

The Phenomenon of Transnational Jihad

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

Summary

The concept of Transnational jihad and Pan-Islamism got prominence and came up as a phenomenon with the rise of ideologues like Abdallah Azzam, Anwar al Awlaki, Mohammad al-Maqdisi and others. The present paper focuses mostly on Abdallah Azzam, the father of trans-national jihad, who later was credited being the most significant person in bringing Arab Fighters to Afghanistan in the 1980. Besides, it provides insight into the ideology of al-Maqdisi which explains the massive impact these religious scholars have in the Muslim world. The role of these ideologues could not be understood without delving into trans-national jihad and 'foreign fighters'- the agents of Global Jihad.

Foreign Fighters and Pan-Islamism

Islamism is politically heterogeneous, meaning different types of Islamist activism have shown up on various occasions throughout history. A significant number of the elements that fuelled the previous Islamist development are not adequate to clarify this particular wonder of transnational war and this new subcurrent of populist Pan-Islamism. The period of 1960s saw two new developments- a) the repression and outcast of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria; b) foundation of International Islamic associations and numerous new colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia, of which Hijaz district became extremely important where the fleeing Brotherhood activist from various countries found refuge. There they began a different discourse underscoring the outside dangers to Muslim countries and established a worldwide network of charities for Aid purposes.

The foreign fighters are very distinct from other types of violent actors as there are some criteria which separate them- "they need to operate within the confines of insurgency, they must not have citizenship of the conflict state, they must not have any affiliation with any military organisation, and most importantly they must be unpaid". These fighters are not a soldier but they do enjoy some form of state support some way or the other. They are funded by private donors and nongovernmental charitable sector.

Why would anybody like to fight someone else's war?

There have been many well-established theoretical arguments about the phenomenon of transnational activism where major themes are: role of religious difference between warring parties, a new factor of post-decolonisation where the invasion of an independent Muslim country is seen as a more dramatic act of aggression and hence more likely to attract foreign fighters, increased role of religion as a reason, a free pass is given by the home country of fighters, the role of communication technology, cheaper modes of transportation, and the role of Islamist movements (Hegghammer 2010).

But there are fallacies in these explanations, for instance, there is no obvious answer to why anti-colonial struggle should not invite foreign fighters. On the contrary, the increase in the number of independent Muslim states after the 1950s should have produced more local movements and not transnational activism. Also, Arab Afghans were not actively supported by the governments rejecting the home country logic or also called 'blowback theory' where Afghan Mujahideen are confused with Arab Afghans. It is true that the United States and Saudi funded and trained Afghan Mujahids, but there is no evidence that they did the same for the Arabs (Coll 2004). Some scholars also have claimed that foreign fighters emerged because Islamism declined which also doesn't seem to give a clear picture. Now it is possible to say that moderation in mainstream Islamism can lead to the radicalisation of fringe who get frustrated and disillusioned with the pace of struggle but it does not explain the reason behind internationalisation of the fringe.

The better explanation however is said to be found in the concept of Pan-Islamism that did not exist before the 1980s. Pre 1980s was about revolutionary Islamism where it focused on the enemy within and not outside. For Islamist revolutionaries such as Sayyid Qutb, Jihad was mainly about eliminating corrupt rulers and revoking secular legislation, and not repelling external military aggression. Afghanistan was the first Islamic independent country to be invaded by non-Muslims and became the first theatre of global jihad. There was a difference between the pan-Islamism of 1980s and preceding Islamist movements. The recruitment messaging during the time had three major aspects- Diagnosis, Prognosis and Rationale (Wilson 1973). The diagnosis was as simple that there is a definite existential threat that the Muslim Umma faces where territories are occupied followed by the rape of women and butchering of people and mosques are obliterated. The prognosis tells that Muslims will fight back militarily because the Islamic Law commands it and the situation is quite bad for any diplomatic solution to work. The rationale so given is that it is the responsibility of all Muslims around the world to liberate from the tyranny as commanded the divine law. This is where ideologues like Abdallah Azzam gained traction and led this part of the world to a new style of war.

