims seeking to learn more about their religion.

## The Montgomery County Model

Like former radical Maajid Nawaz’s efforts in the United Kingdom, an example of an anti-extremist Muslim activist organization in the United States is World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE). Muslim employees of WORDE have conducted extensive first-hand research on effective CVE practices in accordance with the White House’s *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*.<sup>54</sup> Notably, WORDE established the lauded<sup>55</sup> “Montgomery County Model” as a community-based CVE initiative and founded the International Cultural Center (ICC), a community center focused on preventing violent extremism by means of community service, educational programs, and community/civic engagement.<sup>56</sup>

WORDE conducts workshops, promotes mainstream orthodox literature, and hosts moderate Muslim scholars and speakers to educate community youth in its Montgomery County Model. For instance, the organization has brought in specialists and traditional Muslim scholars to counter the black-and-white “good versus evil” or “Muslims versus non-Muslims” world view al-Qa‘ida propagates in its narratives. Referencing historically influential jurists and citing passages from the Qur’an and *hadith* (traditions), these speakers promote tolerance by asserting

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<sup>54</sup> The White House, *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, December 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf> (accessed May 3, 2014).

<sup>55</sup> George Selim, “New Strategies for Countering Homegrown Violent Extremism,” November 13, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/selim-prepared-remarks-20131113.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> International Cultural Center, “About Us,” n.d., <http://www.theicc.net/about-us> (accessed May 24, 2014).

that pluralism is a “key principle in Islam.”<sup>57</sup> The voices of these speakers have resonated deeply with the Montgomery County youth community, who are involved in healthy alternative activities, like soup kitchens and creative arts and sports programs, in their endeavors to be peace-loving, contributing, positive members of society. By supporting moderate, anti-extremist organizations, we shall witness messages that resonate with the youth and worldwide Muslim communities shift from the AQAA narrative to that of peaceful moderates.

## Conclusion

The counternarrative initiatives mentioned in this paper will obviously require government support in the form of public-private partnerships and sufficient financial backing. In addition to private donors and, more importantly, governments providing support to anti-extremist Islamic groups within their own countries, multinational entities such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s (GCTF’s) newly-formed Hedayah<sup>58</sup> project could also provide funding for these endeavors at a global scale. One key criterion in this initiative is ensuring correct identification of a moderate anti-extremist group with which to partner, a mistake government entities have made in the past. The ability to distinguish Salafists from mainstream orthodox Sunni entities is of utmost importance. In addition to the ideological differences between mainstream Muslims and Salafists as described earlier in this paper, one indicator of a Salafist-influenced entity is their dependence on Salafist scholars and ideologues like Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb, as orthodox mainstream Muslim scholars and leaders will not rely on those scholars, deeming Salafi scholars weak and deviant.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Mehreen Farooq, WORDE Senior Fellow, May 13, 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Hedayah, “About Hedayah > Global Counterterrorism Forum,” n.d., <http://www.hedayah.ae/about-hedayah/global-counterterrorism-forum/> (accessed May 24, 2014).

Using good practices as advised in the GCTF’s Ankara Memorandum, and once a framework is in place, one can begin spreading narratives to counter AQAA’s messaging. Muslim leaders, former radicals and activists from within the community would disseminate the counternarratives at the grassroots level using the same platforms as those utilized by AQAA<sup>59</sup> – most notably Muslim community centers, mosques, university campuses<sup>60</sup> and online chat rooms and websites. This would entail that these institutions add moderate mainstream Muslim scholars, former radicals, celebrities, and activists to their lists of “recommended” guest speakers and invite them often, as they do with Salafist speakers. Additionally, these institutions would need to add a variety of Islamic scholarly literature to their libraries, to include those by scholars and activists mentioned in this paper and others who counter AQ, Salafist, and Salafist-Jihadist narratives.

Moreover, it would behoove the global community at large to have access to English-language (and later, other major languages) scholarly websites that offer rulings and recommendations on various issues facing Muslims. Such websites should also incorporate “ask-the-scholar” forums, where individuals can pose specific questions to scholars designated to answer questions on those websites as a part of their regular duties. Such a platform would serve particularly useful to the youth community, which typically has limited or no access to moderate Muslim scholarly voices.

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<sup>59</sup> Baker, *Extremists in Our Midst*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Husain, “A Global Venture to Counter Violent Extremism.”

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