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Why Clerics Turn Deadly

In July 2010, the media wing of al-Qaeda interviewed the American-born jihadist[1] cleric[2] Anwar al-Awlaki from a secret location in Yemen. One striking element of the resulting video is that throughout, al-Awlaki's remarks reflect the trappings of academia. Rather than emphasizing his violent credentials, the introductory frames recount al-Awlaki's curriculum vitae, including a BA from the University of Colorado and a master's from San Diego State University.[3] After welcoming him, the interviewer asks what al-Awlaki's role was in inciting Major Nidal Hasan to carry out the Fort Hood shooting in November 2009. His response? "Yes, Nidal Hasan was a *student* of mine and I am honored by this" (emphasis mine, *na⁀am, niḍāl ḥasan min ṭulābī, wa ānā ātasharaf bidhalik*), revealing that when portraying himself to his fellow jihadists, al-Awlaki defines himself primarily as a scholar and teacher rather than as a fighter or dissident.[4]

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[1] Jihadist ideology is a set of ideas organized around the central claim that Islam should be the organizing principle of human affairs and that violence is an acceptable means for pursuing this goal. I use the terms "jihadi" and "jihadist" to denote a person, thing, or organization that is associated with jihadist ideology. These are the most common terms for these individuals and organizations in academic literature, and are literal translations of the term that these actors prefer. Hegghammer (2009) and Hegghammer (2010a) propose alternative terms based on the variety of jihadists' goals and methods.

[2] There is no uncontested definition of the term "cleric" when applied to Muslim religious elites. For my purposes, a cleric is a person who produces Islamic literature and who may or may not claim a lineage of scholarly authority. I defend my definition in detail in Chapter 2.

[3] It appears that al-Awlaki is inflating his credentials. He started but never finished a degree at San Diego State University.

[4] "Anwar Al Awlaki Al Malahem Interview FULL ENGLISH Translation," YouTube video, posted July 20, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eInGfXV3YvY, min. 8:13, accessed July 27, 2015, and archived at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K.

Al-Awlaki is not the only jihadist who styles himself an academic. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), released a curriculum vitae that was vague on details but touted his PhD from the University of Baghdad and his purported reputation as a knowledgeable scholar of Islamic law. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, writes prodigious tomes with scores of academic-style citations. Like any citation-obsessed academic, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most prominent jihadist theoreticians, crowed about being identified in a 2006 RAND study as the most influential living jihadist thinker based on citations by featuring the study on his website. And even Usama Bin Laden, the now-deceased leader of al-Qaeda, imitated the academic pretension of taking photographs in front of bookshelves to convey learned authority.[5]

This book explores the academic culture of jihadist clerics to illuminate how jihadist ideology is produced and reproduced among the elites of the jihadist movement. Scholars of Islamic law such as Zeghal (1996, 34) understand that Muslim clerics are academics who strive for a life of pious learning, often with professional titles that exactly mirror those of academics in other settings. However, scholarship on political violence has frequently overlooked the academic identities of jihadist clerics, instead conceptualizing them primarily as religious leaders, preachers, writers, extremists, and militants. Clerics can turn to violence for a variety of reasons, but I focus on two major pathways. The first way to become a jihadist cleric is to become a jihadist first and a cleric later. As I show later, these *jihadists-turned-clerics* can be understood through existing models of lay Muslim radicalization.

The second pathway to jihadism that I describe highlights an overlooked aspect of cleric radicalization: a surprisingly mundane set of academic career pressures that can push clerics toward militant jihadist ideas. My core argument is that *blocked ambition* – the inability of an actor to achieve a substantial, deeply held goal – nudges clerics toward jihadism. Blocked ambition is a common human experience and has been suggested as a cause of radicalization in other contexts. When the ambition of a cleric to become an academic is blocked by failure on the cleric job market or by state repression, those clerics whose ambitions are blocked are at much greater risk of becoming jihadist. To put the argument colloquially, I offer a disgruntled-graduate-student theory of jihad.

The divide is stark: clerics who find gainful employment in state-dominated academic, religious, and political institutions in the Middle East are extremely unlikely to preach violent jihad, while those who work outside of this system are more likely to end up preaching violence. Of course, it may be the case that some clerics with state-funded jobs secretly endorse jihadism, but secretly held beliefs are not my concern. Instead, I seek to understand those clerics who openly preach and incite political violence.

