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978-0-521-73743-2 - The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global, Second Edition

Fawaz A. Gerges

Excerpt

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Prologue

The Far Enemy, or al-Adou al-Baeed, is a term used by jihadis to refer to the United States and its Western allies. This book tells the story of the internationalization of jihad (armed struggle) and how and why in the late 1990s jihadis – who since the 1970s had focused their fight against the “near enemy,” or al-Adou al-Qareeb (Muslim regimes) – shifted gears and called for a new global jihad against the far enemy. Jihadis (they invented the term and refer to themselves as such) are militant activists who feel estranged from the secular social and political order at home and intrinsically threatened by globalization and westernization.¹ Unlike mainstream Islamists who have given up on the use of force, since the 1970s jihadis have utilized violence in the name of religion and have sought to seize power and Islamize society by autocratic fiat from the top down. But their revolt is directed not only against the secular status quo, which they perceive as morally abhorrent, but also against the religious authority and the established canon of Islamic jurisprudence, scholarship, and history that they view as being subverted by corrupting Western influences.² In a sense, jihadis are practicing taqleed (emulating tradition) and are engaged in ijtehad (an effort of interpretation of the sacred texts) at the same time.

My study focuses on doctrinaire jihadis who have used violence against both their own governments (the near enemy) and Western targets (the far enemy); the most important of these jihadis are the Egyptian al-Jama’a al-Islamiya (Islamic Group) and Tanzim al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad); the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which now seems to be defunct and replaced by the Salafist Group for Dawa and Combat; Al Qaeda; al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad, led by the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 • Prologue

militant Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; and other smaller fringe groups.³

But I do not examine the so-called irredentist jihadis, who struggle to redeem land considered to be part of dar al-islam (House of Islam) from non-Muslim rule or occupation, like Palestinian Hamas and Jihad, Lebanon's Hizbollah or Party of God, and other groups in Kashmir, Chechnya, Mindanao, and elsewhere. Irredentist jihadism is sometimes the object of rivalry between nationalist forces, who may not conceive of it as jihad, and Islamists, and, within the latter, between local and global elements, as between the Afghan mujahedeen (Islamic fighters) and the "Afghan Arabs" who joined their struggle in the 1980s; similar nuances have been discernible in other irredentist conflicts, notably in Bosnia from 1992 to 1996, in Mindanao, and now in Iraq. There exist major differences among these three distinct strands of jihadism – internal, global, and irredentist – in terms of diversity of objectives, strategy, and tactics. For example, an important distinction is between the resort to armed struggle that is primarily determined by the context (foreign rule or military occupation) and that which arises primarily out of a radical doctrine expressing a preference for violence over nonviolent strategies despite the possibility of engaging in the latter: "Irredentist struggles are not as a rule the work of doctrinaire jihadis, whereas both internal and global jihads typically are."⁴

Another critical distinction is that my book does not deal with mainstream Islamists, that is, with Muslim Brothers and other politically independent activists who now accept the rules of the political game and emphatically embrace democratic principles and elements of a modernist outlook, although many observers still question their real commitment to democracy.⁵ In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s elements of the Muslim Brotherhood flirted with violence and established the so-called al-Jihaz al-Sirri, or secret apparatus (an underground paramilitary unit within the political organization), which led Egyptian authorities to brutally suppress and persecute its rank and file.⁶ But since the early 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood – the most powerfully organized Islamist movement in the world of Islam, with local branches in the Arab Middle East and central, south, and south-east Asia – has moved more and more to the political mainstream, and now it aims to Islamize state and society through peaceful means.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Prologue • 3

Although Muslim Brothers are often targeted and excluded from politics by ruling autocrats, they no longer use force or the threat of force to attain their goals. Mainstream Islamists represent the overwhelming majority within the Islamist political spectrum, whereas jihadis, the focal point of this book, are a tiny – but critical – minority.

