

Israeli Black Flags: Salafist Jihadi Representations in Israel and the Rise of the Islamic State Organization

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Over the last two years, the Islamic State organization has become one of the most dangerous elements in the Middle East. Its very existence, essence, and actions affect many nations throughout the world; its effect is most striking in the Middle East. This terrorist organization, flying the black flag as its official banner, represents an extreme branch of orthodox Sunni Islam, challenging all existing orders of governance and seeking to replace them with an Islamic regime that imitates the conduct and way of life typical of the seventh century. This branch of Islam is called Salafist jihadism, and is currently considered the most radical manifestation of Islamic fundamentalism. It is also thought to be the fastest-growing group within Islam, gathering supporters from all over the world. This essay seeks to shed light on Salafist jihadism in general and on its Israeli adherents in particular, and to examine the reverberations felt in Israel as a result of the rise of this new power in Iraq and Syria.

Keywords: Salafi, Salafist jihadism, Islamic State, Israeli, Sheikh Nazem Abu Salim, Christians, Jews, global jihad, al-Qaeda, terrorism, Sharia

Introduction

A survey conducted by the General Security Service (GSS) on the spread of al-Qaeda's ideology in Israel, indicated that in recent years the number of organizations identified with al-Qaeda and global jihad in the West Bank as well as within Israel had grown.¹ According to another document published by the GSS in 2012, the "growing identification with Salafist

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ideas, especially Salafist jihadism . . . increases the potential of the threat aimed at Israel.”² While the phenomenon “does not have the consensus of the Arabs of Israel,” the document nonetheless noted that, “there is a risk that young people, affected by charismatic religious figures championing al-Qaeda’s belligerent ideology³ . . . will see the ideas of Salafist jihadism as a religious, ideological justification for transitioning from theory to practice, including undertaking military and terrorist action.”⁴

It should be noted that the Salafist jihadism is considered extremist within the Islamist camp, and especially within Israel. Among Arabs in Israel, the Islamist camp is closer to the Muslim Brothers than to the Salafi groups and radical organizations, although as we will see, the Islamization trend, which is attracted to the idea of Salafist jihadism and its support for an Islamic state, has become a fact. The concern that Muslim citizens of Israel might deepen their identification with Salafist jihadism touches on the conclusions drawn by Professor Sammy Smootha from Haifa University. Smootha claims that since the start of the millennium, members of the Arab minority in Israel has become more radicalized in its attitude toward the Jewish majority, manifested by their refusal to accept Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, their desire to establish a Palestinian state in place of the State of Israel, and interpersonal relationships between Jews and Arabs.⁵

Smootha asserts that, although “the years 2003-2012 were a wasted decade regarding Arab-Jewish relations,”⁶ living with Jews has encouraged a process of Israelization, and balances out and reduces the processes of Palestinization (identification based on the ethnic/political component) and Islamization (based on the religious component) of the Israeli Arab minority.⁷ By contrast, Professor Raphael Israeli of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem claims that “the Israelization of Israel’s Arabs is breaking apart right in front of our eyes” and that “there is clear Islamization, supported by the fact that every time we clash with the Palestinians, they side with them whether as rioters or as the silent majority retaining the right to silence.”⁸

During the month of Ramadan in 2015, Israel’s Channel 10 television investigated whether Muslims in Israel have incited against Jews and have expressed support for the Islamic State organization (formerly ISIS).⁹ The investigative report examined sermons given in fifteen mosques in Israel and areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority,¹⁰ and revealed two main facts: first, there is a process of radicalization in which mosques and preachers that were previously not known to be backers of Hamas

now engage in violent, military discourse that resembles or is identical to the discourse of Hamas concerning al-Aqsa; second, mosques and preachers that previously identified with Hamas have further radicalized their positions, and increasingly identify with Salafist jihadism and the Islamic State organization.

This essay will examine and analyze not only the source of the black flags, but also the religious ideology behind them,¹¹ their representatives in Israel, and the extent of the threat posed by this ideology and its proponents in Israel. This essay raises the question whether Israel's Arabs are undergoing a process of radicalization and if they are influenced by the rise of the Islamic State. In other words, do Israel's Muslim citizens increasingly identify with Salafist jihadism? If so, how is this process manifested, and what does it mean? These questions are of utmost importance, because this branch of Islam directly affects non-Muslims (such as Jews, Christians, and Druze) by preaching for the implementation of Sharia law and calling for jihad, in addition to viewing Israeli citizens as targets for attacks.¹² To answer these questions, the essay will analyze expressions and representations of Salafist jihadism in Israel in primary and secondary texts, with emphasis on news items in the Arabic and Hebrew media, as well as the online activity of Israeli supporters of Salafist jihadism in social media.