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[5] http://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/660/media/images/83127000/jpg/_83127737_83127321.jpg, accessed February 9, 2017, and archived at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K.

Proving that some clerics become jihadists because their academic ambitions are blocked is not an easy task. In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate that indicators of blocked ambition in the lives of would-be clerics – weak graduate school networks, nonacademic jobs, and removal from academic posts – are highly correlated with whether clerics preach jihadist ideas. Of course, there are other plausible explanations for this outcome: some would-be clerics develop jihadist ideas early and never seek a traditional academic career, and even if they do, they may be shut out of traditional academic circles precisely because their ideas are already too radical. Sorting out the various pathways to jihadism is difficult, and even though I provide a substantial amount of new quantitative and qualitative data on jihadist clerics, the evidence I can provide remains circumstantial. However, it represents the outer frontier of what is currently knowable about why some clerics advocate jihadism.

This introductory chapter lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book by previewing the argument and the evidence. In Section 1.1, I lay out the terms of the debate surrounding the rise of modern jihadism and consider whether the causes of radicalization identified in other contexts might also explain why clerics turn to violent jihad. Section 1.2 sketches the theory of blocked ambition. I first provide contextual information about how the norms, practices, and politics of Islamic legal academia deeply pervade the lives of Muslim clerics. I then explain how the ambition of clerics to advance within academia shapes their behavior and expression, and how finding this ambition blocked can put them on a path to jihadism. Section 1.3 describes how I use a combination of methods ranging from ethnography to statistics to test my argument. Section 1.4 considers the ethics of researching militant jihadism, and Section 1.5 concludes by summarizing the plan of the book and the content of the subsequent chapters.

1.1 UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF MODERN JIHADISM

Few ideologies have influenced international affairs in the twenty-first century more than militant jihadism. Modern jihadism is a movement founded around an ideology that claims to hearken back to the founding doctrines of Islam but is in fact a relatively recent phenomenon. At its core, jihadism is violent Islamism. It is Islamism because jihadist ideology holds that society should be governed by Islamic doctrines (according to jihadists' interpretation of Islam). It is inherently violent because jihadists hold that violence is a legitimate means for achieving the society and government they desire. Modern jihadists reach these conclusions by drawing a doctrinal connection between the foundational Islamic concept of God's sovereignty to the violent imposition of the society and government that jihadists believe God desires. For jihadists, God's sovereignty requires that only God's laws be followed, so any form of government that does not take God's laws as its own should be resisted and replaced, violently if necessary. From this foundational claim, jihadist apologists work to develop

interpretations of Islamic law that permit violence in a variety of circumstances to achieve jihadist political goals, though jihadists differ about precisely how these goals should be pursued and what form an ideal Islamic government should take.

Modern jihadism has been developing by fits and starts over the past century. Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), and Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) each developed and refined ideas that would come to constitute the framing principles of modern jihadism. Still, modern jihadism did not really come into existence until the intellectual development provided by Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989) and the violent Egyptian Islamism of the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, Hegghammer dates the dawn of the modern jihadist era to as recently as 1979 or 1980 (Hegghammer 2010*a*, 3).

Observers at the end of the twentieth century might be forgiven for overlooking signs that names like "Bin Laden" and the "Islamic State" would become household terms. Data from the Google n-grams project shows that the term "jihad" was relatively infrequent in English-language books until 1950, when its use began to rise dramatically.[6] By the eve of the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center and targets in Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania, the term "jihad" was being used seven times as often as in 1950. Usama Bin Laden's name does not register until 1998, the year in which he directed attacks against the US embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, and came to the attention of the American public for the first time. Even then, Flagg Miller writes, "Bin Laden's role in global affairs was not immediately apparent to Muslim audiences familiar with his career" (Miller 2015, 9). Then, in 2001, the September 11 attack catapulted jihadism and Bin Laden to the fore of American consciousness and foreign policy. Reference to "jihad" in English-language books approximately tripled from its 2000 value, and Bin Laden's name became roughly nine times more frequent, exceeding references to "jihad" itself. On the day of his death, Bin Laden was the subject of virtually every headline and a substantial amount of web activity.[7]