The New Definition of Jihad

Nowhere is jihadis' revolutionary challenge more evident than in their systemic effort to elevate the status of jihad in Muslim consciousness and make it equal with the five pillars of Islam (profession of faith, prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage). Since the time of the Prophet there has existed a consensus among Muslim ulema (religious scholars) on the status of jihad as a collective duty (*fard kifaya*), one that is determined by the whole community, not by individuals. They also agree that there are five pillars in Islam. Pious Muslims, and even mainstream Islamists, accept the existing consensus and may even take it for granted.

In contrast, jihadis of all colors consider jihad a permanent and personal obligation (*fard 'ayn*) and a vital pillar, though now absent, of Islam.⁷ Osama bin Laden, the chief of Al Qaeda, subscribes to this definition of jihad as an “individual duty” for every Muslim who is capable of going to war.⁸ As he put it, “jihad is part of our religion and no Muslim may say that he does not want to do jihad in the cause of God. . . . These are the tenets of our religion.”⁹ Bin Laden went further: “No other priority, except faith, could be considered before [jihad].”¹⁰

Among the five pillars, bin Laden ranked jihad second only to *iman* (belief), an astonishing judgment coming from a nonreligious authority. But we should not be surprised by that because the new ideologues of jihad contest the very foundation of the classical school, which laid more stress on the “defensive” and “collective” nature of jihad. The new ideologues claim that the old rules and regulations do not apply because Muslim lands are “occupied,” by either local “apostates” or their American masters.¹¹ Under such conditions, jihad becomes obligatory to all Muslims, to defend their religion and its sanctuaries.¹² Thus the lines become blurred between “defensive” and “offensive” jihad as well

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 • Prologue

as between “collective” and “individual” duty. The new ideologues portray jihad as an all-encompassing struggle that requires full and permanent mobilization of Muslim society against real and imagined enemies at home and abroad. In this context, bin Laden warns fellow Muslims against complacency and dereliction of duty:

Fighting is part of our religion and our Shariah. Those who love God and the prophet and this religion may not deny a part of that religion. This is a very serious matter. Whoever denies even a very minor tenet of religion would have committed the gravest sin in Islam. Such persons must renew their faith and rededicate themselves to their religion.¹³

Jihad as a Permanent Revolution

More than anyone else, Sayyid Qutb, hanged by Egyptian authorities in 1966 for his alleged subversive preaching and plotting against the nationalist regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, inspired generations of jihadis, including Al Qaeda’s senior leaders, Osama bin Laden and his deputies – the two late military commanders, Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri and Mohammed Atef (known as Abu Hafs al-Masri), theoretician Ayman al-Zawahiri, and thousands of others – to wage perpetual jihad to “abolish injustice from the earth, to bring people to the worship of God alone, and to bring them out of servitude to others into the servants of the Lord.”¹⁴ Far from viewing jihad as a collective duty governed by strict rules and regulations (similar to just war theory in Christianity, international law, and classical Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*), jihad, for Qutb, was a permanent revolution against internal and external enemies who usurped God’s sovereignty.¹⁵ He attacked Muslim scholars and clerics with “defeatist and apologetic mentalities” for confining jihad to “defensive war.” There is no such thing as a defensive, limited war in Islam, only an offensive, total war, Qutb asserted: “The Islamic Jihaad has no relationship to modern warfare, either in its causes or in the way in which it is conducted. The cause of Islamic Jihaad should be sought in the very nature of Islam, and its [universal] role in the world.”¹⁶

Qutb was the first contemporary radical thinker who revolutionarized the concept of jihad and invested it with a new meaning – waging

Prologue • 5

an “eternal” armed struggle “against every obstacle that comes into the way of worshipping God and the implementation of the divine authority on earth, hakimiya, and returning this authority to God and taking it away from the rebellious usurpers [rulers].”¹⁷ In his legal summation in his own defense during the trial for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, former emir (prince) of al-Jama’ a al-Islamiya (Islamic Group), indirectly utilized Qutb’s idea of God’s sovereignty to rationalize Sadat’s murder: “God made hakimiya a matter of kufr [disbelief] or iman [belief] or kufr and Islam or jahiliya [ignorance of divine authority]. There is no middle way in this command and no solh [truce]. Believers govern according to God’s laws and do not change or replace a single letter or word of them; kufar [infidels] are those who do not govern according to God’s laws,” a direct reference to Sadat.¹⁸ That is a crime punishable by death, Abdel Rahman implied. In his closing arguments, he challenged the definition offered by the ruling and religious establishment regarding the defensive nature of jihad; Islam does not put any limits on jihad in the cause of God because it is a continuous struggle against internal and external enemies. Like Qutb, Abdel Rahman sarcastically debunked this official heresy and asked the judges if the imperial expansion of the Islamic empire was “defensive”?¹⁹

