

# Salafi-Jihadis in the United States: Using Social Media to Forge a Secluded Community

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## **Abstract**

This analysis of Salafi-jihadi online posts by American posters shows that the seemingly unsystematic online discourse in fact focuses on two main topics: the doctrines of *al-wala' wal-bara'* and *takfir*. In addition, it highlights the markers that distinguish Salafi-jihadi writers from Salafi-taqlidi ones. Further, the article explains how Salafi-jihadis utilize their online discussions to try to create and maintain a virtual community and a real-life enclave of like-minded individuals, committed to separating both ideologically and socially from their “impure” surroundings. It shows that the ultimate goal of many of the Salafi-jihadi posters is to ensure that followers of their creed do not integrate into their surrounding communities. Finally, the article shows that the online Salafi-jihadi discourse analyzed seeks to maintain a community of devoted Salafi-jihadis who are dedicated to the notion of jihad and willing to carry out jihad if and when the opportunity presents itself.

**Keywords:** Salafi-jihadis, *al-wala' wal-bara'*, *takfir*, jihad, United States

## Introduction

After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Salafi-jihadis became noticeably active on the Internet. Online Salafi-jihadi posts and discussions evolved quickly in the West, proliferating particularly after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>1</sup> At that time, dozens of virtual Salafi-jihadi forums and websites emerged, many of them hosted on servers located in the United States.<sup>2</sup> When the servers' owners eventually shut down these forums and websites,<sup>3</sup> Salafi-jihadis were forced to seek more reliable platforms elsewhere. Social media platforms owned by Internet giants offered stability and anonymity and ensured a high level of protection from unwanted government intrusion.<sup>4</sup>

The present article is one of relatively few studies that offer qualitative in-depth analysis of the Salafi and Salafi-jihadi discourse on social media.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, this study

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- 1 E. Alshech and Y. Appelbaum, "Behind the Scenes of Virtual Jihad – Part II: When the Interests of Iraqi Jihad Groups and the Coalition Coincide: The Case of Al-Boraq.com," MEMRI, <https://www.memri.org/reports/behind-scenes-virtual-jihad-%E2%80%93-part-ii-when-interests-iraqi-jihad-groups-and-coalition> (Accessed on May 15, 2022).
  - 2 MEMRI, "The Enemy Within: Where Are the Islamist/Jihadist Websites Hosted, and What Can Be Done about It?" July 23, 2007, <https://www.memri.org/reports/enemy-within-where-are-islamistjihadist-websites-hosted-and-what-can-be-done-about-it> (Accessed on May 1, 2022).
  - 3 See a 2010 Congressional hearing titled "U.S. Strategy for Countering Jihadist Web Sites," Sept. 29, 2010, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-111hhrg61516/html/CHRG-111hhrg61516.htm> (Accessed on May 15, 2022). See also Gabriel Weimann, "New Terrorism and New Media," 2014, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf) (Accessed on Mar. 12, 2022).
  - 4 MEMRI, "Due to Shutdown of Major Jihadi Forum, Jihadists Forced to Rely on Facebook and Twitter to Disseminate Messages," Dec. 20, 2012, <https://www.memri.org/cjlab/due-to-shutdown-of-major-jihadi-forums-jihadis-forced-to-rely-on-facebook-twitter-to-disseminate-messages> (Accessed on Feb. 10, 2022).
  - 5 For examples of qualitative literature analyzing Salafi-jihadi online communications, see Laura Huey, Rachel Inch, and Hillary Peladeau, "@Me If You Need Shoutout: Exploring Women's Roles in Islamic State Twitter Networks," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2019), pp. 445–463; Nathan S. French, *And God Knows the Martyrs: Martyrdom and Violence in Jihadi-Salafism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Eli Alshech, "The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism," *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 21 (2014), pp. 419–452; Makroen Sanjaya, Andi Faisal Bakti, Ridzki Rinanto Sigid, and Rulli Nasrullah, "The Practice of Digital Capitalism and the Commodification of the Salafi Community on Instagram RodjaTV," *International Journal of Environmental Sustainability and Social Science*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2022), pp. 577–591; Carmen

offers insight into the American online writers' worldviews, beliefs, and goals. The article tracks American Salafi-jihadis' online communications in the early 2000s and unveils their endeavor to create an "enclave society" within the United States.

The aspiration to create a Salafi-jihadi enclave society within society at large is not unique to Salafi-jihadis in the United States. It is evidenced in and by online discussions by Salafi-jihadis worldwide. Nonetheless, analyzing the specifics of how this concept is promoted within the United States, or within any other single country, is an important endeavor because each country facilitates different interactions between Salafi-jihadis and the people surrounding them. As demonstrated below, Salafi-jihadis face different challenges in different countries, and the strategies they use online to differentiate themselves and to create virtual and non-virtual communities may vary accordingly.

The analysis presented here demonstrates several characteristics of the online Salafi-jihadi discourse. First, the discourse appears at first glance to be disorganized, and it is often difficult to determine whether Salafis posting online are co-conversationalists or whether each account owner is posting disconnected observations. In addition, many posts lack clear focus and it is often hard to distinguish whether the writer is Salafi-taqldi or Salafi-jihadi unless, as occurs infrequently nowadays, the account owner invokes the topic of jihad. Because Salafi-jihadis and Salafi-taqldis share the same religious doctrine and disagree mainly, albeit not only, on the correct way to implement it,<sup>6</sup> their online discussions of doctrinal issues often appear indistinguishable. Finally, because the discourse occurs over time, crosses geographic borders, and involves a large number of participants, it is difficult to delineate the broader worldview that informs it.

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Becker, "Gaining Knowledge: Salafi Activism in German and Dutch Online Forums," *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, Vol. 3 (2009), pp. 79–98.

6 Various scholars have recently challenged the claim that all Salafis adhere to the exact same doctrine ('*aqida*). For a review of the literature on this matter, see Philipp Bruckmayr and Jan-Peter Hartung, "Introduction: Challenges from 'the Periphery'? Salafi Islam Outside the Arab World: Spotlight on Wider Asia," *Die Welt Des Islams*, Vol. 60 (2020), pp. 150–151.

## Material and Method

Through a qualitative analysis of hundreds of posts (most of them dated between 2016 and 2021) found in dozens of Facebook accounts owned by Salafi-jihadis, located primarily in the United States, this article reveals that the seemingly unsystematic and disorganized online discourse in fact focuses on two main topics: the doctrine of *al-wala' wal-bara'* and the doctrine of *takfir*. In addition, the article highlights the markers that distinguish Salafi-jihadi writers from Salafi-taqliidi ones. Furthermore, the article explains how Salafi-jihadis utilize their online discussion of *al-wala' wal-bara'* and *takfir* to try to create and maintain not only a virtual community, but also a real-life enclave of like-minded individuals committed to separating both ideologically and socially from their “impure” surroundings. Finally, it shows that the ultimate goal of many of the Salafi-jihadis who post online is to ensure that followers of their creed do not integrate into their surrounding communities even when the surrounding community is Salafi-taqliidi.

The analysis in this article focuses on hundreds of posts written in English and gleaned from dozens of Facebook accounts owned by Salafi-jihadis, primarily in the United States.<sup>7</sup> For security reasons, some account owners use pseudonyms, yet their intricate discussions reveal that they are real people communicating with other Salafi-jihadis in their vicinity. Most of the account owners, however, freely display their pictures and specify their exact locations. Most posts were written between 2016 and 2021 by residents of West Virginia, Minnesota, New Mexico, Georgia, Illinois, Washington, Texas, Maryland, Florida, Missouri, New York, Arkansas, and California. Each account has 150–2,000 “friends,” with the average account communicating with approximately 400 “friends.” In this respect, each account represents a community of Salafi-jihadis.

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7 When notions expressed by Salafi-jihadis writing in the United States are echoed by Salafi-jihadis residing in other English-speaking countries, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa, this article occasionally cites those posts in addition to the American ones expressing similar ideas.