Abdallah Azzam

It is clear from the available material that Abdallah Azzam is by far the most influential foreign fighter ideologue. He was born in Jenin, Palestine in 1941, and was evicted from his hometown during 1967 Six-Day War. He spent years pursuing his studies in Islamic jurisprudence attending university in Syria and graduating with a doctorate in Islamic studies from Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In 1981, he left Saudi Arabia and moved to Islamabad to contribute to the Afghan war. He established 'Maktab

al-Khidmat lil Mujahideen’ or called The Services Offices for Arab Jihadists. it was Azzam who discovered Bin Laden while teaching in Jeddah.

Arab mobilisation in Afghanistan has been talked about as an extension of Qutb’s revolutionary ideas but this was not just revolution, rather national liberation which Qutb does not talk about. Azzam’s religious training and Muslim Brotherhood background gave him the authority that he needed to possess. His Palestinian background always made to close to the home even while in Afghanistan which he talked as the ultimate goal i.e liberation of Palestine. The reasons for fighting were more pragmatic ones rather than mere theological by telling all able Muslims to join the war in Palestine and those not able to go there should come to Afghanistan. His presence in this region was based on three practical reasons- for morale-boosting, as an inspiration for Muslim Umma and third, he despised the leftists' dominance in the PLO.

The Ideology of Azzam

The recruitment videos include recordings from his speeches. His texts may thus be used as a basis for a comparison between the foreign fighter doctrine and other jihad doctrines. He offered a rationale for 'Privatised Warfare'. Azzam's central concept, also the name of one of his books is '*Al-Defaa aan Ardhee al-Muslimeen aham furood al-ayaan*' (Defending Muslim Lands is Among the Most Important Collective Obligations) (Enein 2008). This is where he changed the trajectory from previous Islamists by introducing the word 'collective obligation' (fard ayn) as against individual obligation (fard kifaya). The rationale according to him is that all able Muslim men worldwide join the fighting because Islamic law requires it. The responsibility for the defence of Muslim territory is shared by all Muslims and not limited to the residents of the contested area. Azzam simplifies, rather reduces Islamic law and history, he does not expose his listener to the intricacies (Enein 2008). He employed political maneuvering and often got his fatwa endorsed by some of the most noted clerics of the time. Azzam’s doctrine was also much less controversial than Sayyid Qutb’s revolutionary Islamism because the struggle Azzam envisaged defence of Muslim territory from non-Muslim aggression—was the same as that assumed in orthodox jihad doctrines whereas revolutionaries proposed killing nominally Muslim rulers, a theologically much more problematic endeavour. Scholars like Yusuf al-Qaradawi disagreed on his ground of duty saying Arabs are not obliged to go to war. Azzam's message got more popular because of the prevailing atmosphere of obscurity. Arab Nationalism was on the decline since 1967 war and the utopia of Islamic Revolution in Iran had faded away and this trans-national doctrine got more advantageous as it was placed very close to Islamic Legal Orthodoxy and thereby won over other militant ideologies (Hegghammer 2010).

There was a plethora of literature coming out during later 1970s filled with foreign fighter content. The same community of people who produced this literature also raised money for Muslim victims in war via organisations like the Muslim World League and other charities. The Pan-Islamism was not about the union of Muslim counties but more about cooperation among the people. The Hijaz region became a fertile ground and the Mecca-Medina-Jeddah triangle became the world's largest base of Islamic Religious organisations. These organisations provided a platform for all marginalised elites to export the ideas.