There is a dearth of documentation about the Salafist jihadi current in Israel; in particular, first-hand testimony is lacking, as its proponents operate covertly to avoid arrest. The lack of information makes it difficult to understand the psychological, social, family, religious, and technological motivations affecting a person's decision to leave Israel to join the Islamic State. Future research based on interviews with detainees, personal testimonies, and/or wills left by jihadists who have been killed will enable us to study these motives in depth. Another problematic factor is that radical Salafist preachers among Israel's Arabs have a very limited sphere of activity, whether in the mosque or in cyberspace. They cannot express their opinions freely and openly as they are concerned that the Israeli security services are listening to their sermons, which could lead to their arrest; they also cannot operate freely in cyberspace. Proof of the validity and seriousness of this concern lies in the media-covered arrest of Sheikh Nazem Abu Salim Skafa of Nazareth, as the prosecution against him was based on his sermons at the Shihab al-Din mosque where he served as imam, and on his activity in cyberspace.

Black Flags in Israel

During Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip, black flags were seen flying at protests in Israel. The public, the media, and decision makers are familiar with these flags because of their use by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and especially the Islamic State. As a result of their appearance and given the knowledge about massacres of Iraqi minorities committed by the Islamic State, Knesset member Ayelet Shaked asked Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon to declare the Islamic State illegal.¹³ On September 3, 2014, the minister of defense declared the Islamic State to be “an illegal organization” and banned all contact with it. The following day, the media issued reports indicating that law enforcement agencies had been instructed to remove the flags identified with Hamas, the Islamic State, and Hizbollah.¹⁴

On September 10, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called a debate to discuss the threat posed by the Islamic State. The debate, held in the presence of senior personnel, including ministers, heads of the security establishment, and the attorney general, dealt with strengthening enforcement against showing support or identifying with the organization, locating activists and supporters, and foiling attempts to set up terrorist cells.¹⁵ The anti-Islamic State legislation was a response to the growing support for the organization seen in the previous months in Israel, including on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.¹⁶ For example, a picture posted and shared by the Twitter account @DefenderISIS on March 28, 2014, displayed a man holding a sign that read, “Greetings of affection and love from Jerusalem to the glory of the [Islamic] nation, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Quraishi [the leader of the Islamic State].”¹⁷ Black flags were flown in the city of Acre in July 2014 as a show of solidarity with Gaza Strip residents and in protest of the IDF’s bombing there.¹⁸

The Israeli website *0404 News* twice reported that black flags had been spotted in the city of Nazareth since the start of Operation Protective Edge.¹⁹ According to *0404 News*, a black flag had been hung from the patio of a Nazareth apartment, and vehicles with black flag stickers on them had been sighted in town. According to other reports, black flags had been spotted “in Acre, Nazareth, Umm el-Fahm, Kafr Qana, Sakhnin, and East Jerusalem.”²⁰ At the end of July 2014, the Christian Arab portal *Star2000* reported that a sign featuring the black flag had been erected across the entrance from the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, one of the most sacred sites in Christianity.²¹ According to this report, members of the

Christian community in the north and pilgrims have encountered hostility and even threats from radical Muslims, challenging their Christian faith. If Christians had become used to the contempt expressed in the flying of the green flags,²² they are now encountering the black flags.²³ In October, the slogan “The Islamic State is coming” appeared as graffiti near the Christian village of Bana in the Galilee,²⁴ accompanied by propaganda clips disseminated on the Internet showing what happens with the arrival of the Islamic State.

Jews, Christians, and the Islamic State

The inherent threat of the Islamic State – an organization that declared itself a “caliphate” and its leader as “caliph” (the leader of all Muslims in the Sunni world)²⁵ – has direct implications for Christians in the Middle East. For example, in the city of Mosul in Northern Iraq, which was conquered by Islamic State fighters, Christians were presented with three choices: to convert to Islam; to remain where they are and submit to Muslim law under the definition of “protected people” (*ahl al-dhimma*), and be required to pay a head tax called *jizya*; or to die. Masses of Christians fled and became refugees, joining other minorities facing the threat of annihilation.²⁶

Compared to Christians, the status of Jews is even more inferior. The Prophet Muhammad fought, vanquished, and humiliated the Jews of the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, his adherents must now continue to defeat and humble the Jews. The establishment of the State of Israel is seen as a direct challenge to the authority of Allah, and hence the use of religious terminology to justify violent struggle and reject Israel’s existence.²⁷ “Given that Muhammad himself engaged in jihad . . . his commandment is valid forever,”²⁸ causing Salafists to be eager to fulfill Muhammad’s commandment. Indeed, the Islamic State in particular and adherents of Salafist jihadism in general use both Sharia and jihad against non-Muslims. Examples may be found in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the Arab world.