## Salafiyya and Its Various Trends

Salafis are Muslims who strive and claim to strictly follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad in every aspect of life. They adhere exclusively to the Quran, the Hadith, and the interpretation of these sources promulgated by the first three generations of Muslims (*al-salaf al-salih*).<sup>8</sup> Salafis embrace a strict concept of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) which consists of three indivisible tenets: God is the sole creator and sovereign of the universe (*tawhid al-rububiyya*), God alone has the right to be worshipped (*tawhid al-uluhiyya*), and God does not share characteristics or powers with any person or entity (*tawhid al-asma' wal-sifat*).<sup>9</sup>

Quintan Wiktorowicz identifies three trending groups among Salafis today: purists (also known as *taqlidis* or traditional Salafis), politics, and jihadis.<sup>10</sup> All three groups share the same doctrine (*'aqida*), but they disagree on the correct way to implement it in modern times (*manhaj*).<sup>11</sup> The purists, consisting primarily of older Salafi scholars who dominate the Saudi religious establishment, eschew politics and political activism and

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- 8 According to Henri Lauziere, the use of the term *Salafi* for a full-fledged ideology “that encompassed the whole of existence, from knowledge to practice, from morality to etiquette” began in the 1970s. Until then, to be a “Salafi” meant to adopt the theological approach of the righteous forefathers regarding the question of belief generally and *tawhid* specifically. Henri Lauziere, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 201. See also the debate between Frank Griffel and Lauziere: Frank Griffel, “What Do We Mean by Salafi?” *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 55 (2015), pp. 186–220; Henri Lauziere, “What We Mean Versus What They Meant by “Salafi”: A Reply to Frank Griffel,” *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 56 (2016), pp. 89–96. On Salafi thought and conduct, see Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action,” in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 33–57. See also Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016).
- 9 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of a Salafi Movement,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29 (2006), p. 209.
- 10 Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy,” pp. 207–239; Joas Wagemakers, “Revisiting Wiktorowicz: Categorizing and Defining the Branches of Salafism,” in Francesco Cavatorta and Fabio Merone (eds.), *Salafism after the Arab Awakening: Contending with People’s Power* (London: Hurst, 2016), pp. 7–24.
- 11 Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy,” p. 221. See also Eli Alshech, “The Rise of a Charismatic Mujahid: The Salafi-Jihadi Quest for Authority,” in Dafna Ephrat and Meir Hatina (eds.), *Religious Knowledge, Authority, and Charisma: Islamic and Jewish Perspectives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2014), pp. 157–170.

focus instead on purifying Islam through preaching and education.<sup>12</sup> The *politicos* follow a younger generation of scholars, originating in the Saudi kingdom, who challenged the purists' authority in the 1980s and 1990s and claimed, *inter alia*, that society must exhort the regime, publicly if need be, to promote a perfect Islamic state.<sup>13</sup> The jihadis appeared in the modern Saudi political arena in the mid-1990s. They demanded an immediate end to what they viewed as the corrupt state of the Islamic nation and hoped to achieve this change through uncompromising jihad against both Islamic regimes and non-Muslim powers.<sup>14</sup>

Though both the *politicos* and the jihadis oppose the purist scholars, they differ considerably in their ideological orientation, with the jihadists sanctioning the use of extreme violence and being quick to proclaim *takfir* (i.e., to accuse other Muslims of heresy) – positions that the *politicos* have explicitly denounced.<sup>15</sup>

## Salafiyya in the United States

Scholars consider Saudi Wahhabism to be among the main sources of Salafiyya in the United States and other Western countries. Shaykh Muhammad Syed Adly was perhaps the first Muslim to spread the Salafi doctrine in the United States. He received his education in Islamic law in Saudi Arabia and traveled to the United States in 1975 to teach at the American Muslim Mission Mosque in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>16</sup> The first major organization to spread the Salafi *da'wa* in the United States was the Al-Qur'an wal-Sunna Society (QSS); founded in Ohio in 1995, it subsequently struck roots in California, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky.<sup>17</sup>

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12 Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy," p. 217. For a further stratification of the purists, see Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz," pp. 7–24.

13 Wagemakers distinguishes between *politicos* who are dedicated to parliamentary work (e.g., Hizb al-Nur in Egypt) and those who restrict their efforts to extra-parliamentary enterprises (e.g., *da'wa*). Wagemakers, "Revisiting Wiktorowicz," p. 17.

14 Alshech, "Charismatic Mujahid," p. 159.

15 Ibid.

16 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America: History, Revolution, Radicalization," Georgetown University, October 2018, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Salafism%20in%20America.pdf>, pp. 33–34 (Accessed on Jan. 5, 2022).

17 Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America," p. 41.

Additional support for quietist Salafiyya in the United States came from the Saudi kingdom through the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (ILASA) in Fairfax, Virginia, which awarded stipends to American students to study in Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup> By the mid-1990s, many young Americans who had trained in the Saudi kingdom and studied with prominent Salafi scholars such as Ibn Baz, al-Madkhali, and Ibn al-‘Uthaymin returned to the United States and spread Salafism in their local mosques and communities and in prisons.

The establishment of the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA) in Michigan in 1993 marked the emergence of Salafi political activism in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the quietist Salafi organizations that preceded it in the United States, IANA involved itself in politics and current affairs pertaining to the Muslim world and occasionally issued legal opinions (*fatawa*) supporting jihad.<sup>20</sup> The man who is perhaps most responsible for spreading the Salafi-jihadi ideology in the United States is Anwar al-‘Awlaqi. He started his preaching career in 2001, in Dar al-Hijrah, a Virginia mosque known to be affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>21</sup> After 9/11, and after fleeing to Yemen, al-‘Awlaqi adopted rhetoric that was unequivocally Salafi-jihadi,<sup>22</sup> and he engaged in planning attacks.<sup>23</sup>

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18 Ibid., p. 46.

19 Ibid., p. 64. According to Elmasry, “The founders of the Salafi movement in America, leaders such as Bilal Philips, Abdullah Hakim Quick, Ali al-Tamimi, Dawud Adib, Abu Muslima and Abu Usama all share the commonality of having studied in Madina on full scholarships.... By the late 1990s, the floodgates had opened; Madina had a substantial number of young Americans on scholarship to study” (Shadee Elmasry, “The Salafis in America: The Rise, Decline and Prospects for a Sunni Muslim Movement among African-Americans,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 2 [2010], pp. 217–236, on 222).

20 Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Salafism in America,” pp. 64–65.

21 On the ideological orientation of the Dar al-Hijrah mosque, see Tom Gjelten, “Push to Name Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Group Worries U.S. Offshoots,” NPR, Mar. 24, 2017, <https://npr/3HBCcz5> (Accessed on Dec. 14, 2022).

22 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad,” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 2011, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf> (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

23 On al-Awlaqi’s connection to terrorism in America, see Catherine Herridge, *The Next Wave: The Hunt for al-Qaeda’s American Recruits* (New York: Crown, 2011), pp. 12–22.

Today, the United States is host to several popular Salafi-jihadi advocates who are active in spreading the Salafi-jihadi creed worldwide. One of the most prominent advocates of the Salafi-jihadi creed is Shaykh Musa Jibril, born in Michigan and trained in Saudi Arabia in Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>24</sup>

## The Salafi Quest for Isolationism

Salafi-jihadis distinguish themselves from other Muslim denominations, even Salafi-taqlidis, based on a general approach shared by all Salafis. In order to understand the contemporary online Salafi-jihadi discourse and the role it plays in advancing the Salafi-jihadi agenda in the United States, it is necessary to first understand the Salafi ideology's emphasis on separatism.

Salafis of all denominations believe that it is their obligation to create a world order governed exclusively by the laws of Islam as they define them. They believe that prior to creating an Islamic state, Muslims must first establish a society free of deviant practices and devoid of impious people and entities. To this end, Salafis attempt to purify the existing society by separating themselves from the "defiled" surrounding communities within which they live. They achieve this seclusion by embracing legal doctrines that enforce separatism.

The Salafi aspiration to seclusion resonates with Mary Douglas's notion of the "enclave," which is part of her grid/group theory.<sup>25</sup> "Group" determines with whom a member of the group can interact, while "grid" controls how interactions take place. The theory's underlying claim is that a social group can maintain a cohesive community when the right balance is kept between ideology, organization, and behavior. According to Douglas,

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24 Meleagrou-Hitchens, "Salafism in America," p. 98.

25 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Pantheon, 1970); Mary Douglas (ed.), *Essays in Sociology of Perceptions* (London: Routledge, 2003). On the notion of "enclave" and its implications for religious societies, see Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 23–89.

[t]he relation of self to society varies with the constraints of grid and group: the stronger these are, the more developed the idea of formal transgression and its dangerous consequences, and the less regard is felt for the right of the inner self to be freely expressed. The more that social relations are differentiated by grid and group, the more the private individual is exhorted to pour his passions into prescribed channels or to control them altogether.<sup>26</sup>

When a society lacks the physical means to enforce its regulations regarding behaviors and internal or external interactions, it is likely to foster an “enclave” mentality among its members.

