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.[1]

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.[2] Al-Qaeda has been replaced

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

[2] 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.

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with self-organising, independently directed groups that take their inspiration but no directive from the likes of Osama bin Laden.[3] 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'.[4] 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.'[5]

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.

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

[4] B. Hoffman, 'The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama Bin Laden Still Matters', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2007.

[5] 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*[6] 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 pro- duction of the militant Salafist worldview, the metanarrative of innate and sustained Western hostility waged against Islam and its practi- tioners, 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 accom- modate 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

[6] *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.[7] 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

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[7] 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 mono-
lithic 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 preci-
sion 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;[8] 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;[9] 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.[10] 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?

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[8] R. Cowan *et al.*, 'Bus Bomb Clues May Hold Key to Terror Attack', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2005.

[9] H. Siddique, '"Take Care of Mummy", July 7 Ringleader Told Daughter', *The Guardian*, 24 April 2008.

[10] A. Benschop, 'Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold', 2004, available at 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'.[1] 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:

[1] Burke, 'Think Again: Al Qaeda', p. 18.

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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.[2]

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'.[3]

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.[4]

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

[2] 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.

[3] 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.

[4] 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.[5]

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.'[6] 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.[7]

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[5] BBC, 'London Bomber: Text in Full', *BBC News Website*, 1 September 2005.

[6] D. McGrory and Z. Hussain, 'Cousin Listened to Boasts About Suicide Mission', *The Times*, 22 July 2005.

[7] 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.