



### A Journey into the Origins and Future of Salafi-Jihadist Terrorism

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#### *Junction 9/11: A Journey into the Terrorism Worlds of al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their Affiliates*

by Yoram Schweitzer, Aviv Oreg, and  
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314 pages [in Hebrew]

*Junction 9/11* seeks to deal in a comprehensive, multidimensional fashion with the many questions that trouble any observer of the fascinating phenomenon of the rise of the Salafi-jihadist organizations that have become one of the primary shapers of modern history. In doing so, it touches on the relations between Islam and the West, and on the seeming decline in strength of Salafi-jihadist organizations over the

past few years. The authors, who have worked in this field for many years, including during their military service (Schweitzer and Oreg were responsible for studying this issue in the research division of the Intelligence Directorate), share their vast knowledge with readers. Most of the information is not new and many of the events are well-known, but reading the book is nevertheless enjoyable and informative.

The book comprises two main sections. The first section includes three chapters: the opening chapter presents the ideology of Salafi-jihadism, which underlies al-Qaeda and ISIS, along with other organizations around the world. The second and third chapters describe significant milestones in the organizational, ideological, and operational development of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State from the 1980s until today. The second section includes two chapters: the fourth chapter deals with issues that cut across the different organizations, including psychological warfare by Salafi-jihadist organizations, the singular practice of suicide bombings, and global jihadist attitudes toward Israel. The fifth and final chapter deals with the question of the future of Salafi-jihadism, and this is indeed the most important question. It touches on the nature of the weakened threat posed by Salafi-jihadist organizations to the West and to the Middle East. Will this weakening continue, and were the events that preceded it an impressive but short-term outbreak—a passing fad? Or is the current decline in activity a short hiatus, after which terrorism will once again substantially threaten “infidels” in the West and the Middle East? The book grapples with this question toward the end; its expert authors refrain from offering a conclusive and unequivocal answer. In their analysis, substantial knowledge regarding the past and present can lead to either possibility, and therefore does not essentially help to predict the future.

On the one hand, global jihadist organizations have suffered serious blows over recent years.

especially the loss of leaders who were killed or arrested (bin Laden, al-Zarqawi, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, al-Zawahiri, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and many more) and loss of control of extensive territory, which has thus harmed their capabilities and their attractiveness to young people in Western countries. The damage to jihadist organizations is also reflected in their reduced level of activity in the West. Additional reasons include improved capabilities by Western security and intelligence agencies to cope with the challenge; focus by jihadist organizations on fighting with other forces in their region, so that they are not involved in promoting terrorism within Western states; and the Taliban's commitment at this stage to the Doha Agreement that forbids al-Qaeda from acting against Western targets from Afghan territory. On the other hand, the distress that led many Muslims to follow the extremist interpretation of Islam and the impressive strength displayed by Salafi-jihadist organizations still commands attention, and in the future may translate into acts of violence. This might take place in organized fashion, or in the manner of "death by a thousand cuts," as conceived by Abu Musab al-Suri, which was adopted by al-Qaeda and ISIS; in other words, by terrorists who act based on the inspiration of those organizations without being directly affiliated with them.

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(primarily based on ideological disputes, but sometimes due to political and interpersonal power struggles). One of the major disputes regards the additional aims of the jihadist organizations beyond the struggle against a foreign presence on Islamic soil (such as Afghanistan and Iraq): the debate centers on whether to focus on acting in Islamic countries against ostensible Muslim governments and their supporters who allow Western ideas to penetrate, or alternatively, to focus on jihad against the West in the West. Other major debates: whether to fight the Shiites or to refrain from doing so; whether or not to publicize and glorify cruelty toward infidel victims; and whether the conditions were ripe for establishing a caliphate.

One of the most fascinating disputes described in the book was the one that preceded the decision to carry out the 9/11 attacks. On the one hand was the desire to attack the symbols of US power and control; on the other hand was the concern that the US response would harm the viability of Taliban rule in Afghanistan and deny al-Qaeda its primary base. All these debates took a completely rational form based on cost-benefit analyses, with the guiding principle being which policy would best advance the aims of Salafi-jihadism and be most consistent with its radical worldview.

An especially interesting issue for Israeli readers is that of the threat posed to Israel by radical Salafi-jihadist terror organizations. The discussion of this subject is appropriately in-depth. The takeaway is that while the actual performance of organized Salafi-jihadist terrorism against Israel was lower than the degree of their anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli rhetoric, the actions taken (some of which succeeded while others failed) and the increasing prevalence of attacks inspired by Salafi-jihadism by terrorists not acting within an organized framework, compel Israel to continue to closely monitor terrorist bodies that adhere to this ideology and support the global effort to suppress them.

In this context the book describes Israel's important contribution to the global and regional campaign against extremist Islamic terrorism, particularly in the field of intelligence. The impression given by this chapter is that global jihadist organizations see the struggle against Israel and the Jews as part of the campaign against the West, but believe that the primary role in this context must be played by Palestinian organizations, which they view as not acting with sufficient determination and daring (including Hamas). While al-Qaeda therefore concluded that it could not neglect this aim and that it must act to some extent against the Jews and Israel itself or via its proxies (for example, with attacks in Mombasa and Djerba), the Islamic State and its branches emphasized this issue even less, even if they did not completely neglect it (shooting at Eilat, attacks in Brussels, and inside Israel in 2022).

Either way, it is clear that the Palestinian Islamist public has not been drawn in significant numbers toward these movements, and their presence in the Palestinian space has been limited, because the Islamist struggle against the immediate enemy, Israel, was led by local bodies, i.e., Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The number of Palestinians and Israeli Arabs who joined al-Qaeda remained low, and most were active in other arenas of jihad and not in Israel. The few who dared do so in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip were targeted and chased by the PA and Hamas. Very few of the Palestinians involved in Salafi-jihadism left their imprint on history; the most prominent was Abdallah Azzam, the ideologue who established the services bureau which was a foundation for al-Qaeda. According to the book, al-Zarqawi, who led the terrorism campaign against the Americans in Iraq, was of Jordanian-Palestinian origin, but most sources present him as a Jordanian from the Bani Hassan tribes.

The book covers many other fascinating topics, including the organizational and ideological development process of the Salafi-

jihadist organizations; the effective use by al-Qaeda and especially the Islamic State of the internet and social networks for recruiting agents and supporters; the transition of radical Islamic activity centers to new hubs, with an emphasis on Africa and Asia, while focusing on local enemies; their thus-far failed efforts to obtain unconventional weapons, and the efforts by the West, led by US President Obama, to prevent them from doing so.

This noteworthy book is important for making the information available to the Israeli public, but it is not free of shortcomings. First, it has no index. Such a wide-ranging work should allow readers to return easily to a detail or a person of interest. The appendices with a timeline of the development of Salafi-jihadism and key persons mitigate this drawback somewhat, but do not resolve it. Second, there are a few editing problems and repetitions, and more maps, pictures, and diagrams would be valuable additions; those that are included are not always translated or explained. Third, in the description of ideological sources, a broader picture could have been included, and the use of Qur'an verses by radical Islam was not described sufficiently. The limited number of Arabic sources in the extensive bibliography also stands out. The description of the methodology of the showcase attacks could have been more detailed.

None of the criticism above, however, eclipses the importance of this book's contribution to understanding Salafi-jihadism, or the enjoyment of reading it.

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