In Zawahiri’s memoir, which he began to write in 2000 and which he published immediately after September 11, he writes that Qutb’s powerful ideas, particularly the sovereignty of God, along with his violent death, comprised the first spark that lit the jihadi fire.²⁰ Zawahiri credits Qutb with giving rise to the contemporary jihadi movement and dramatically and strategically changing its direction and focus. According to Zawahiri, Qutb convinced young activists that the internal enemy is as dangerous as, if not more dangerous than, the external one because it serves as a tool for the latter to wage a hidden war against Islam and Muslims. As a result, Zawahiri adds, the Islamic vanguard, who used to consider the external enemy as the enemy of Islam, began to fight local regimes, which he said are the real enemy of Islam.²¹ Zawahiri does not appear to be aware of the irony and contradiction of his position. In his memoir, he heaps praise on Qutb for reminding jihadis of the urgent need to attack the near enemy as opposed to the far enemy. Yet it does not occur to Zawahiri that by targeting the United States, he

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 • Prologue

and his Al Qaeda associates took their jihadi movement in a dramatically opposite direction from that recommended by Qutb, threatening its very existence. But he rationalized this pronounced dichotomy between his rhetoric and his action by saying the “battle today cannot be fought on just a regional level without taking into account global hostility,” a reference to America’s direct intervention against the Islamist movement.²²

Adding a personal touch to his narrative of Qutb’s contribution to the jihadi movement, Zawahiri, who was in his teens when Qutb was executed, said that Qutb personally inspired him to establish the first underground cell (composed of a few high school friends) of Egyptian “Jihad” in 1967.²³ Indeed, Zawahiri’s radicalism is deeply influenced by Qutb’s writings, and all his publications borrowed intellectually from Qutb’s, particularly his commentary on the Qur’an, *In the Shades of the Qur’an*, considered by some jihadis to be his best for its accessibility and human dimension.²⁴ Qutb’s *Milestones* targeted Zawahiri’s generation – “this vanguard” – who, Qutb noted, should know the landmarks on the road toward their destination, which is to rid Muslim society and politics of jahiliya and to restore hakimiya to earth. As he said in the introduction, “I have written *Milestones* for this vanguard, which I consider to be a waiting reality about to be materialized.”²⁵ Those fateful words, written in a prison cell before he was hanged, led thousands of young men on a violent journey to exact revenge on jahili rulers and jahili society in general.

Thus Zawahiri was not the only young jihadi to adopt Qutb’s expansive definition of jihad as a perpetual war and a personal obligation. In the eyes of the new ideologues, jihad ceases to be a collective endeavor and is transformed into an individual journey and a path to self-realization and purification. In his trial, Abdel Rahman, a radical cleric who acted as the spiritual guide to Egyptian jihadis from the 1970s until the early 1990s, publicly lectured the judges that Sadat’s killers had a duty, not just a right, to take matters into their own hands: “Any Muslim who observes his society not to be governed by the Shariah [Islamic law] must struggle hard [pursue jihad] to apply it, and he is not required to be a scholar.”²⁶ Disputing the government’s assertion, Abdel Rahman reminded his audience that there is no church and no hierarchy in Islam and that believers can directly interpret the texts with no recourse

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Prologue • 7

to the established authority; jihad is very much an individual obligation and does not need blessing by the clerical community.²⁷