The threat posed by the supporters of the Islamic State to Christians in Israel led to the opening of a Facebook page called “Exposing the Islamic State in Israel.” As its name indicates, the page is dedicated to exposing Israeli Arabs who identify with the so-called caliphate.²⁹ In a telephone interview with the late-night show *Tzinor Layla* conducted on August 13, 2014, the page administrator, using the handle Yuhana, claimed he had exposed more than 300 Israeli Arab supporters of the Islamic State and that they had threatened his life and his friends’ lives because of their

Facebook activity.³⁰ One of the Israeli Arabs exposed as an Islamic State supporter called for bringing the black flag back to where it had been flown in Nazareth, issuing the threat that “it was time for a [terrorist] attack” in the city. Another threatened to behead Yuhana, who said that he feared for his life. Shadi Halul, a member of the Forum for Enlistment of Christians into the IDF,³¹ said that the rise of the Islamic State had a direct effect on Israeli Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian: “Very extensive circles within the Muslim population in Israel identify with the Islamic State . . . Only some of them are currently giving expression to this identification by external means.” He claimed that “the flying of the Islamic State flag is accompanied by a widespread discourse on the elimination of the ‘crusader’ Christians and Jews in Israel.”³² As a member of the Christian Arab minority, Halul is worried that “if, at some point, unrest breaks out, they will take advantage of the momentum for more extensive organizing – first against Christians, and later on against Israel in general.”³³

Based on an article that appeared in *Ynet* on September 6, 2014, increasing numbers of Israeli Arabs are identifying with the Islamic State, a factor heightening tensions among more moderate members of Israel’s Muslim Arab sector. For example, after the imam in the north expressed his support for the organization, dozens of people who prayed in his mosque attacked his sermon on the spot and demanded his ouster.³⁴ Elsewhere, one man attending prayers said that, in his opinion, “The Islamic State is the only one capable of establishing an Islamic nation, and it is good they’re punishing people. I hope they come to Israel too.” According to the article, his sentiments led to the outbreak of a brawl.³⁵ Sheikh Hamad Abu Daabis, the head of the Southern Branch of the Islamic Movement, said that, “The Islamic State makes reasonable demands, such as the establishment of a state for Islam, but its methods for attaining the goals cause fear among many nations around the world.” The cleric, however, did not condemn those methods. A sheikh from the Galilee, said that, he personally supported the Islamic State, while a resident of Tira in the Triangle said that he knows people who expressed support for the Islamic State and that in Tira alone there are at least a thousand supporters.³⁶

The Black Flag: Between Salafism and Salafist Jihadism

To understand the Islamic State phenomenon, it is first necessary to understand Salafism (سلفية).³⁷ The Salafist movement is “the ur-movement of the Islamic revival of the twentieth century.” The meaning of the word

al-salaf (السلف) is “forefather,” and the word Salafiya describes “walking in the footsteps of the fathers of Islam.”³⁸ Salafism stems from the intention, need, and desire to purify “Islam from the flaws it acquired and return to the Golden Age of Islam – [the era of the lifetime of the Prophet] Muhammad and the first caliphs.”³⁹ The call for Salafiya signaled the start of a race among zealots who competed among themselves to most resemble the generation of the Prophet Muhammad, both in speech and in conduct, while distancing themselves “from anything that was not yet known to the Prophet’s generation (*bida’*).”⁴⁰ Moreover, the quest for Salafiya means “violent resistance to democracy and the liberty of citizens.”⁴¹

The term “forefathers of Islam” refers to *al-salaf al-salah*, a phrase translated as “righteous forebears” (or “the first straightforward ones”) and provides inspiration to the adherents of Salafist jihadism who want to recreate the victories of Islam from the era of the Prophet Muhammad and the caliphs.⁴² That time period was replete with extensive conquests and remains “a symbol and source of inspiration for radical [Salafist] Muslims.”⁴³ In the context of our own time and discussion, one can see how the attacks carried out by the Islamic State are justified by imitating the acts of “the righteous forebears.”⁴⁴ A Salafist sheikh living in the Palestinian Authority claimed that the Salafiya movement is not violent, but merely promulgates Islam (*dawa*). According to this sheikh, the Salafiya movement split into two branches: intellectual Salafism (*salafiya dawa*) and Salafi jihadism.⁴⁵ While the former focuses on spreading the faith and calls for adherence to Islam throughout the world, much like the Tablighi Jamaat society,⁴⁶ the latter champions violence in order to establish God’s kingdom on earth here and now. Salafist jihadism gave rise to terrorist organizations identified with global jihad, and all strive for the same objective.