Today, militant jihadism is perhaps the most widely influential revolutionary ideology in the international system, having shaped world events over the last twenty years and still posing a remarkably durable challenge to the existing international order. Nationalist strains of jihadism have fueled tenacious territorial conflicts in Palestine, Chechnya, and elsewhere. Transnational jihadists have called for the complete overthrow of the existing international system and virtually all of the norms that undergird it (Mendelsohn 2009), and have followed through with dramatic acts of political violence. As a result, US

[6] The Google n-grams project tracks the frequency of words in approximately 15 percent of all English-language books ever published. I obtain data on the use of the word "jihad" from https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?direct_url=t1%3B%2Cjihad%3B%2Cc0, archived.
[7] Google search trends for "bin laden" show a dramatic spike on the day of his death: www.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=bin%20laden, archived.

foreign policy has been dominated by the specter of jihadism in a way that few anticipated even during the tense weeks following the September 11 attacks. By October 2001, the US military was striking targets in Afghanistan in a war that would officially last thirteen years. In 2003, the United States launched a second war against Iraq, lasting almost nine years. Although the initial impetus for war was not to root out jihadists, the administration of President George W. Bush consistently referred to Iraq as a front in the "war on terror,"[8] and the power vacuum that ensued after American forces toppled the government of Saddam Hussein was filled, in part, by a tenacious jihadist insurgency aimed at both ousting American forces and settling scores with Shia militias.

Even after the official end of the Iraq war, the remnants of this insurgency haunt US foreign policy interests in the Middle East. After apparent defeat in 2007, an insurgent group named the Islamic State of Iraq grasped the opportunities offered by the neighboring Syrian civil war, reinvented itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and declared itself a jihadist state under Emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A 2014 RAND Corporation study reports that "beginning in 2010, there was a rise in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups and fighters, particularly in Syria and North Africa. There was also an increase in the number of attacks perpetrated by al-Qa'ida and its affiliates" (Jones 2014, x). Despite US efforts to pivot away from the Middle East after fifteen years of fighting jihadists, the next decade of American foreign policy is likely to be as dominated by counter-jihadism as the last.

What explains the rise and persistence of modern jihadism? Broadly speaking, scholars have taken two approaches to answering this question. The first approach attempts to develop general theories to explain rebellion and then applies these theories to understand jihadist movements (see, for example, Della Porta 2013). A key debate in this scholarship is whether rebellion is primarily caused by the grievances of those who rebel or by structural conditions that provide opportunities for violent collective action. This approach results in parsimonious theories of rebellion, but these explanations sometimes struggle to explain specific aspects of jihadist violence. A second approach starts from the specific circumstances and details of jihadist movements and traces the apparent causes of their rise using the tools of history, sociology, and anthropology. This work is especially well attuned to the nuance and texture of jihadists and their social movements, but these explanations are often contextually specific and refer to unique historical moments and the idiosyncrasies of individuals.

My argument in this book draws on both of these approaches. I explain the choices of some Muslim clerics to preach jihad using a theory of blocked ambition that hearkens back to general theories of grievance and rebellion, but

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[8] Garamone, Jim. "Iraq Part of Global War on Terrorism, Rumsfeld Says." DoD News. http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=43444, accessed February 9, 2017, and archived at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K.

I highlight particular forms of blocked ambition that are specific to the context of modern jihadism.

Among the scholarship that develops general theories of rebellion, the argument of Gurr (1970) that grievances motivate rebels is the most direct predecessor to my theory of blocked ambition. There has been a great deal of work before and since, but Gurr's *Why Men Rebel* remains one of the clearest applications of the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Dollard et al. 1939) to the problem of political violence. Gurr focuses on the choice of individuals to rebel and argues that individuals get angry when they feel they should be getting more resources and opportunities than they are. This sense of mismatch between expectations and outcomes can arise because individuals have higher expectations than before, or because their ability to realize those expectations is lower, or both (Gurr 1970, 46). In Gurr's argument, if people become angry enough because of their relative deprivation in society, they will rebel when the opportunity presents itself.

This argument is a predecessor to my own argument that clerics' blocked ambitions can push them toward the violent ideas of militant jihadism. The novel aspect of my argument is in detailing the specific features of blocked ambition for clerics. Although Gurr is theorizing about the psychology of frustrated individuals, he tends to focus on sources of relative deprivation relevant to broad societal groups across many contexts: discrimination, economic decline, and repression (Gurr and Duvall 1973, 138–139). I focus instead on a form of blocked ambition that is specific to individuals who would like to become Muslim clerics in the specific context of the modern Middle East and Muslim world.