Although Douglas’s theory pertains mostly to physical impurity, it also applies to the notion of spiritual defilement. Like the communities in Douglas’s research, Salafis in the United States and worldwide are concerned with keeping their members away from what they view as the pollution, in this case spiritual pollution, that surrounds them.<sup>27</sup> However, because they are not able to physically separate their adherents from infidels and so-called deviant Muslims, they strive to create a virtual enclave, or an enclave mentality, to help protect their community against moral defilement. Because Salafis lack the prescriptive power necessary to prevent their members from defecting, they attempt to curb defection by claiming the high moral ground and depicting their surroundings as hedonistic, impious, and morally inferior. In effect, Salafis attempt to create what Almond, Appleby, and Sivan call a “wall of virtue [which] separate[s] the saved, free ... and morally superior enclave from the hitherto tempting central community.”<sup>28</sup>

Two of the most powerful tools that Salafis of all denominations use to create and preserve their enclave are the doctrines of *takfir* (roughly, “to excommunicate”) and *al-wala’*

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26 Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 102.

27 For conceptions of physical and spiritual pollution among Salafis in Egypt, see Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity in the Presence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 68–113.

28 Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity*, p. 34.

*wal-bara*<sup>29</sup> (roughly, “association and disassociation” or “loyalty and disavowal”).<sup>30</sup> *Takfir* is a legal procedure for excommunicating Muslims who violate specific religious laws that nullify one’s status as a Muslim.<sup>31</sup> *Al-wala’ wal-bara’* is essentially a complex ethical roadmap that Salafis use to navigate what they view as a morally hazardous reality. In a nutshell, the doctrine stipulates who or what a Salafi must disassociate himself from or associate with, and specifies what disassociation and association entail in terms of thought, speech, and conduct.<sup>32</sup> Taken together, the two doctrines enable Salafis to create, maintain, and tightly control the boundaries of their communities.

Although both Salafi-taqlidis and Salafi-jihadis promote an enclave mentality among their followers, the Salafi-jihadi enclave is designed to protect Salafi-jihadis not just from non-Muslims and non-Salafi Muslims, but also from Salafi-taqlidis.

## **Salafi-Jihadis in the United States View the World through the Prism of al-Wala’ wal-Bara’**

The following analysis presents the ways in which contemporary American Salafi-jihadis promote the idea of puritanism and separatism in their social media accounts. Salafis rely on the doctrine of *al-wala’ wal-bara’* to preserve their identity. The purpose of this doctrine is to create a clear dichotomy of “us” vs. “them” and to provide precise guidelines for how to properly interact with people or entities belonging to each of these distinct social categories.

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29 The first group to adopt the notion of *bara’* were the Khawarij, who disassociated themselves from anyone who was not a member of their sect. Another group that used *bara’* were the Shi’is, who urged their members to remain distant from the first three caliphs, as they viewed them as illegitimate, and to only adhere to and associate with the imams descended from Ali and Fatima. See Etan Kohlberg, “*Bara’a* in Shi’i Doctrine,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 7 (1986), pp. 139–175.

30 On the doctrine of *al-wala’ wal-bara’* in modern Salafism, see Mohamed Bin Ali, “The Islamic Doctrine of *al-Wala’ wal Bara’* (Loyalty and Disavowal) in Modern Salafism” (PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, 2012).

31 For relevant literature about *takfir*, see the section on that topic below.

32 Significantly, for Salafi-jihadis the highest level of disassociation from infidels and apostates requires military jihad against them.

### Posts Depicting Reality as Dichotomous

When Salafi-jihadis look at the world through the lens of *al-wala' wal-bara'* they see a bipolar reality, which they express clearly and promote in their discourse. For example, Bilaal Bilaal maintains that “Allah created humanity and divided it into only two camps: a camp of believers and a camp of disbelievers.”<sup>33</sup> According to Bilaal, only two options exist within this division. A person belongs to either “the army of Allah [or] the army of Iblis (i.e., Satan) and there is no third army in between.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the distinction between Salafi-jihadis and non-Salafi-jihadis is a strict dichotomy. One is either a Salafi-jihadi and thereby a Soldier of Allah, or one is an apostate. Another writer, Mustafa Abu Malik Ka’bah, presents a similarly dichotomous view of the world. Ka’bah maintains that since there are only two options, a true believer must show loyalty only to Allah and the believers and must display enmity towards unbelievers.<sup>35</sup> According to Ka’bah, the zero-sum dichotomy between Salafi-jihadis and all others goes beyond actions – beyond the separation into two army camps – and extends to emotions as well. Thus, Muslims must not only distance themselves from non-Muslims in practice, but must also hate non-Muslims.

Murat Hakkam further reinforces the idea of a dichotomy by promoting the notion that loyalty is an exclusive concept. He first cites Anwar al-‘Awlaqi: “You are either with us or against us. You cannot stand on both sides of the fence.” He then urges his followers to make that choice because “truth will always overcome falsehood, and the believers are with the truth.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, al-‘Awlaqi maintains that it is not possible to be loyal to Salafi-jihadism while also being loyal to other ideas and ideals. In the same spirit, Mikaaeel AbdurRazzaq warns that infidelity and true belief, or true Islam, cannot coexist because you “either live by *shari‘a* or live under [the] satanic system.”<sup>37</sup> According to this view, anything that is not pure Islam is necessarily associated with Satan and his perilous

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33 Bilaal Bilaal (New Mexico), Facebook, Dec. 28, 2021 (Accessed on May 2, 2022). See also AbuAmaan Haqq, Facebook, Apr. 16, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

34 Bilaal Bilaal, Facebook, January 2022 (Accessed on Mar. 10, 2022).

35 Mustafa Abu Malik Ka’bah (Atlanta), Facebook, June 10, 2017 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

36 Murat Hakkam (Washington), Facebook, Nov. 5, 2021 (Accessed on Apr. 10, 2022).

37 Mikaaeel AbdurRazzaq (Hot Springs, Arkansas), Facebook, Sept. 13, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2018).

impact on the world. It is not possible for a person to be a complete devotee of Allah and simultaneously to interact with “others” (i.e., infidels/apostates) in any significant way.

Armed with this perception of a strict dichotomy, Salafi-jihadis adopt an intolerant approach towards the societies surrounding them. Their online posts portray Salafiyya-jihadiyya as superior to other Islamic denominations. They depict non-Salafi society as *jahiliyya* (i.e., a society impermissibly governed by laws made by people rather than by Allah),<sup>38</sup> and explain the expression “moderate Muslims” as a title conferred upon certain Muslim rulers by the “Western lords” whom those rulers serve.<sup>39</sup> Salafi-jihadis posting online perceive infidelity and belief as mutually exclusive<sup>40</sup> and explain that for the truth (i.e., belief) to prevail, falsehood (i.e., infidelity) must be eliminated.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Salafi-jihadi writers present themselves as the “Victorious Sect” (*al-ta’ifa al-mansura*), the only one out of 73 Islamic sects that stuck to the True Path,<sup>42</sup> and as the “very few” (*ghuraba’*; literally, “strangers”) within the Muslim Ummah to have adhered unwaveringly to the purest form of Islam.<sup>43</sup>

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38 Muslim Ibn Abdullah (UK), Facebook, July 9, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). This is how Sayyid Qutb explains the meaning of modern *jahiliyya* in his commentary on the Quran. For him, even a Muslim society governed by the *shari’a* can be regarded as a *jahili* society if it subjects itself to some manmade laws that contradict the divine law. Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), p. 904.

39 Murat Hakkan (Washington), Facebook, June 11, 2021 (Accessed on Apr. 10, 2022).

40 Mikaaeel AbdurRazzaq, Facebook, Sept. 12, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2018).

41 Abdullah Ahmed (unknown location in the US), Facebook, June 18, 2021 (Accessed on May 3, 2022). This view relies on Qur’an 17:81.

42 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Apr. 5, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). See also AR Rashad, Facebook, Sept. 28, 2015 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2018). Both posts refer to the famous *hadith al-iftiraq* in which the Prophet allegedly predicted: “My nation will be split into seventy-three sects, all of them in Hell except for one.” For a discussion of this hadith, see Ibn Baz, “Al-Murad bi-qawlihi: Kulahum fi nar ila wahida,” <https://bit.ly/34pkzRc> (Accessed on Feb. 1, 2022).