The Salafist idea and Islamic radicalism emerged from both a direct and indirect connection with Israel and the West, with roots in the British Mandate in the Middle East, especially Egypt and Israel (Mandatory Palestine).⁴⁷ Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, studied in Egypt at al-Azhar University with Muhammad Rashid Rida, one of the most important Muslim theoreticians of the twentieth century, who laid the foundations for the current growth of the Salafiya movement.⁴⁸ Another one of Rida’s students and a friend of the Mufti was Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁹ The Mufti himself, a believer in the pan-Islamic idea,⁵⁰ might have identified as a Salafist today, perhaps even as a Salafist jihadist; he was opposed to Western dress, incited the murder

of Jews and “traitors” (Arabs who sold land to Jews), called for a global holy war against the Jews in Mandatory Palestine, and in the world, and against the West, and worked assiduously to realize his ideas and plans.⁵¹

During the British Mandate, several armed groups in Mandatory Palestine were active against the Jewish Yishuv. The most idealistic, active, and important one was *al-Kaf al-Aswad* (The Black Hand) of Sheikh Izz ad-Din al-Qassam (1883-1935). Al-Qassam, originally from Syria, gathered around him a small group of devotees committed to violent struggle against both the Jews and the British. Similar to the Mufti and al-Banna, he too studied at al-Azhar University and was influenced by Salafist thinkers. More so than the Mufti, his attitude toward the Yishuv eventually became a symbol, and a “model to emulate.”⁵² The military wing of Hamas – as well as the missiles it fires at Israel – is named for him.

In 1953, *Hizb al-Tahrir* (The Liberation Party) was formed in Jerusalem by the preacher Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani. His organization challenged the regimes in Arab lands and the political ideas prevalent at the time (nationalism, pan-Arabism, the political ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood) while it sought to revive the caliphate.⁵³ According to al-Nabhani’s understanding, jihad was a tool that would enable the future Islamic state to expand its territories to the area of *Dar al-Harb*.⁵⁴ The Six-Day War became a kind of fault line.⁵⁵ After the war, the theories developed by thinkers such as al-Nabhani, Sayyid Qutb,⁵⁶ and Sheikh Dr. Abdullah Azzam⁵⁷ started to crystallize into a cohesive program for a holy global war to establish the new caliphate. Those three, along with Osama bin Laden, paved the way for the formation of the Salafist jihadist faction we know today. Despite the differences between them, it seems that their notions were melded together and that their writings can explain what is known today as the Islamic State.

In November 2013, a video was published on the Internet showing a member of Hizb al-Tahrir preaching for war against the Jews and against conceding Islamic land such as Jaffa or Haifa.⁵⁸ According to this preacher, “The land of Palestine is Islamic and waqf land⁵⁹ and we have no permission to give it up.” The message to the Jews is clear: “For them, we have nothing but the sword until the [judgment] day comes when even the rocks and the trees will call out, ‘oh servant of God, oh, Muslim, there’s a Jew behind me, go kill him.’”⁶⁰ Hizb al-Tahrir is considered throughout the world to be a non-violent organization whose political activities are legitimate and legal, but its ideology largely overlaps that of other Salafist organizations

that use extreme violence to promote their goals.⁶¹ Officially speaking, Hizb al-Tahrir rejects violence, but, as various researchers have noted, it accepts the right of (Sunni) Muslims to engage in self-defense using violent means.⁶²

Although the belief that Israel is waqf land is associated mostly with the discourse of Hamas, the above quotation of the Hizb al-Tahrir member also expresses the absolute rejection of any concession of land that was previously under Islamic ownership, i.e., land that belonged to the various Islamic caliphates. Either way, the organization incites not only against Jews and the West, but also against any type of government that is not pure Salafist, and does not implement the Sharia. This is the point of congruence of Hizb al-Tahrir with the Salafist jihadist ideology.