I am not the first scholar to propose the idea that jihadists are inspired by a mismatch between their circumstances and their expectations. Many scholars have pointed to poverty and marginalization as possible explanations for the rise of jihadist violence. For example, Ansari (1984, 141) examines the jihadist assassins of Anwar Sadat in Egypt and concludes that "the militant view is confined to a segment of the population on the margin of urban society. ... For this segment of the population which is experiencing an acute sense of deprivation, the resort to Islam was more a sign of social protest than a way of life." Kepel (1984, 128), also speaking of Egypt, says that, "In the ramshackle dwellings of the suburbs ringing the large Egyptian cities, people by-passed by the progress and development turned towards other, more radical tendencies of the Islamicist movement." Ayubi (2003) agrees that the dissatisfactions of the middle class in the Middle East explain the surprising number of students and professionals involved in the jihadist movement in Sadat's Egypt. "While the middle strata have been expanding in size and in proportion in most Arab societies, their rising expectations (stimulated in particular by the acquisition of higher education and by the move to urban centres), are being severely frustrated because of the constrained nature of economic development in these societies" (Ayubi 2003, 159–160).

However, grievance-based explanations have drawn substantial criticism on a number of grounds and are somewhat out of fashion in the current literature on political violence. Gurr's argument was criticized by Tilly (1978, 23) for "neglect[ing] the analysis of organization and mobilization in favor of a view of collective action as a resultant of interest plus opportunity," and Oberschall (1978, 300) says it "lacks explanatory power." These critics follow the logic of Trotsky, that "the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt" (Trotsky 1932, 353). Hafez (2003, 9–15) applies these critiques of grievance-based theories to the problem of jihadist militancy, pointing out that conditions of disappointing economic underperformance and tumultuous social change have been endemic to Muslim-majority states in the Middle East, but levels of violence in these countries have varied substantially. These critics have tended to support explanations that focus on the ways social movements facilitate collective action.

The second approach to understanding the rise of jihadism has been to start from the phenomenon itself and to propose more limited, short-range theories and explanations. Scholars in this tradition emphasize the influence of human agency on the rise and course of the jihadi movement. Hegghammer (2010*a*, 10), for example, argues that structural accounts have only limited ability to explain jihadist violence in Saudi Arabia since 1980 because "violent contestation requires actors who can mobilize followers and operationalise intentions." Hegghammer therefore focuses a great deal on individuals, amassing an impressive collection of Saudi militant biographies and highlighting the unique roles of individuals such as Abdullah Azzam and Hamud al-Shu'aybi.

Another example of this approach is Madawi Al-Rasheed's (2007) analysis of religious protest and violence in Saudi Arabia. Al-Rasheed highlights many potential causes but argues that, fundamentally, the adoption of Wahhabist[9] ideology – a form of conservative, revivalist Islam – by the authoritarian Saudi state fueled the rise of various strains of Wahhabism. When the state came under pressure from forces of globalization, it lost control of Wahhabist discourse, and jihadism emerged as one extension of Wahhabist ideas.

The main challenge to these explanations is that they are too context dependent to be useful as theoretical explanations, and the scholars writing these accounts focus on descriptions of how jihadism developed in a particular time and place, rather than exploring the deeper causes that might be common to many contexts. For example, while it is true that charisma and force of will of individuals like Abdullah Azzam and Usama Bin Laden are important for the development of modern jihadism, this explanation is unsatisfying in its

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9   Wahhabism is a form of conservative, revivalist Islam that is intellectually tied to the teachings and legacy of Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in Saudi Arabia. It is related to, though not wholly synonymous with, Salafism (Commins 2015).

specificity. Would jihadism have come to Saudi Arabia if Bin Laden had taken a different life course? These explanations cannot say.