43 Joe Green (Hot Springs, Arkansas), Facebook, Apr. 6, 2021. Here the writer alludes to a hadith in which the Prophet allegedly said: “Islam began as something strange (*gharib*) [i.e., as a small sect that upheld values contradicting those of the surrounding infidel society in Mecca] and will go back to being strange [i.e., at the End of Time there may be billions of Muslims, but only a small group will be considered truly faithful to the purest form of Islam]. On *ghuraba’*, see also Saif Alisalm Albttar [*sic*] (San Diego), Facebook, June 26, 2015 (Accessed on May 15, 2022) and Alex Hale (Australia), Facebook, June 28, 2016 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

In embracing the mutually exclusive dualism of good and bad, Salafi-jihadis in their posts present infidels (*kuffar*) as inherently dangerous. They view infidels as collaborating with Satan<sup>44</sup> to derail faithful Muslims from the Righteous Path.<sup>45</sup> They believe that infidels, and specifically Jews and Christians, strive to make Muslims abandon Islam and embrace their own religions instead,<sup>46</sup> citing Quran 2:120, which states: “Never will the Jews and the Christians be satisfied with you unless you follow their religion.”<sup>47</sup> Finally, Salafi-jihadis posting online pressure their peers to take a clear ideological stance vis-à-vis infidelity. Murat Hakkan, for example, urged his audience: “You have to make a choice. You cannot stand on both sides of the fence.”<sup>48</sup>

Although the concept of an enclave as articulated by Mary Douglas is not an express component of Salafi-jihadi discourse online, it clearly underlies that discourse. The Salafi-jihadi portrayal of society, socialization, and loyalty as fundamentally dichotomous and its encouragement of a binding choice in favor of Salafiyya-jihadiyya and against all other doctrines, ways of life, and social associations promote the enclave that Douglas describes. For Salafis, creating a self-selective enclave allows them to live within a sphere of like-minded individuals who can interact with one another according to the laws of Islam, without danger of defilement or derailment from the True Path.

All Salafis espouse the dualistic view of the world described above. By defining other (non-Salafi) Muslims as living in a state of *jahiliyya*, Salafis of all denominations draw a line, as it were, between spheres that are permissible to Salafis and those that are not. This line creates a moral and social boundary beyond which true believers may not venture. It thus serves two functions: First, it defines the group and clearly delineates the places, people, and ideas with which group members may not interact. Second, in proclaiming themselves the Victorious Sect and the “very few” (*ghuraba'*) who have remained on the

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44 In Quran 7:11–18, Satan informs God that he undertakes to derail people from the correct path.

45 Dujjy Amreeki, Facebook, Mar. 7, 2017 (Accessed on Jan. 8, 2018).

46 Aiisha Abdullah (New York), Facebook, Apr. 6, 2018 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). A similar idea is expressed by Prince AuQasa (Facebook, September 2016 [Accessed on Jan. 8, 2018]).

47 In a post-dated Dec. 23, 2019 (Accessed on Apr. 7, 2020), Omar Kaay of Sydney, Australia, states that wishing Christians a merry Christmas is prohibited. According to Salafis, that expression validates the truth of the holiday and thus Muslims must avoid it.

48 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Nov. 5, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

Path, Salafis claim the higher moral ground, thus incentivizing adherents of the Salafi creed to stick steadfastly to their doctrine. As the following paragraphs demonstrate, where Salafi-jihadis and Salafi-taqlidis part ways has to do with implementing this dualism in daily life.

## Salafi-Jihadis List the Implications of Their Dichotomous Reality

### 1. Posts Renouncing Muslim Rulers and Their Regimes

All Salafis agree that the notion of a dichotomous reality has significant real-life implications. Thus, Salafis of all denominations reject all contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim regimes and consider them to be *tawaghit* (sing. *taghut*).<sup>49</sup> For Salafis, a *taghut* is not only an oppressor but also a person who blurs the line (*jaza al-hadd*) between truth and falsehood and between appropriate belief and infidelity.<sup>50</sup> According to Salafis, Muslim rulers who defy God's authority by not governing fully and exclusively in accordance with the *shari'a* are *tawaghit* because they mislead Muslims and cause them to abandon their true faith by forcing them to adhere to manmade law.<sup>51</sup>

Although all Salafis view Muslim rulers with suspicion because they do not rule strictly by divine law, only Salafi-jihadis use disparaging language when referring to them publicly and accuse them openly of apostasy. For example, Salafi-jihadis in the United States refer to the Saudi ruler as "Oh, fake king of salool [*sic*]."<sup>52</sup> The label *al-Salul*,

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49 Wali Alex (Columbia, Ohio), Facebook, Mar. 29, 2019 (Accessed on May 7, 2020); Bilaal Bilaal, Facebook, Dec. 30, 2021 (Accessed on Dec. 11, 2022); Muslim Ibn Abdullah (UK), Facebook, May 10, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). In this last post the writer ironically comments: "People think that the *tawagheet* armies in Muslim lands which are largely funded by USA will defeat Israel..."

50 Literally, the term *taghut* (pl. *tawaghit*) means "idol" or "false deity." Salafis employ this term in referring to Muslim rulers or any person who applies any law other than what Allah revealed. For Salafis, obeying a manmade law is equivalent to worshipping a manmade idol.

51 Salih Ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, "Ma ma'na al-taghut wa-hal kul taghut kafir," <https://bit.ly/34r2xeX> (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

52 Abdullah Al-Amriki (possibly West Virginia), Facebook, Dec. 12, 2017 (Accessed on Nov. 17, 2020).

a derogatory substitute for al-Sa‘ud, has become a trademark of Salafi-jihadis referring to the Saudi regime. The title *al-Salul* alludes to ‘Abdallah Ibn Salul, a contemporary of the Prophet and a leader of the Khazraj tribe in Medina, who accepted Islam outwardly but inwardly continued to adhere to his old beliefs. By referring to the Saudi regime as *al-Salul*, a writer using that insulting title implies that the Saudis pretend to be pious whereas in reality their conduct contradicts Islamic law. Similarly, another Salafi-jihadi writer in the United States cites Shaykh Nasir al-Fahd, a Salafi-jihadi currently incarcerated in Saudi Arabia, who labels the Saudi regime an “infidel” regime,<sup>53</sup> while another writer labels both the Saudi and Jordanian regimes “[M]unfiqoon [*sic*; i.e., hypocrites] slaves of the West ready to destroy Islam and Muslims.”<sup>54</sup>

Wali Alex, a resident of the United States, refers to Bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, pejoratively as “the *mahdi* of the *madkhalis*.”<sup>55</sup> The *madkhalis* are scholars, led by Shaykh Rabi‘ al-Madkhali and Muhammad al-Madkhali, who opposed the Sahwa movement.<sup>56</sup> The Sahwa, led by Safar al-Hawali<sup>57</sup> and Salman al-‘Awda,<sup>58</sup> criticized the Saudi regime in the 1990s for what it viewed as the regime’s partial commitment to Islamic law.<sup>59</sup> The *madkhalis* accused the Sahwa of being entangled in politics instead of focusing

53 Umar al-Muslim (Washington), Facebook, Sept 12, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

54 Muwahid Muwahid (unknown location in the US), Facebook, Dec. 15, 2017 (Accessed on June 18, 2020). Salafi-jihadis in South Africa nickname Muslim rulers the same way. Prince AuQasa, Facebook, Oct. 30, 2017 (Accessed on Jan. 2, 2018).

55 Wali Alex, Facebook, Mar. 29, 2019 (Accessed on May 7, 2020). See Ali Ibn Ibraheem (Sydney, Australia), Facebook, Oct. 24, 2021, where a photo of Muhammad bin Salman is featured with the label “infidel (kafir)” (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

56 On Shaykh Rabi‘ al-Madkhali, see Al-Jazeera, “Al-Madkhali: salafi sa‘udi hajim al-ikhwan wa-‘arid al-rabi‘ al-‘arabi,” Apr. 7, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3v0dssQ> (Accessed on Dec. 18, 2022).

57 On Safar al-Hawali, see Mamoun Fandy, “Safar al-Hawali: Saudi Islamist or Saudi Nationalist?” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1998), pp. 5–21.