The social and outreach activities that adherents of Salafist jihadism engage in at the mosques, in the streets, and in cyberspace increase their influence on the public at large, leading to radicalization.⁶³ William Lawrence and Haim Malka examined the development of the new generation of Salafist jihadism in North Africa, a phenomenon they call “the new radicalism.” This generation uses social activism and outreach in order to entrench itself within the population. While the adherents of this ideology have not been successful in reaching the masses, they do represent a dangerous and subversive element with the ability to destabilize fragile regimes.⁶⁴

What is the significance of the black flag that arouses many responses, even panic, in many parts of the world? According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the black flag previously represented the Prophet Muhammad and the subsequent caliphs, and served as their battle flag.⁶⁵ For the contemporary Islamic movement, the black flag represents belligerent jihad as well as the establishment of a renewed Islamic caliphate.⁶⁶ This flag, inscribed with the *shahada*,⁶⁷ is highly significant for the Islamic State, which grew out of Iraq.⁶⁸ Similarly, this flag was first flown in Iraq as the flag of the Abbasid dynasty,⁶⁹ whose capital was Baghdad – currently a target for conquest by the Islamic State.

The black flag entered global consciousness as a result of its use by Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, and other violent organizations, whether in action or rhetoric.⁷⁰ The use of the black flag stems from the Salafists’ desire to imitate the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, Hizb al-Tahrir is an example of a non-violent (in action), Salafist movement that seeks to revive the caliphate and uses the black and white flags as its symbol. In fact, Hizb al-Tahrir’s use of black flags preceded that of other Salafist jihadist organizations. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that since the appearance

of al-Qaeda and of the Islamic State, the flag has become identified first and foremost with Salafist jihadist terrorism. Through the use of violence, the jihadists have appropriated the “copyright” for the use of this flag and turned it into their symbol. The increasing strength of the jihadists, accompanied by adopting the black flag, points to a powerful force that is gaining momentum.

From Arab Spring to Islamic Winter

When the events called the Arab Spring broke out and the black flag was flown in many nations, at times accompanied by cries of “Osama, Osama, we’re all Osama,”⁷¹ concerns were raised that a radical Islamic force would spread and reveal itself as a “jihadi winter.”⁷² William McCants, an expert on the study of radical Islam at the Brookdale Institute, tried to calm the fears in a published essay called “Black Flag.” He claims that before we push the panic button, we should remember that the appearance of black flags in protests throughout the Arab world does not necessarily mean the presence of jihad supporters or jihadist terrorist organizations.⁷³ McCants asserted that the black flags expressed various phenomena: the possibility that young people used their newfound freedom to frighten their parents; Salafists flew the flags to publicly express their anger, using a familiar, fear-inducing symbol; and an expression of hope, in the style of “wish you were here,” reflecting an aspiration more than a reality. Is McCants’ claim valid regarding Israel? Is his claim valid more than four years after the events that rocked the Middle East? Moreover, it is impossible to ignore the fact that flying the black flag by Salafist activists currently occurs against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, which has become a center of global attention.

Israeli security experts, interviewed anonymously by Channel 2 television’s news program, said that some twenty Israeli Arabs have joined global jihad organizations fighting in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁴ It appears that the process has only developed in recent years, especially since the war in Syria has been appropriated by jihadists. According to one individual interviewed, “in the last year, there has been great radicalization in several Bedouin settlements in the Negev Desert, and Arab settlements in the north when it comes to the application of Sharia. Even people who used to be secular have been swept up and influenced by radical ideas.”⁷⁵

In other words, the Islamic State has inspired, influenced, and attracted a growing number of people in Israel. This is not a phenomenon unique

to Israel; it is happening all over the world, but with a direct connection to our region. After a special GSS and IDF force killed three Salafist jihadists near Hebron,⁷⁶ the Israeli daily *Haaretz* noted that the activity of jihadists in the Middle East, “in Sinai, and especially . . . in Syria strengthens the support for them in the West Bank.”⁷⁷ If the Salafists are indeed a rising power in the West Bank, could they also be a rising power among Israeli Arab citizens?

Global Jihad: Manifestations and Representations in Israel

According to the GSS, Salafist jihadist organizations in Israel have planned attacks and have tried to reach jihadist frontlines in Chechnya or Afghanistan. A 2012 GSS document stated that, “in the Arab sector, there has recently been pronounced identification with the ideas of Salafist jihadism. Although it is a limited phenomenon, it is clear that it is gaining a foothold and appeals to young radicals in this population sector.”⁷⁸ Terrorist cells that were inspired by al-Qaeda and identified with the organization’s philosophy were discovered in the Jerusalem area and in the Triangle (Jaljuliya).⁷⁹ In 2008, security services arrested two Bedouins from Rahat who were motivated by global jihad and had planned to carry out attacks in Israel.⁸⁰ In all of these cases, the Internet played a central role at every stage, from induction, through planning, to carrying out the attack, or attempting to do so.⁸¹