Beyond the scholarship that is focused on jihadism, I use a wide-ranging literature on Islamism and Islamist[10] mobilization to develop my theory of blocked ambition (e.g., Wickham 2002; Blaydes and Linzer 2008; Brown 2012; Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani 2012; Cammett and Luong 2014; Masoud 2014. Much of this work examines Islamist moderation and radicalization: Can formerly militant Islamist groups decide to participate in politics as "normal" actors if they are brought into the formal political system (Schwedler 2011, 2007)? If so, does inclusion lead to moderation because the individuals who lead Islamist groups change their minds (Wickham 2013)? Or do Islamists moderate because political structure compels them to change their behavior, even if their ideology remains the same (El-Ghobashy 2005, 375)? My argument and evidence weigh in on this debate about whether inclusion leads to moderation: I find that those individuals with careers inside state-supervised educational and religions institutions are far less likely to preach violence than those who are turned away from such careers.

I am not alone in drawing on both general theories of rebellion and specific examinations of the jihadist phenomenon to proffer an account of why people become violent jihadists. In addition to the scholarship already noted, recent accounts of jihadist radicalization by scholars such as Sageman (2004) and Wiktorowicz (2005*b*) incorporate insights from broad theories of rebellion and the specific literature on jihadists. My aim in this book is not to replace existing accounts of the rise of modern jihadism but rather to enrich them by exploring the choices of individual clerics to preach jihadism. Recent scholarship demonstrates that individuals can dramatically affect international relations (Byman and Pollack 2001; Chiozza and Goemans 2011; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015), a finding that stands in contrast with earlier work that minimized the role of individuals (e.g., Waltz 1979). Examining the choices of individual clerics addresses a recent critique that, "despite over a decade of government funding and thousands of newcomers to the field," scholars are "no closer to answering the simple question of 'What leads a person to turn to political violence?'" (Sageman 2014, 565). Despite the challenges of studying the choices of individuals (Stern 2014), insight as to why individuals turn to violence, or in this case to preaching violence, will be most forthcoming from studies that take individuals as the primary unit of analysis.

Are jihadist clerics important to jihadist movements? If not, then offering an explanation of why some people become jihadist clerics will not advance the broader agenda of explaining jihadism. Jihadist clerics matter because

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[10] In scholarship on political Islam, the term "Islamist" refers to actors who believe that Islam should be the organizing principle of society and the basis of its laws, and who are engaged in political action to achieve this aim. Jihadists are Islamists who approve of violence, but most Islamists reject political violence and are thus not jihadists.

they are the idea entrepreneurs whose beliefs and teachings provide doctrine and framing for jihadist social movements. Existing scholarship suggests that clerics play a crucial role in motivating lay Muslims who perpetrate violence (Sageman 2004; Wiktorowicz 2005b). Those perpetrating jihadist violence have repeatedly invoked the ideas of clerics, and jihadists tend to commit violence in ways consistent with the beliefs they profess (Hegghammer 2013). Counterterrorism officials see jihadist preachers as grave threats, going so far as to call one of them, Anwar al-Awlaki, "the most dangerous man in the world" in 2010.[11] Jihadist terrorists who have carried out attacks in the United States appear to have been influenced by preachers such as al-Awlaki.[12] And according to commentators such as Greame Wood (2015) and Will McCants (2015), the religious ideas promoted by jihadist clerics are fundamental to the motivations of jihadist groups and their visions for the future.

However, the assertion that jihadist violence is caused by religious ideas has stirred controversy (Cottee 2017), and some question whether the ideas of jihadist clerics are relevant for understanding the rise of the jihadist movement. Foust, for example, has argued that the importance of the ideas jihadist clerics preach is overstated: "Ideology is a woefully incomplete explanation for why terrorists chose to commit terror."[13]

The contention that jihadist ideology is largely irrelevant to the jihadist movement, and thus to world affairs, comes in two flavors. First, the obvious congruence between the forms of jihadi violence and the professed beliefs of jihadists could merely demonstrate that jihadists will say anything to justify their actions. There are limits to how plastic Islamic law can be, but jihadists have a track record of issuing Islamic legal rulings supporting extreme violence that is normally forbidden. For example, to justify their burning of a Jordanian fighter pilot, the Islamic State issued a fatwa, quoted in Chapter 2 of this book,

[11] Cole, Matthew and Aaron Katersky. "Awlaki: 'The Most Dangerous Man in The World'" ABC News. http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/awlaki-dangerous-man-world/story?id= 12109217, accessed February 9, 2017, and archived at http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ PG4A7K.