This Hijazi pan-Islamist discourse was more alarmist and more global in outlook than any of its predecessors. Governments tolerated the diffusion of pan-Islamist propaganda because it vilified primarily non-Muslim powers, not Muslim governments. It had the benefit of diverting attention from domestic political problems and directing towards Sharia. The pan-Islamists also sought to practice solidarity by providing aid to Muslims in need around the world. Azzam identified himself as ‘Qutbist-Salafist’ and his involvement in the Afghan cause illustrates the role of the international Muslim Brotherhood and the Muslim World League. Azzam’s influence was amplified by two factors: first, his status as a religious scholar and, second, his links with the pan-Islamist community which gave him access to resources and recruitment arenas that less well-connected individuals did not have. Azzam remained important post 9/11- by making a theoretical concept of ‘*Al-Qaeda al-Sulba*’ (Firm Base) of help and administrations from which worldwide jihad could be pursued from Afghanistan. He energized Sunni Islamist aggressor groups to gain from Hezbollah (Shiite) and set up organizations for raising support, enlistment, weapon practice, and conventions in the United States far from the efficiency of Arab security services. He is viewed as the Clausewitzian scholar of Islamist militancy, who consolidated a deadly agreement and damaging interpretation of Islamic law and history, with ruinous translations of the French, and Russian Revolutions.

Muhammad Al-Maqdisi

To know about the philosophy and ideology of al-Maqdisi, it would be apt to know about the Salafi creed which revolves around some strict interpretations of themes like Tawhid (oneness of God) and proscribed actions like kufr(unbelief) and shirk(polytheism). The followers of such creed tend to model themselves around the ‘Salafs’ or the first generation of pious followers around Prophet Mohammad. However, even Salafis do not agree on everything and there is enough friction among themselves. They have been classified into three categories by Wiktorowicz- Purists, Politicos and Jihadis. These groups are however united by common creed (aqida) and have a different method of applying it in the

contemporary world (manhaj). Al-Maqdisi is a religious scholar and not strategist nor participated in actual combat like Abdallah Azzam. His followers though include fighters like Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Al-Qaeda in Iraq whose faction later become Islamic State (Daesh). Purist Salafists like Maqdisi are more engaged in teaching, studying, and making society more Islamic; Politico Salafists take a more active part in politics as part of their Minhaj; and Jihadis on waging a war against unbelievers. Maqdisi's ideology resonates with purist Salafis and remains very different from the rhetoric of Osama Bin Laden or Ayman al Zawahiri. However, the jihadis tend to take Maqdisi very seriously because of his religious authority and command. Nothing much in detail has been written on his early life, but he got known when he travelled to Afghanistan where 'jihad' was already in operation against the Soviets. It is there where he wrote his most important contribution, '*Millat Ibrahim*' extrapolating al-Utaybi¹'s ideas. He got more popularity via al-Zarqawi but later their relationship got worse after Zarqawi indulged himself in brutal attacks against the US troops and Shiites and therefore, was reprimanded for bringing a bad name to Religious creed.

Concepts of al-Maqdisi

The most significant concept of Maqdisi is '*Al-Wala wa-l-Bara*' (loyalty and disavowal). These come from strict views on 'aqida' and 'manhaj' (Wagemakers 2009). He used this concept to label the rulers in the Muslim world as infidels. This is in contrast to Wahabism that prevails in Saudi Arabia where the Salafists apply al-Bara differently. For example, contact with infidels is forbidden but the presence of US troops on home soil is acceptable if the ruler thinks it fit. He applied the concept to both social and political issues, while others restricted al-Bara to the only social sphere. Apart from the Quranic references to 'Millat Ibrahim', he draws a connection between al-wala wa-l-bara and Tawhid. This did put him against political regimes like Saudi Arabia where he got harsh on the regime for establishing relations with the United States and called that an insult to Islam (Wagemakers 2009). To simply say Maqdisi used the concept which generally is used to enforce social piety against Islamic rulers and told all Muslims to denounce them.

Maqdisi's next emphasis laid upon his concept of 'Kufr' where he further explains how most of the contemporary Islamic rulers are non-Muslims. He separates Kufr (unbelief) into two types- Major and Minor Kufr (Wagemakers 2009). Activities under the former directly place one outside the fold of Islam while under the latter one can be regarded as sinful (fasiq) but not necessarily infidel (kafir).

¹ Juhayman al-Utaybi was the leader of a group of rebels who took control of the Grand Mosque of Mecca in 1979. His concept of 'Millat Ibrahim' (religion of Abraham) was later adopted by Maqdisi.