In 2010 and 2011, the GSS stopped the development of a terrorist cell associated with al-Qaeda and led by Sheikh Nazem Abu Salim Skafa, the imam of the Shihab al-Din mosque in Nazareth and the founder of Jama’at Ansar Allah Bayt al-Maqdis al-Nasra (Nazareth Supporters of the Holy House Group). This terrorist cell, some of whose members had tried to reach Somalia to realize their ideology,⁸² was responsible for the murder of taxi driver Yefim Weinstein (November 2009); attacks on Jews and Christians; and planned attacks and abductions of civilians and soldiers.⁸³ As far as we know, Abu Salim Skafa’s group was the first manifestation of organized Salafist jihadism to appear within the Green Line. The group posed a clear threat to anyone that they viewed as enemies of Islam: non-Muslim citizens of Israel, IDF soldiers, and even the pope.⁸⁴ The judge presiding in Abu Salim Skafa’s trial said that, “One cannot view the accused’s published statements as innocent; they lay down the path for his philosophy – identified with al-Qaeda and global jihad – to seize control by force and terrorism.” She added that, “Had his activity not been shut down, the terrorist activities

of his acolytes would have increased.”⁸⁵ According to the verdict, some thousand people were exposed to Abu Salim Skafa’s propaganda in the mosque, behind closed doors, and in the social media. “When such a large number of people is exposed to this type of content, the chance increases, that at least one or a few will decide to operate on the basis of that content, and will engage in some act of violence or terrorism.”⁸⁶ The threat inherent in Abu Salim Skafa’s faithful, Israeli Salafist jihadists still exists and is still relevant in the presence of a terrorist organization like the Islamic State that has grown strong enough to become a threat to many nations around the world, including Israel.

Searching for Black Flags on Facebook

How can we know if someone supports or identifies with Salafist jihadism in general or with terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in particular? What clues expose an Islamic State supporter in a Facebook profile or Twitter account? The social media profiles of adherents of Salafist jihadism share some characteristics. The appearance of the black flag is usually one of them. Other features include expressions of admiration for prominent leaders in the global jihad movements (such as bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi⁸⁷); the posting of propaganda videos and photographs; following certain preachers or groups identified as Salafist jihadist; writing and sharing messages supporting jihad (as both an idea and action) and its representatives (the Mujahidin); or threatening the enemies of Islam.

According to a study done by the Pew Research Center, Facebook is the preferred social media by Internet users compared to other social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and others).⁸⁸ According to data supplied by Alexa, a company that ranks websites, the five most popular sites in Israel are the search engine Google (ranked both one and two: the international and the Hebrew versions), Facebook, YouTube, and Ynet. Twitter placed seventeenth.⁸⁹ These data are in all likelihood correct also for Israel’s Arab sector.⁹⁰ If Facebook is the preferred social media of the Israeli Arab sector, one can assume that most activity of Salafist jihadi adherents in Israel would also occur on this social media site. Given that that is the case, one Facebook friend can reach dozens or even hundreds of other people, and examine the information posted on their pages. According to Yuhana, the administrator of the Facebook page “Exposing the Islamic State in Israel,” he found some 300 Facebook profiles of Islamic State supporters in Israel. One such individual is Abu Musab al-Saffuri, whose real name is Rabia

Shahada.⁹¹ Al-Saffuri's page says that he lives in Upper Nazareth and that he studied engineering at ORT Singalovski in Tel Aviv.⁹² He is currently in Syria. The handle Abu Musab al-Saffuri may indicate a connection to the village of Saffuriyya,⁹³ and identification with Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Al-Saffuri is seen in a video disseminated on the Internet in May 2014, in which he addresses Christians and Alawites, and tells them that he and his comrades "love death for the sake of Allah more than you love life." He also threatened that he and his comrades have come to drink the Alawites' "tasty" blood.⁹⁴ In an interview with the Internet edition of the newspaper *Kul al-Arab*, al-Saffuri made it clear that he was not fighting for the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria, but rather for the purpose of establishing an Islamic state. The next target, he said, is the liberation of Palestine and the al-Aqsa mosque. To "beloved Palestine," he promised, he would "return as a conqueror."⁹⁵