[12] "Investigators believe OSU attacker self-radicalized, inspired by ISIS propaganda." FoxNews.com. www.foxnews.com/us/2016/11/29/investigators-believe-osu-attacker-self-radi calized-inspired-by-isis-propaganda.html, accessed February 11, 2017, and archived; Serrano, Richard. "Boston bombing indictment: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev inspired by Al Qaeda." *Los Angeles Times.* http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/27/nation/la-na-nn-boston-marathon- bombing-suspect-indictment-20130627, accessed February 11, 2017, and archived; *United States of America vs. Dzhohar Tsarnaev*, indictment, United States District Court, Massachusetts, https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/718914/tsarnaev-indictment. pdf, accessed February 11, 2017, and archived.

[13] See Foust, Joshua. "GUEST POST: Some Inchoate Thoughts on Ideology." Jihadology.net. http://jihadology.net/2011/01/19/guest-post-some-inchoate-thoughts-on-ideology, accessed July 31, 2015; Foust, Joshua. "GUEST POST: Jihadi Ideology Is Not As Impor- tant As We Think." http://jihadology.net/2011/01/25/guest-post-jihadi-ideology-is-not-as- important-as-we-think, accessed July 31, 2015. Both articles are archived at http://dx.doi.org/ 10.7910/DVN/PG4A7K.

in which they make an argument that clearly runs counter to the traditional Islamic legal view that punishment by fire belongs only to God.

Second, even if jihadist ideas cause the form of violence, ideas may not cause violence itself. If jihadism did not exist, the argument goes, then structural factors such as persistent authoritarianism, poor economic opportunity, and long-term demographic trends would cause disaffected young men in the Middle East to rebel under the banner of communism, pan-Arabism, or some other ideology.[14] Of course, world history cannot be run twice, once with jihadism and once without it, so this is a difficult claim to either prove or disprove. More generally, because it is impossible to directly perceive the mental states of other individuals, it is difficult to conclusively demonstrate that ideas have a causal impact on politics (O'Mahoney 2015).

A large research tradition takes up the challenge of showing that ideas shape political outcomes in various domains (Reich 1988; Hall 1989; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Blyth 1997; Wendt 1999; Blyth 2001; Philpott 2001; Blyth 2003; Chwieroth 2007; Culpepper 2008; Jacobs 2009; Mehta 2011; Nelson 2014), with a particular focus on the role of religious ideas, such as jihadism, in international affairs (Fox 2000; Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000; Philpott 2000; Fox 2003; Toft 2007; Horowitz 2009; Hassner 2009; Hassner and Horowitz 2010; Hassner 2011; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Hassner 2016). The dominant approach is to link ideas to political outcomes using reports from the actors involved. For example, Wagemakers (2012, 22) studies the influence of jihadist ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi by following citations to al-Maqdisi's work, tracking unattributed intellectual borrowing of his ideas, and interviewing Islamists about his influence. However, this approach can only assess influence in a thin, scholarly sense: other jihadists may be influenced by al-Maqdisi, as evidenced by citations and intellectual borrowing, but this does not mean that these individuals were originally drawn to jihadism *because* of al-Maqdisi. And it does little to disprove the claim that just as much violence would have occurred in a counterfactual world where al-Maqdisi had never written anything. Most available evidence of the importance of ideas for jihadists is similarly circumstantial: jihadists who commit violence claim to follow the teachings of jihadist clerics and assert that these teachings inspire them to fight.[15]

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[14] David Laitin, personal communication.

[15] In a survey of fifty fighting jihadists in Syria, Mironova, Mrie, and Whitt (2014) ask, "Have you heard or read the Islamic teachings of any of the following?" followed by a list of current official scholars from the fighters' group Jabhat al-Nusra, and four prominent jihadist ideologues from outside the group. By and large, these clerics were widely recognized by fighters: Abu Musab al-Suri 84 percent recognition, Abu Qatada al-Filistini 59 percent, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi 49 percent, Abu Maria al-Qahtani (al-Nusra) 47 percent, Sulayman Bin Nasr al-Ulwan 41 percent, Abu Sulayman al-Muhajir (al-Nusra) 35 percent, and Sami al-Oraidi (al-Nusra) 35 percent. Sixty-three percent of these fighters selected the statement "fatwas by the Ulama affect my decision to fight" as one of their reasons for fighting.