58 On Salman al-‘Awada and his role in political dissent in Saudi Arabia, see Usaama al-Azami, “Legitimising Political Dissent: Islamist Salafi Discourses on Obedience and Rebellion after the Arab Revolutions,” in Masooda Bano (ed.), *Salafi Social and Political Movements: National and Transnational Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 61–85.

59 On the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, trans. George Holoch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 37ff. See also Madawi al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 59–101.

on religious knowledge (*‘ilm*), and of violating their religious obligation to be obedient to the ruler (*wali al-amr*) and to prevent civil discord (*fitna*) at all costs.<sup>60</sup> In turn, members of the Sahwa portrayed the *madkhalis* as the “party of the rulers” (*hizb al-wulah*), alleging that they preferred to side with the regime rather than fulfill their obligation to ensure that society is governed by divine law. Hence, by referring to Bin Salman as the “*mahdi* of the *madkhalis*,” Wali Alex depicts him as the leader of scholars willing to betray their responsibility to safeguard Islam.

## 2. Posts Rebuking Muslim Scholars Affiliated with Muslim Regimes

Religious scholars who are appointed as official consultants by Muslim rulers (e.g., state muftis), and those who side with Muslim rulers publicly, are regarded by Salafi-jihadis in the United States as no different than the rulers themselves. While American Salafi-taqlidis also have misgivings about scholars associated with or loyal to contemporary Islamic regimes, they refrain from attacking them publicly. In contrast, Salafi-jihadis openly lash out at such scholars, labeling them *ulama’ al-su’* (wicked scholars),<sup>61</sup> scholars of dollars,<sup>62</sup> fake scholars,<sup>63</sup> and misguided scholars.<sup>64</sup> Wali Alex’s post includes an example of a severe verbal attack on such scholars:

Unfortunately, there are many who study under and blindly follow [scholars] whom they consider knowledgeable in *deen* [i.e., religion]. Scholars who may have acquired large amounts of information but have failed to understand it correctly. Some will only advise upon what their nationalist leaders approve and will never speak a word of condemnation of their [i.e., the leaders’] ... crimes. Fake scholars leading people astray. They serve their own desires (fame, recognition, money, power, respect) and they belittle and demean any striving Muslim outside their sect....<sup>65</sup>

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60 Lacroix, *Awakening Islam*, pp. 215–216.

61 Abdulrahman Mohamed Ali Gelle, (location unknown), Facebook, Feb. 14, 2017 (Accessed on Feb. 2, 2018).

62 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Dec. 2, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

63 Wali Alex, Facebook, Oct. 28, 2018 (Accessed on Mar. 14, 2020).

64 Abdullah Khalid (New York), Facebook, Jan. 11, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

65 Wali Alex, Facebook, Oct. 28, 2018 (Accessed on Mar. 14, 2020).

Wali Alex accuses the scholars of betraying their obligation to guide their fellow Muslims to the Righteous Path. Such scholars allegedly lead other Muslims astray by providing legal opinions that, according to Salafi-jihadis, are conciliatory vis-à-vis the rulers but incompatible with Islamic law. Despite their great erudition, such scholars are called “fake” because they do not act upon their true knowledge. They refrain from rebuking the rulers for their misconduct and, even worse, are motivated by materialistic gain rather than by religious duty.<sup>66</sup>

Another writer labels official scholars *imam al-irja'*.<sup>67</sup> The term *irja'* literally means “postponement.” Contemporary Salafis use the term *murji'* (stemming from the gerund *irja'*) to refer pejoratively to a Muslim who refuses to proclaim *takfir* (by postponing it indefinitely) against a coreligionist who committed a sin that, according to Salafis, necessarily nullifies the sinner’s Muslim status.<sup>68</sup> By remaining passive in the face of apostasy, claim Salafis, such a Muslim also becomes an apostate. Here, Salafis rely on a legal precept according to which “one who does not proclaim *takfir* against an apostate becomes [an apostate] like him.”<sup>69</sup> In keeping with the Salafis’ insistence on absolute dichotomy, a Muslim who fails to condemn apostasy as required necessarily becomes an apostate. One is either against *kufir* or embraces *kufir*; there is no middle way.

Salafi-jihadis differ from Salafi-taqlidis in their treatment of official scholars who fail to proclaim *takfir* against the political leaders they serve. Salafi-jihadis insist on labeling such an omission as *irja'*, thereby indirectly accusing the scholar of apostasy. In contrast, Salafi-taqlidis characterize such an omission as an exercise of erroneous legal judgment rather than a deliberate refusal to proclaim *takfir* against the ruler. In so doing, they avoid attributing apostasy to an official scholar.<sup>70</sup>

66 For another attack on Muslim scholars who support contemporary Arab regimes, see video by Anwar al-'Awlaqi in Ahmed Hajjobeid (Australia), Facebook, Apr. 5, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

67 Muslim Ibn Abdullah, Facebook, Apr. 10, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

68 Daniel Lav, *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 41ff.

69 Shaykh Ibn Baz, “Hukm man lam yukaffiru al-kafir aw shakka fi kufrihi,” <https://bit.ly/3FUX3ZS> (Accessed on Nov. 28, 2021).

70 In a post-dated Dec. 10, 2016 (Accessed on Jan. 10, 2018), Prince AuQasa goes beyond general criticism of “wicked scholars” and accuses specific scholars of conduct and utterances that he views as apostasy. See also Mikaaeel AbdurRazzaq, Facebook, Sept. 7, 2017, where

### 3. Posts Renouncing National Identity

Salafis of all denominations reject the idea of national identity, which they view as incompatible with the notion that Muslims may be submissive only to Allah.<sup>71</sup> Salafi-jihadis in the United States use their posts to caution their peers against embracing the national identity of their home country. For example, Abdullah al-Amriki maintains that nationalism is the root cause of the division that the Muslim world has experienced in the last century. He urges Muslims to accept only the black flag that has united Muslims since the emergence of Islam.<sup>72</sup> Leyvouné Wilson laments: “Muslims, especially ... American [converts] ... assume that they can be Muslim[s] and American[s] at the same time.” He then invokes the Salafi dichotomy: “No, you are either [a] Muslim or [an] American.”<sup>73</sup> In the same spirit, Abdur Raheem posts a photo of a woman wrapped in an American flag with a caption that reads: “the only flag Muslims should be repping [*sic*] [i.e., wrapping themselves in] is the flag of *tawhid*.”<sup>74</sup> Murat Hakkan warns: “Nationality is a disease.”<sup>75</sup> Faruq Abdus Salam depicts nationalism as a Western device to undermine Muslims’ commitment to Allah: “The idol of nationalism was invented by the enemies of Allah to weaken the love and hate for the sake of Allah within the[ir] hearts.”<sup>76</sup>

As these posts demonstrate, Salafis do not perceive nationalism simply as a false notion but as inherently conflicting with true belief. When Muslims embrace a national

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the writer labels the rulers’ scholars “dogy scholars” (Accessed on Mar. 10, 2018). See also Abu Usama Afreeqi’s post (Facebook, Mar. 22, 2017) specifically criticizing the Zimbabwean scholar Mufti Menk (Accessed on May 10, 2018).

- 71 Al-Durar al-Saniyya, “Kalam al-shaykh ibn Baz fi naqd al-qawmiyya,” <https://bit.ly/3xfNns1> (Accessed on Apr. 11, 2022).
- 72 Abdullah al-Amriki, Facebook, Jan. 1, 2018 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2020).
- 73 Leyvouné Wilson, Facebook, Mar. 16, 2016 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2020). See also Yusuf Karim (Manchester, UK), Facebook, Feb. 1, 2017, where the writer opposes adopting a national identity (Accessed on Mar. 15, 2018).
- 74 Abdur Raheem (southern US), Facebook, June 6, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).
- 75 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Nov. 15, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).
- 76 Faruq Abdus Salam (Missouri), Facebook, Dec. 29, 2021 (Accessed on Apr. 17, 2022). For other posts condemning nationalism, see Ismail Muhammad (Texas), Facebook, Dec. 28, 2019 (Accessed on Apr. 17, 2022); Dujjy Amreeki, Facebook, 2017; Omar Kaay, Facebook, May 16, 2018: “Palestinians will continue to be humiliated as long as they keep [their struggle] a nationalist struggle” (Accessed on May 6, 2020).

identity, according to Salafis, they inexorably relinquish their exclusive devotion to the truth, because national identity entails loyalty to the nation, whereas Islam permits loyalty only to Allah. Salafi-jihadis thus view dedication to a nation as creating a religious conflict. Salafi-jihadis posting in America warn that American Muslims would need to adhere to American laws even when these laws conflict with divine law. This, explains Wilson, “violates your *tawhid* [and] takes you out of the fold of Islam.”<sup>77</sup> Similarly, American Muslims would be required to assist their nation even when that nation attacks Muslims. This conflicts with the doctrine of *al-wala’ wal-bara’*, which proscribes assisting infidels against Muslims. In other words, national identity and loyalty to Allah are mutually exclusive; Muslims must choose only one of them.