It would not be an exaggeration to say that jihadis look up to Qutb as a founding, spiritual father, if not the mufti, or theoretician, of their contemporary movement. Qutb's *Milestones* provided the religious justification for jihadi groups, like Egyptian al-Takfeer wal-Hijira (Excommunication and Hegira, or the Society of Muslims, led by Shukri Mustafa, an agronomist), Tanzim al-Jihad and Jama'a al-Islamiya, and Algerian Armed Islamic Group, which appropriated his concepts of hakimiya and jahiliya and used them as ammunition in their ideological and political struggle against Muslim rulers. In the eyes of Islamic activists, *Milestones* is symbolically powerful because it was the last book written by Qutb before his execution and so is seen as his final "will" to future generations. Ironically, Qutb's Arab biographers agree that of all his texts, *Milestones* is the weakest and the least rigorous intellectually, and that it includes one old idea, jahili society, which he rehashes in a long literary monologue form. But that is part of the strength and appeal of *Milestones* to young activists who hunger for radical, simplistic notions that challenge classical interpretations of the Islamic canon and allow them to go directly to the sacred texts without mediation or intervention by the religious authority. As one Arab writer said, Qutb's importance to jihadis lies in "daring" to neutralize the fiqh and providing jihadis with direct access to the original texts, which they utilized as absolute weapons against "impious regimes."²⁸

Jihadis whom I interviewed in several countries said they were inspired by Qutb, who showed them the way forward and whom they referred to as a shahid, or martyr. They talked about the torture he endured at the hands of the Nasserist security apparatus and the dignity and courage he showed under duress. Zawahiri says that Qutb's words acquired a deeper resonance because of his defiance and refusal to appeal to President Nasser to spare his life, which provided activists with an example of steadfastness and sacrifice. For example, he cites the case of Salah Sirriya, a Palestinian Islamist who in the early 1970s assembled a group of young Egyptian college students to carry out a coup d'état and kill President Sadat by seizing control of the Military Academy in Heliopolis in the Cairo suburbs. The coup failed, and Sirriya and his top aide were sentenced to death for leading what came to be known

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Fawaz A. Gerges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 • Prologue

as the “Military Academy” group. Zawahiri heaped praise on Sirriya for his courage and not faltering in the face of death; when a group of political prisoners gathered around Sirriya and begged him to petition Sadat for leniency, he retorted with the conviction of a believer: “What powers does Sadat have to prolong and control my destiny? Look at this melancholic prison, and this awful food, and these clogged toilets in which we empty this food. This is the harsh reality of prison life, so why do we hold on to it?”²⁹ For dramatic effect, Zawahiri describes the last meeting in prison between Sirriya and his wife and nine children before his execution, in which he unequivocally told her: “If you petition for amnesty, consider yourself divorced.”³⁰ The moral of the story, Zawahiri concludes, is that although Sirriya was killed and his group dismantled, other jihadis have carried the banner forward, including his own group – the Jihad organization – and have brought Sadat to justice by assassinating him.

In jihadis’ eyes, Qutb appears bigger than life, a model to live up to and an example to be imitated. According to Zawahiri, Sirriya was one of the first jihadis to follow in Qutb’s footsteps, and he, too, motivated other activists to travel the same road. Jihadism has gradually evolved into a living experience, not only an intellectual discourse. Although the senior echelon of the movement are versed with theory and doctrine, on the whole the foot soldiers are driven by the suffering of Muslim communities or specific individuals. In a strikingly revealing interview with the Arabic-language newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, the Moroccan widow of an Al Qaeda operative, Abd al-Karim al-Majati, who was killed in 2004 in a shootout with the Saudi security forces and who is accused of planning the Madrid train bombings, said her husband’s baptism into jihad was purely natural and emotional, not doctrinal and intellectual. Asked about al-Majati’s alleged disagreement with radical clerics, she answered: “I stress that educationally my husband was a simple man because he did not attend university and did not take lessons in the Shariah, and he even had problems with the Arabic language [more fluent with French]. . . . Sometimes we received texts from the Internet, but my husband did not read them, his relationship to jihad was instinctual.”³¹ Al-Majati is the norm, not the exception.