The identification of Israeli Salafist jihadists with the Islamic State can be seen in declarations, as in the case of Adnan Ala a-Din,⁹⁶ a Nazareth attorney, who published on Facebook the hadith about the Jew hiding behind the rock on judgment day.⁹⁷ On September 8, 2014, Ala a-Din uploaded to his Facebook page a still photograph from a video showing the execution of Steven Sotloff, a Jewish journalist with dual Israeli-US citizenship who was kidnapped by Syrian rebels, sold to the Islamic State, and beheaded by a British national known as Jihadi John. Ala al-Din posted the picture with a caption reading "A victim who speaks fluent English threatens heretics . . . Will we see a Hebrew-speaking victim?!"⁹⁸ Adnan Ala al-Din was not content to stay at the level of theory, and in January 2015, it was reported that he and six of his friends had been arrested. It emerged that he headed a cell identified with the Islamic State,⁹⁹ which had participated in meetings with a "well-known and senior" Salafist jihadist preacher from the north. The cell was in touch with Islamic State activists in Syria and Iraq, including other Israelis, and the members taught themselves to slaughter sheep, apparently in preparation for slaughtering humans.¹⁰⁰ This seems to indicate that Israeli Muslim citizens not only have a spiritual leader and authority to follow (the well known, senior sheikh from the north), but also those seeking to join the Islamic State and those who have already done so, are aware of each other.

A growing number of Arab Israelis is attracted to the Islamic State, "the wonder that everyone is talking about and wants to be part of."¹⁰¹ More than a few have tried to go to Syria to join the caliphate and have been caught.¹⁰²

Other have been stopped from leaving Israel, such as a young Israeli named Karim Mursal Khaled Abu Salah, who, according to his Facebook page, lives in Sakhnin. On August 1, 2014, Abu Salah posted a photograph of an injunction preventing him from leaving Israel, which was issued on the basis of “a real concern that his leaving . . . might damage state security.”¹⁰³ The injunction was valid until August 30, 2014. Abu Salah was a Facebook friend of Adnan Ala al-Din and a member of the above-mentioned cell.

Abu Yusuf Abu Hussein notes that he lives in Baqa al-Gharbiya and that he attended the science and technology high school in the city.¹⁰⁴ His profile picture is that of Adnan Ismail al-Bilawi, one of the Islamic State’s prominent field commanders.¹⁰⁵ He also uploaded photos of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – as the “Caliph Ibrahim”¹⁰⁶ – to his page. As his account is public, one can see not only his pictures and posts, but also his 446 friends as of September 2014, many of whom are Israeli Arabs (including those noted here) who do not bother to hide their identity and support for the Islamic State and its leader. Another Arab Israeli who does not hide his support for the Islamic State is Thaer Saleem, who notes that he lives in the village of Muqeible in Northern Israel.¹⁰⁷ Saleem dedicated his Ramadan blessing of 2014 to the “Caliph Ibrahim” and Mullah Mustafa Omar, the head of the Afghani Taliban. On July 4, 2014, Saleem posted a picture of the leader of the Islamic State.¹⁰⁸ Ten people “liked” the picture, including Adnan Ala a-Din and other Israeli Arabs.

As we can see, there are supporters of global jihad in Israel who have stated outright where they live, making it easy to identify them as Israeli Arabs. Although some have hidden their personal information, it is possible to extract data about them and their friends. An excellent example is the Facebook account of Jabarin Jabarin, whose residence is not mentioned, but because the page is made public, it is possible to see many expressions of admiration for the Islamic State and its past and present leaders.¹⁰⁹ This account has 373 friends, many of whom are Israelis, among them Ala al-Din and al-Saffuri.

How can one know that a profile belongs to an Israeli if he does not explicitly say so? First, the name he chooses can indicate his background or place of residence (as in the case of al-Saffuri). A prominent feature among the friends of Jabarin Jabarin is that some share a similar surname, which appears in several variations: Jabarin, Gbareen, and Gbren. The Facebook page of one Mosa Gbren, whose profile picture is that of the “Caliph Ibrahim,” in particular stands out.¹¹⁰ Some of Jabarin Jabarin’s

friends also note Umm al-Fahm as their city of residence. A simple Google search will show that one of the large clans in Umm al-Fahm is the Jabarin clan, which explains the presence of some of them among the Facebook friends of Jabarin Jabarin, and strengthens the claim that he is Israeli.