#### **4. Posts Renouncing Democracy**

Like nationalism, democracy is perceived by all Salafis as discordant with the notion of exclusive loyalty to Allah.<sup>78</sup> In their posts, Salafi-jihadis in the United States reject democracy on two grounds. First, they claim that democracy is based on manmade law. Abdullah Rashid labels democracy *shirk* (polytheism),<sup>79</sup> because belief in *tawhid* requires acceptance of Allah as the sole legislator. Submitting to manmade law is effectively taking the position that another entity – the human legislator – shares the power to enact laws with Allah. By ascribing to another entity one of Allah’s attributes – here, the power to enact laws – one commits a forbidden act of association (*shirk*).<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, embracing democracy is a religious sin.

Mohammed Jubouri, another American Salafi-jihadi, explains that rejecting democracy “isn’t simply believing [that legal] judgement of the people [by other entities] besides

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77 Leyvonne Wilson, Facebook, Mar. 16, 2016 (Accessed on Feb. 19, 2018).

78 Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, “Al-Dimuqratiyya din,” [https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/94/940127120128B94814293F8822156DA1\\_DEMDEEN.rtf.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/94/940127120128B94814293F8822156DA1_DEMDEEN.rtf.pdf), p. 11 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). According to al-Maqdisi, a prominent Salafi-jihadi shaykh, democracy is impermissible because it confers sovereignty upon the people and grants superiority to manmade law, thus contradicting *tawhid*, which requires that Muslims accept Allah’s right to legislate (*tawhid al-hakimiyya*) as exclusive.

79 Abdallah Rashid (Minneapolis), Facebook, Jan. 12, 2016 (Accessed on June 18, 2018).

80 Leyvonne Wilson, Facebook, May 26, 2016 (Accessed on July 21, 2020).

Allah is invalid and [an act of] major *shirk*, but [rather rejecting democracy also requires that] we ... not participate via our action[s] in this system of selecting deities [MPs who legislate besides Allah] or voting ‘yes’ to man-made constitution, which is a statement of *kufr*.<sup>81</sup> In line with the Salafi creed, Jubouri’s post equates electing members of parliament with choosing a deity other than Allah. Wilson, another online poster, conveys a similar understanding in discussing parliamentary elections:

In reality, a Muslim who has enough knowledge and understanding that all legislation belongs to Allah and that democracy is *shirk* (associating partners with Allah) and who knows that voting and supporting *taghut/kuffar* [entails] taking them as leaders [other than] Allah, [and yet he partakes in democracy], had made the signs clear ... [that he] has taken Islam as a mockery.<sup>82</sup>

Since members of a secular legislature have the power to enact laws that contradict Allah’s *shari’a*, electing them is tantamount to accepting another deity. Dujji Amreeki hints at the connection between voting and *shirk*: “Done with Muslims telling me why I need to vote. Allah is my only leader.”<sup>83</sup> Dujji Amreeki therefore equates the act of voting with replacing Allah with a human deity. AR Rashad links the discussion of democracy to the Salafi notion of a dichotomous reality: “Democracy equals man-made law and *shari’a* equals Allah’s law. Whos [*sic*] side are you on? Choose wisely coz [*sic*] only one leads to Jannah [i.e., Paradise].”<sup>84</sup>

Salafis also reject democracy because it is based on a multiparty system. Faruq Abdus Salam cites a Quranic verse often cited by Salafis as a proof text for the illegitimacy of

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81 Mohammed Jubouri, Facebook, Nov. 29, 2018 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

82 Leyvounne Wilson, Facebook, May 26, 2016 (Accessed on Oct. 11, 2018).

83 Dujji Amreeki, Facebook, Nov. 7, 2016 (Accessed on June 15, 2018). Mikel Islam of Manchester, UK (Facebook, Aug. 11, 2017), cites the Salafi-jihadi scholar Anwar al-‘Awlaqi: “The law of Allah should not be voted over. To give the people the choice whether to apply *shari’a* or not reflects a fundamental problem in the understanding of *tawhīd*” (Accessed on July 19, 2018).

84 AR Rahsad, Facebook, May 3, 2015 (Accessed on Sept. 8, 2018). See Ahmed Hajjobeid, Facebook, Apr. 11, 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/ahmed.hajjobeid>), where the writer opposes elections (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

multiparty systems: “Those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have no part in them. Their affair is with Allah, He will tell them the truth at the end” (6:159).<sup>85</sup> As the Saudi taqlidi Shaykh Ibn al-‘Uthaymin explained in response to a question:

There is nothing in the Quran or the Sunna that permits multiple parties or groups [within the Islamic nation. On the contrary,] the Quran and the Sunna contain passages which condemn it.... Allah ... said: “Do not be among the polytheists, who split up their religion and become sects, with each party rejoicing in what it has” [30:31–32]. Undoubtedly, those parties contradict what Allah ordained and, moreover, what Allah instructed people to do: “This is the nation [you should be,] one nation. I am your Lord and you should serve me” [21:92].<sup>86</sup>

Salafis thus urge their peers to reject multiparty systems that tear the nation apart and undermine the idea of a united nation under the sole sovereignty of Allah.<sup>87</sup>

## 5. Posts Proscribing Imitating the Kuffār

Salafis understand that Muslims’ assimilation into their non-Islamic host communities can have an erosive effect on the intrinsic dichotomy of “us” versus “them” and “good” versus “evil.” Accordingly, Salafis impose restrictions intended to promote separation and to install a mental barrier between Muslims and the non-Muslims who live in close proximity. Some of these restrictions are aimed at ensuring that Muslims never adopt what Salafi-jihadis view as non-Muslim religio-communal practices. For example, Salafi-jihadis posting online urge their peers to refrain from partaking in Halloween celebrations,

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85 Faruq Abdus Salam, Facebook, Dec. 29, 2018 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

86 Ibn al-‘Uthaymin, “Hukm ta‘addud al-ahzab: al-ikhwan al-muslimin wa-ghayrihim,” May 7, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/ataw7id/posts/511176905598594> (Accessed on Dec. 1, 2021). The Salafi-jihadi shaykh Abu Basir al-Tartusi denounced the idea of multiple parties on similar grounds. Abu Basir al-Tartusi, “Hukm al-Islam fi al-dimuqratiyya wal-ta‘addudiyya al-hizbiyya,” July 5, 1999, <http://tartosi.blogspot.com/1999/06/blog-post.html> (Accessed on Dec. 1, 2021).

87 The Muslim Brotherhood justifies multiparty systems on the grounds that Allah does not prohibit having multiple opinions. See “Al-Islam wal-ta‘addudiyya al-hizbiyya,” Ikhwan Wiki, <https://bit.ly/2ZleOwd> (Accessed on Dec. 1, 2021).

as Halloween is “a pagan harvest festival,”<sup>88</sup> and not to celebrate New Year’s Day<sup>89</sup> and Mother’s Day.<sup>90</sup> They warn against marking Valentine’s Day<sup>91</sup> and even popular Muslim holidays such as the birthday of the Prophet (*mawlid*), which Salafis claim has no basis in Islam.<sup>92</sup>

By calling on their peers to reject nationalism and democracy, two fundamental common denominators for the American people, and to avoid popular cultural practices that are prevalent in the United States, Salafi-jihadis who post online in the United States seek to create and stabilize a Salafi-jihadi enclave by “pull.”<sup>93</sup> They attempt to strengthen Salafi-jihadis’ internal commitment to jihadism by preventing them from adopting cultural norms and commitments that could potentially threaten such commitment. By urging American Salafi-jihadis to erect social and mental barriers between themselves and American culture, they seek to ensure that American Salafi-jihadis remain internally committed to remaining apart from American society at large, including from those American Muslims who embrace American culture.