Major kufr includes practices like worshipping idols. Minor includes practices like drinking alcohol. However, the controversy lies in the political actions of rulers where these ideologues vary on whether to apply takfir (to excommunicate and declare one infidel) or not. Maqdisi considers any form of democracy as a different religion altogether and hence un-Islamic and an apt ground for applying takfir. Many purists believe that governing on basis of non-Islamic laws is only minor kufr whereas Maqdisi is quite strict on this aspect. According to him, democracy gives sovereignty to people of the country taking away the power which only 'God' should exercise. Having that said he is also against the very general application of takfir to people in large. He considers it to be impossible to apply takfiri to society as kufr cannot be ascertained in large groups of people and limit it only to Rulers, people in army, police, bureaucracy and ministries. This raises his stature and position in the eyes of followers and makes him less vulnerable to opposition.

Maqdisi nevertheless comes out as jihadi as well when he considers 'Jihad' as the highest form to express feelings. On the question of whether it first should be done against the west or nearby Islamic rulers, he takes a middle position. For instance, he commended the attackers of 9/11 but also told that West could be defeated under a large Islamic banner alone thereby indicating the need to conquer the near lands. This is where he differs from the strategies of Al-Qaeda. He strongly advocates '*qital al-tamkin*' (fight to consolidate power) against '*qital al-nikaya*' (fight to cause damage) and establishes the importance of Da'wa (propagation of Islam) in jihad and took strong opposition against suicide bombings and failure to establish proper and just Islamic system after military successes post completion of jihad.

Conclusion

There have been ideologues like Anwar Awlaki who introduced storytelling as a key rhetorical device and used 'Sira' (tales of the life of the Prophet Muhammad) to a greater extent than perhaps any other radical ideologue before him. His stories were largely apolitical, so they appealed to a wide audience and made Awlaki appear like a regular Islamic preacher without militant inclinations. He painted the world clearly, with Muslims and non-Muslims as hostile foes, and focused on the solidarity of the Muslim country, or Umma. Simultaneously, he consolidated Western talks about common liberties, hostility to bigotry, rhetoric against imperialism with thoughts of Islamic fortitude and different references that engaged his audience members' social feeling of having a place. The distinction between jihadi and reformist groups of the transnational Salafi development isn't a difference about whether jihad is required, but instead the timing of any war. Indeed, even noticeable Salafi reformists,

for example, the late Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Bani, have concurred that current conditions make jihad an individual commitment. Yet, the groups differ concerning whether that commitment should be satisfied promptly or after a lot of profound arrangement. Reformists contend that Salafis should initially assemble the base of strict comprehension before the Umma is set up to wage jihad. Reformists authorize jihad under outrageous conditions, for example, the Soviet attack of Afghanistan or the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, when dire conditions and need may drive reformists to acknowledge jihad. Then again, jihadis accept that Salafis ought to seek after all alternatives without a moment's delay. Propagation is significant, however it ought to transiently agree with jihad, which should be pursued at any place where Muslims are mistreated.

The most significant aspect of these ideologues in propagating Trans-nationalism is that they were successful in equating 'Jihad' with other daily Islamic practices like fasting and praying. Scholars like Azzam enticed the youth to participate without the necessary permission from parents, teachers and made them go on their own. This, however, is in contrast to what the early prophets did- emphasizing negotiations and toleration. The Trans-national war though is driven by religion but the major undercurrent of Pan-Islamism is not just restricted to some simple religious construction. Two major components for large scale Global Resistance are- an ideology which finds resonance with the transnational imagined community and a strong network of transnational activists. There are some policy implications of these findings-those seeking to prevent foreign fighter recruitment need to recognize that the recruitment messages do not rely on complex theological arguments, but on simple, inner appeals to people's sense of solidarity and altruism. If anybody needs to counter it, they will have to control audio-visual propaganda and spread awareness of factual errors in the pan-Islamist victim narrative. Along with this, a need to promote other local forms of identification and adjustment of public diplomacy to reality would be important drivers to change.

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