The fifth and last chapter in the series of shows called “The Islamic State Threat” by Zvi Yehezkeli focused on Islamic State activists and supporters in Israel. Most of the people interviewed by the investigation rejected the Islamic State and its methods. Some agreed with the general idea, but rejected the violent means employed. Two others interviewed expressed support for the caliphate and its methods. The show’s conclusion was clear: the Islamic State is already here.¹¹¹

Sheikh Abu Salim, “al-Saffuri,” Adnan Ala al-Din, Abu Salah, and many others who have not been mentioned here for lack of space, are all “friends” on Facebook. They are the Israeli manifestation of an international, militant community that exists and is growing both in reality and in cyberspace. This community poses a dilemma for the security services. If the Israeli Salafists are arrested, their reputation locally and internationally will only be enhanced, not to mention that they will be able to disseminate their ideology in prison. On the other hand, if they remain at large, they are liable to radicalize others or realize their doctrine themselves by going to a jihadist front or by carrying out terrorist attacks.

The concern that the GSS has about Israeli Arab citizens going to Syria is that “they will be exploited by terrorists both for information about targets in Israel and for military activity against Israel.”¹¹² Efraim Halevy, a former head of the Mossad, also warned against Israelis joining jihadist organizations in Syria.¹¹³ In addition to this danger, which is discernible (i.e., it is clear who leaves Israel and it is fairly easy to estimate who will continue on to Syria or Iraq), one must factor in the unknown danger coming from those who would like to see an Israeli who speaks fluent Hebrew as one of their victims.

Conclusion

The mass demonstrations that broke out in the Arab world at the end of 2010, during which the black flag was raised, shook the Middle East and provided a clear boost to the Salafist jihadist movement. Researchers claimed at the time that the waving of the black flags did not necessarily indicate a terrorist presence. Nonetheless, given what we know about developments in the Middle East and the rapid growth of the Salafist presence in the area,

even within the State of Israel, and given the rise of the Islamic State, it would not be outrageous to say that the flying of black flags at this point – even if done only out of defiance – indicates the presence of a subversive, hostile force that should be monitored and controlled. This force is on the fast track to radicalization, and we do not know when it will be ripe for action and realize the Salafist theories by using violent jihadist means.

As noted in the GSS document presented earlier in this essay, the Salafist movement in Israel is “gaining a foothold and is a draw for young radicals,” but it is failing to pull in the masses. Just as there are people attracted to power, many people reject horror and brutality. Black flags have been seen only in a handful of locations, even though violent demonstrations and riots have occurred throughout Israel. While the appearance of black flags in Israel points to the presence of Salafist jihadist adherents, this does not necessarily mean they will engage in violence. Nonetheless, violent action depends more on the means (or their lack thereof) available to radical Salafists, and less so on their wishes.

The success of the Islamic State in the battlefield in Iraq and Syria has been accompanied by ethnic and religious cleansing, brutality towards POWs and civilians, and terrifying, effective psychological warfare reaching every population segment in Israel and the world, including anti-Jewish incitement. All of this has an effect on Israel’s Arab population in general and the proponents of the Salafist approach in particular. Identification with the jihadist force rising in the north leads to radicalization, which could turn outwards – by going to jihadist fronts – or turn inwards, by engaging in lone wolf terrorism within Israel or by creating local infrastructures inspired by global jihad.

The rise of the Islamic State has implications for Israeli society. The radicalization of individuals in the Israeli Muslim Arab sector affects their immediate surroundings; their uncompromising approach, which enjoys a tailwind blowing from Iraq and Syria, has a tendency to attract others. They also have an influence on their more distant surroundings, as their attitude towards Jews, Christians, and other minorities changes and becomes violently aggressive and militant. As we have seen, this is expressed both in words and in action, and as experience has shown, words can lead to action.

Those who fly the black flag today – and this is unfortunate for the people of Hizb al-Tahrir – cannot claim that it is the flag of all Muslims, because it is not. It is the flag of a fundamentalist, militant movement coming into

being, one whose rhetoric and actions outdo even non-Salafist terrorist groups such as Hamas. It is the battle flag flown together by non-violent Salafists who “only” call for jihad during protests or in their sermons, and violent Salafists (Salafiya jihadiya), who support the notion of jihad as a violent struggle in reality.

Given the actions carried out publicly by the Islamic State, the one who flies this flag – be it in the United Kingdom, Israel, or Iraq, in the street or at home, across from the Church of the Annunciation, or as a sticker on the car – knows exactly with what he identifies and what the flag represents in the Israeli context: Muhammad’s war against the Jews. Therefore it may behoove the State of Israel to consider legislation against organizations, groups, or individuals using this flag as their symbol, because by flying it today they engage in incitement to persecute and harm the Jews and Christians, as well as other non-Muslim minorities (like the Druze and Bahai).

Notes

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