## Salafi-Jihadis Advise Their Peers to Implement the Doctrine of Takfir

Another mechanism that Salafi-jihadis employ online to deter their peers from assimilating into the larger American Muslim society, and particularly into the Salafi-

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88 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Oct. 28, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

89 Abdulrahman Mohamed Ali Gelle, Facebook, Jan. 1, 2017; (also accessed May 15, 2022), Mikaaeel AbdurRazaq, Facebook, June 17, 2018, Jan. 10, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

90 Shaykh Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, “Ma hukm al-ihthifal bi’id al-Umm,” <https://bit.ly/3oKaTrU> (Accessed on Feb. 13, 2022).

91 AR Rashad, Facebook, Feb. 14, 2017. See a legal opinion by Shaykh Fawzan that prohibits celebrating Valentine’s Day. Shaykh Salih ibn Fawzan al-Fawzan, “Hukm al-ihthifal bima yusama bi’id al-hubb,” <https://www.alfawzan.af.org.sa/ar/node/18322> (Accessed on Feb. 13, 2022).

92 Ibn Baz, “Hukm man yasna’ wa-man yahduru al-ihthifal bi-mawlid al-nabi,” <https://bit.ly/3ulC2zn> (Accessed on Feb. 13, 2022).

93 Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, *Strong Religion*, p. 32.

taqlidi community, is the doctrine of *takfir*.<sup>94</sup> *Takfir* is a religious procedure by which one can proclaim a Muslim an apostate because of his or her behavior. In essence, *takfir* is a critical mechanism that serves to delineate the boundaries of the religious community and, in so doing, to ensure its spiritual purity. Salafis of all denominations maintain that one's status as a Muslim does not depend solely on uttering the assertion of *tawhid*, but also on an unwavering commitment to Muslim religious practice. A Muslim who consistently fails to perform a religious duty – even if it is only one such duty – is considered by Salafis to be an apostate.<sup>95</sup>

Salafi-jihadis invoke *takfir* in their discussions on social media in two primary ways. First, they cite the legal conditions that activate *takfir* and elaborate on the legal justifications for applying it in real life. The discussants usually invoke the famous epistle by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab titled "The Nullifiers of a Person's Islam" (*Nawaqid al-Islam*).<sup>96</sup> They also cite Salafi-jihadi authorities on the topic, such as Abu Basir al-Tartusi.<sup>97</sup> For example, Ruqaya Alex posted a generic list of acts of *kufir*, such as *kufir al-Istihlal* (permitting what Allah forbade), that trigger *takfir*.<sup>98</sup> This is in line with the typical Salafi stance that considers certain utterances and actions as demonstrating that one permits

94 In recent years, important literature has been published on *takfir* in the context of modern Islam. The most recent examples are Justyna Nedza, *Takfir im militanten Salafismus: Der Staat als Feind* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020); Badar Muhammad, "The Radical Application of the Islamist Concept of Takfir," *Arab Law Quarterly*, Vol. 31 (2017), pp. 134–162; Joas Wagemakers, "'The Kafir Religion of the West': Takfir of Democracy and Democrats by Radical Islamists," in Camilla Adang, Hassan Ansari, Maribel Fierro, and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief in Islam: A Diachronic Perspective on Takfir* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 327–353; Justyna Nedza, "The Sum of Its Parts: The State as Apostate in Contemporary Saudi Militant Islamism," in Adang, Ansari, Fierro, and Schmidtke (eds.), *Accusations of Unbelief*, pp. 304–326.

95 Ibn Baz, "Al-Iman qawl wa-'amal wa-yazidu wa-yanqusu," <https://bit.ly/3JkQLt8> (Accessed on Feb. 15, 2022).

96 Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, "Nawaqid al-Islam," <https://books-library.net/free-730527813-download> (Accessed on Feb. 15, 2022). See, e.g., Alex Hale, Facebook, June 27, 2016, in which the writer quotes directly from Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's epistle (Accessed on Apr. 20, 2018).

97 Abu Basir al-Tartusi, "A'mal tukhriju sahibaha min al-milla," Aug. 30, 2001, [https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/17/178E00393D9610410E6DCAE8F9298EE2\\_b10.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/17/178E00393D9610410E6DCAE8F9298EE2_b10.pdf) (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

98 Roqaya Alex, Facebook, Oct. 1, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

oneself to override Allah's exclusive authority to legislate. Salafis view such behavior as apostasy. As another example, Leyvouné Wilson warns Muslims not to reject the doctrine of *takfir* or bestow the derogatory title *takfiri* on one who carries it out because "if our beloved Prophet Muhammad and the four rightly guided caliphs were alive today ... they would be making a lot of *takfir* on many Muslims because of the conditions we are in today."<sup>99</sup>

In addition to general discussions of the lawfulness and types of *takfir*, Salafi-jihadis also elaborate on specific actions or beliefs that justify a proclamation of *takfir* against Muslims today. Abdullah Khalid's post quotes Shaykh Suleiman Anwar, a Salafi-jihadi cleric from Maryland,<sup>100</sup> who states that belief in feminism is apostasy.<sup>101</sup> Faruq Abdus Salam cites Shaykh Suleiman al-'Alwan, a detained Saudi Salafi-jihadi cleric, who warns that "whoever does not label Jews ... as infidels abolishes his [own] status of a believer."<sup>102</sup> Muwahid Muwahid invokes the famous Salafi legal stance<sup>103</sup> that chronic dereliction of the duty to pray is apostasy.<sup>104</sup> Bilaal Bilaal accuses Muslims who join the armies of the disbelievers of apostasy.<sup>105</sup> Malik Gjanaa accuses Muslims of being hypocrites when they eschew *takfir* against a person who happens to be their shaykh.<sup>106</sup> Finally, Bilaal Bilaal laments the fact that American imams neglect to discuss the duty to proclaim *takfir* against Muslim rulers in their Friday sermons.<sup>107</sup>

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99 Leyvouné Wilson, Facebook, June 6, 2016 (Accessed on Jan. 11, 2018).

100 Justin Jouvenal, "Maryland Imam's Advocacy of ISIS Lands Him at Center of Terrorism Probe," *Washington Post*, Oct. 7, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/maryland-imams-advocacy-of-isis-lands-him-at-center-of-terrorism-probe/2016/10/06/421c6627-c715-4fe7-a246-70871169cf49\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/maryland-imams-advocacy-of-isis-lands-him-at-center-of-terrorism-probe/2016/10/06/421c6627-c715-4fe7-a246-70871169cf49_story.html) (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

101 Abdullah Khalid, Facebook, Mar. 30, 2019 (Accessed on June 14, 2020).

102 Faruq Abdus Salam, Facebook, Dec. 28, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

103 See, e.g., Ibn al-'Uthaymin, "Hal yukaffiru man la yusali tahawunan?" <https://binothaimenee.net/content/7729> (Accessed on Feb. 15, 2022).

104 Muwahid Muwahid (unknown location in the US), Facebook, Oct. 4, 2017 (Accessed on June 18, 2020). See also Alex Hale, Facebook, Sept. 18, 2016 (Accessed on May 13, 2018).

105 Bilaal Bilaal, Facebook, Jan. 4, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

106 Malik Gjanaa (UK), Facebook, Apr. 6, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 8, 2018).

107 Bilaal Bilaal, Facebook, Nov. 12, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

The actions and attitudes that Salafi-jihadis posting in the United States classify as apostasy are not random. These are common behaviors among Muslims who live as a minority, particularly in liberal countries. They include, for example, remaining silent when encountering feminist attitudes and tolerance of Jews. American Salafi-jihadis abhor such liberal-driven attitudes. They also want to ensure that adherents of Salafi-jihadism rebuke the reluctance, common to many imams in the United States as well as some contemporary Muslim countries, to discuss *takfir* in their sermons for fear of the authorities. American Salafi-jihadis also oppose Muslims' unwillingness to proclaim *takfir* against coreligionists who fail to recite the mandatory prayers.

In theory, all Salafis would declare such people apostates unless they repent. In practice, however, only Salafi-jihadis insist on discussing *takfir* publicly, and thus they have been labeled *takfiris* pejoratively by the general Muslim population. Most Salafi-taqlidis posting online avoid discussing the public imposition of *takfir* against other Muslims for fear that Muslims and the larger society in the United States and other liberal countries may mistake them for Salafi-jihadis.<sup>108</sup> Knowing that Salafi-taqlidis are averse to imposing *takfir*, Salafi-jihadis urge their American peers to invoke the subject in their posts and in real life in order to be identified as Salafi-jihadis and to force Salafi-taqlidis to repudiate them publicly. This, they believe, will foster an enclave by "push"; i.e., Salafi-jihadis will be pushed away by their taqlidi counterparts and thus they will not be able to be absorbed into their communities.