After listening to jihadis’ tales about Qutb and other martyrs, I realize that their movement is nourished on a diet of political

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Fawaz A. Gerges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Prologue • 9

persecution and suffering and that they are socialized into a siege mentality and driven by a powerful force to exact revenge against their ruling tormentors. The bloody history of official torture and persecution perpetuates a culture of victimhood and a desire for revenge and enables the movement to mobilize young recruits and constantly renew itself. Arab/Muslim prisons, particularly their torture chambers, have served as incubators for generations of jihadis. For example, Montasser al-Zayat – who in the early 1980s served time with Zawahiri in prison in the Sadat assassination case and who has since become the best-known attorney defending jihadis and Islamists in Egyptian trials – published two memoirs in Arabic titled *Ayman al-Zawahiri as I Knew Him* and *Islamic Groups: An Inside-Out View* that show that jihadis are terribly influenced by their experience of persecution and suffering and a deep-seated desire to seek revenge.³² Qutb's Arab biographers also wondered if his words would not have been calmer had he not been mistreated in prison.³³ As long as Muslim governments violate the human rights of their citizens and sanction abuse, they will continue to breed radicalism and militancy. To summarize, Qutb popularized and legitimized the idea of making jihad a personal and permanent endeavor to confront "jahili leadership" and "jahili society" alike.³⁴

Jihad Against the Near Enemy

If Qutb provided an overarching intellectual architecture for the contemporary jihadi movement, Mohammed Abd al-Salam Faraj (who coordinated the 1981 assassination of President Sadat and was the ideologue of the Jihad Group, which later evolved into Tanzim al-Jihad (widely known as Egyptian Islamic Jihad) translated the meanings of jihad into operational terms. While Qutb produced an ideological manifesto, Faraj was an activist who preached jihad in local mosques, recruited jihadis, and plotted underground to overthrow the regime along lines similar to those of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Faraj, whose colleagues describe him as a fiery and charismatic orator, defined jihad in a small booklet titled "al-Faridah al-Ghaibah," or "Absent (or Forgotten) Duty," which became the bible and operational manual of all Egyptian jihadis in the 1980s and 1990s, including the

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Fawaz A. Gerges

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 • Prologue

two leading organizations – Jihad and its much bigger sister, al-Jama'a al-Islamiya.³⁵

Several points are worth highlighting about this critical document. To begin, the title of Faraj's booklet refers to the jihad duty, which is no longer observed and is even contested and denied by some ulema. He aimed at reviving jihad by reminding Muslims of the significance of this concept to the establishment of an Islamic government, to which all Muslims are obliged to strive. Here Faraj presented a new idea: that jihad was the way to establish an Islamic state, while the classical conception of jihad required the existence of an Islamic authority to do so. Next, Faraj makes the case for jihad as a personal, not just collective, duty because now the near enemy (Muslim rulers) occupies the country. Historically, the classical view held that jihad was a collective duty that could be activated only if outside enemies threatened or invaded Muslim lands. But Faraj turned the classical view on its head and asserted that present-day Muslim rulers, particularly Egyptians, forsake their religion by not applying the Shariah and by taking unbelievers as their allies: "The rulers of these days are apostate. They have been brought up at the tables of colonialism, no matter whether of the crusading, the communist, or the Zionist variety. They are Muslim only in name, even if they pray, fast, and pretend that they are Muslims."³⁶ Therefore, waging jihad against these apostates is a personal duty of every Muslim who is capable of fighting, until the former repent or get killed.

The importance of Faraj's operational dictum does not lie in defining jihad as an individual and permanent obligation and refuting the classical view regarding the collective and defensive nature of jihad. Qutb and others had already made that argument very eloquently and powerfully. Rather, Faraj posited a new paradigm, assigning a much higher priority to jihad against the near enemy than against the far enemy. According to Faraj, a young activist who came from a middle-class family and who graduated from Cairo University with a degree in electrical engineering, not even liberating Jerusalem (the occupied Palestinian capital and the most important place for Muslims after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia) takes precedence over the struggle against local infidels. Why? Faraj advances three arguments in support of his position. First, "fighting the near enemy must take priority over that of the far