## **Salafi-Jihadis Praise ISIS and Inspire Their Peers to Carry Out Jihad**

Perhaps the most powerful rhetorical device used by Salafi-jihadis to ensure that their peers do not assimilate into the Salafi-taqliidi community, the larger Muslim society, or general society is expressing support for ISIS and famous jihadi figures. Salafi-jihadis at

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108 Salafi-taqliidi shaykhs discuss *takfir* in response to questions addressed to them and in scholarly writings. However, in more popular communications, Salafi-taqlidis eschew the topic while Salafi-jihadis insist on invoking it.

times praise and express support for Salafi-jihadi shaykhs who have been charged with or convicted of inciting terrorism in Western countries. For example, they support Shaykh Ahmad Musa Jibril, who was convicted in the United States;<sup>109</sup> Shaykh Abdullah al-Faisal, who was sentenced in the UK;<sup>110</sup> Shaykh Anjem Choudary, who was imprisoned in the UK; Shaykh Abu Baraa, an associate of Anjem Choudary;<sup>111</sup> and Shaykh Nasr Fahd, who was sentenced in Saudi Arabia.<sup>112</sup> Occasionally, they openly support high-profile jihadi figures such as Shaykh Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the head of al-Qaeda Iraq before it was declared a caliphate in 2014,<sup>113</sup> and Shaykh Anwar al-‘Awlaqi, who fled America to join al-Qaeda in Yemen.<sup>114</sup> Infrequently, they have paid tribute to Salafi-jihadis who have perpetrated attacks on Western soil, such as Usman Khan, who attacked an offender rehabilitation conference in London on November 29, 2019,<sup>115</sup> and have called for “free[ing] our brothers” from Guantanamo Bay prison.<sup>116</sup>

The most daring, albeit extremely rare, statements by Salafi-jihadis on social media include allusions to, and sometime open calls for, violence. Some posters stress the need to institute *shari‘a* law by force,<sup>117</sup> while others proclaim that jihad and fighting are the correct response to America.<sup>118</sup> Some online activists post photographs bearing captions such as “Jihad: The

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109 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, Jan. 10, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022); Muslim Ibn Abdullah, Facebook, Dec. 25, 2021 (Accessed on Apr. 17, 2022); Jonathan Haqq (US), Facebook, Nov. 1, 2017 (Accessed on May 12, 2018); Abu Haleema (Manchester, UK), Facebook, Jan. 16, 2018 (<https://www.facebook.com/abu.haleema.39>) (Accessed on May 12, 2021); Salafy Revert (Cape Town, South Africa), Apr. 11, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022); Ahmed Hajjobeid, Apr. 7, 2022 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

110 Joe Green, Facebook, Mar. 1, 2018 (Accessed on June 18, 2018).

111 Dujjy Amreeki, Facebook, May 9, 2017 (Accessed on July 10, 2018).

112 Musab Amms Alx from Australia, Facebook, Apr. 30, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

113 Allen al-Amreeki (US), Facebook, Feb. 1, 2017 (Accessed on June 10, 2018).

114 Joe Green, Facebook, May 13, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022). See also Omar Kaay, Facebook, July 10, 2019 (Accessed on June 12, 2020).

115 Murat Hakkan, Facebook, June 3, 2021 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

116 Mohammed White, Facebook, Jan. 22, 2018 (Accessed on Feb. 14, 2020).

117 Abdullah al-Amriki, Facebook, Mar. 13, 2018 (Accessed on May 12, 2021).

118 Muhammad White, Facebook, July 25, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 7, 2018).

only solution,”<sup>119</sup> and “No more soft Islam.”<sup>120</sup> Some discuss the need to establish an Islamic caliphate.<sup>121</sup> Some writers remind their readers that the “Prophet Muhammad and his companions [carried] jihad to spread Islam [and] did not just [practice] Da‘wa on the [street] corner or on Facebook.”<sup>122</sup> Finally, it is common for Salafi-jihadi writers to include the famous quote by Anwar al-‘Awlaqi in their posts: “This Religion is not [a] religion of talk, it’s not [a] religion of showing off how much knowledge you have. [Rather] this religion is about your willingness to sacrifice for Allah.”<sup>123</sup> When Salafi-jihadis embrace jihadism and terrorism in their public posts, Salafi-taqlidis and other non-Salafi Muslims are forced to distance themselves publicly from the writers in particular and Salafi-jihadis in general, or else risk being associated with them by the public or the authorities. An example is the Dearborn (Michigan) Muslim community’s condemnation of Musa Jibril’s Salafi-jihadi videos on YouTube.<sup>124</sup>

## Forging an Insular Community with an “Enclave” Mindset

Salafi-jihadis posting online in the United States focus on three main topics, *al-wala’ wal-bara’*, *takfir*, and jihad, to ensure that followers of their creed remain distinct and detached from Muslims of other denominations (including Salafi-taqlidis) and from society at large. The concepts of a dichotomous reality, the rejection of democracy and nationality, and the prohibition on imitating the infidels are designed to drive a wedge between Salafi-jihadis and the community at large, as well as between Salafi-jihadis and the non-Salafi Muslim community. Because non-Salafi Muslims are generally tolerant

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119 Ruqaya Alex, Facebook, Nov. 19, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

120 Mikaaeel AbdurRazaq, Facebook, Oct. 15, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 10, 2020).

121 Abdur Raheem, Facebook, June 6, 2020 (Accessed on May 15, 2022); Abu Usama Afreeqi, Facebook, Apr. 9, 2017 (Accessed on Sept. 6, 2018).

122 Mikaaeel AbdurRazaq, Facebook, Oct. 19, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 9, 2018).

123 Joe Green, Facebook, Nov. 15, 2017 (Accessed on Apr. 7, 2018).

124 Ali Harb, “Michigan Muslims Reject YouTube Preacher Who ‘Radicalised’ London Attacker,” Middle East Eye, June 7, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/michigan-muslims-reject-youtube-preacher-who-radicalised-london-attacker> (Accessed on May 15, 2022). See also the Facebook page “Muslims against Anjem Choudary” (Accessed on May 15, 2022).

of Western societies, accept democracy and nationality as legitimate notions, and allow friendships with and certain imitations of non-Muslims, Salafi-jihadis are keen to keep their adherents away from such Muslims.

The other topics that appear regularly in Salafi-jihadi posts are aimed primarily at keeping Salafi-jihadis separate from Salafi-taqlidis. Thus, the renunciation of Muslim rulers and scholars affiliated with such rulers, and calls to proclaim *takfir* against Muslim rulers and other deviant Muslims, are notions with which Salafi-taqlidis agree in principle but which they eschew in public. By invoking these topics in their public discussions, Salafi-jihadis force Salafi-taqlidis to actively distinguish themselves from Salafi-jihadis. This achieves the insularity that Salafi-jihadis seek. Finally, by referring to jihad and jihadists in their public posts, Salafi-jihadis force the entire Muslim community, including Salafi-taqlidis, to sever ties with them in order to avoid punitive actions by American authorities or communities.

The seclusion that results from the positions advocated by Salafi-jihadis online ultimately allows Salafi-jihadis to create and maintain an enclave of like-minded individuals within the United States. In forging the enclave mentality, Salafi-jihadis ensure that despite the lack of physical separation from general society, followers of their creed remain apart both ideologically and socially. Ultimately, being part of an insular community that is detached from the surrounding population ensures that Salafi-jihadis living in the United States remain committed to their creed and willing to carry out jihad – a doctrine that Salafi-jihadis persistently embrace – when the opportunity presents itself in the future.

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## About the author

Dr. Eli Alshech: Eli Alshech is a senior lecturer at Bar Ilan University who specializes in Islamic radicalism, Salafi-jihadi legal thought, and the various manifestations of jihad in Cyberspace. He has published extensively on diverse topics, including the concept of privacy in early Islamic legal thought, the rise of neo-takfirism, the doctrine of *al-wala' wal-bara'* in Salafi-jihadi thought, and the concept of martyrdom as reflected in the

publications of Hamas. His recent book, co-authored with Nimrod Hurvitz, is titled "Making Sense of Muslim Fundamentalisms: The Clash within Islam." He is currently working on a new book that analyzes how Salafi-jihadis implement the concept of *al-wala' wal-bara'* in their daily lives.