# The Role of Salafi Ideology among Radicalised Muslims: Two Case Studies

## Joas Wagemakers

## Introduction

A lot of research has been done on the extent to which (religious) ideology plays a role in mobilising, activating, and building social movements and how this coheres with other factors. This research has shown that, while ideology is certainly not the only (or even main) motivating factor for social movement actors, ideas can certainly play a role.[1] Recent work on the role of ideology in radical Islamist groups has also shown that (religious) ideology should be seen as a relevant factor in processes leading to terrorism, but that these are complex and diverse among different actors.[2] This short chapter seeks to contribute to this topic by discussing two different case studies in which the presence of Salafi ideology is clearly important in mobilising and radicalising people, but in a similarly complex and diverse way.

## The Reception of Radical Ideas: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi

The first case study dealt with here is that of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (b. 1959), a Palestinian-Jordanian Jihadi-Salafi scholar who is generally seen as one of the most important radical Islamist ideologues in the world and who has been particularly influential in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. With regard to the first country, he wrote a book entitled Al-Kawashif al-Jaliyya fi Kufr al-Dawla al-Sa'udiyya ("The Clear Revelations of the Unbelief of the Saudi State"), which he published in 1989. In this book, al-Maqdisi accuses the regime in Riyadh of being characterised by unbelief because of its unwillingness to apply the shari'a in full, which violates the unity of God (tawhid) in legislation, and its willingness to establish close ties with non-Muslim countries, particularly the United States, which al-Maqdisi views as un-Islamic loyalty to the enemies of Islam. He therefore applies takfir (excommunication) to the Saudi state and believes it should be overthrown through jihad. By writing this, al-Maqdisi not only challenges the Saudi state, but he does so in a way that makes extensive use of the writings of Saudi Arabia's own Salafi scholars as well as Salafi concepts like al-wala' wa-l-bara' (loyalty and disavowal). As such, al-Maqdisi makes a very Salafi case against Saudi Arabia, suggesting that his message will likely appeal greatly to Salafis.[3]

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and it appeared as if Saudi Arabia would be next, the latter asked the United States for help, leading to the presence of 500,000 American soldiers in the kingdom and, in response, the rise of a social movement that protested this decision and accompanied it with a broader set of political demands.[4] Given that a substantial part of this social movement stemmed from the sahwa (renaissance), a political Salafi trend in Saudi Arabia, and al-Maqdisi's book partly dealt with the Saudi-American ties that this movement protested against, it may seem as if these two would dovetail perfectly. This, however, was not the case. Not only was al-Maqdisi's solution to the problem of the Saudi regime (takfir and jihad) more radical than that of the sahwa (criticism and reform), but his discourse was

---

1   See, for example, Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes (eds.), Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective (Lanham, MD, etc.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005).

2   Donald Holbrook and John Horgan, "Terrorism and Ideology: Cracking the Nut," Perspectives on Terrorism 13, no. 6 (2019): 2-15.

3   Joas Wagemakers, A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 104-8.

4   Stéphane Lacroix, Les islamistes saoudiens: Une insurrection manquée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 189-227.

also built on religious Salafi arguments, which mostly fell on deaf ears among the politically savvy adherents to the sahwa. Despite a shared opposition to the Saudi regime and a common general Salafi outlook, al-Maqdisi's book thus had little influence on the social movement that erupted after the Gulf War.[5]

This changed when al-Maqdisi's book on Saudi Arabia was read by members of al-Qa'ida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP), a local branch of the broader al-Qa'ida organisation that was much more radical and violent in its opposition to the Saudi regime and rose in the early 2000s.[6] To members of QAP, al-Maqdisi's arguments – grounded in the works and concepts of (Saudi) Salafi religious tradition – were precisely what they were looking for in their own battle against the Saudi state since – being steeped in Salafi tradition themselves – other, non-Salafi scholars would likely not have appealed to them.[7] As such, al-Maqdisi, partly because he framed his opposition to the Saudi state in religious Salafi terms, was quite influential on the Jihadi-Salafi QAP.[8]

In Jordan, where al-Maqdisi has lived since 1992, his influence developed in the opposite direction. During the period when he arrived there from Kuwait, Jordan was in disarray because of an economic crisis, the Palestinian intifada (1987-1993), the Gulf War in neighbouring Iraq and the peace agreement with Israel in 1994. This tumultuous time led to a search for new answers among some, causing a rise in radical Islamist groups in Jordan.[9] Among these disparate youngsters – who lacked a coherent set of ideas – al-Maqdisi's writings provided the radical Salafi ideology they needed, particularly when they also began to focus on issues that Jordanian radicals found objectionable, such as democracy and the country's "un-Islamic" laws.[10]

After the group of Jordanian young men radicalised, were arrested and went to prison, however, the scholarly and Salafi doctrinal strengths that al-Maqdisi brought to the table began to pale in comparison to the tough, physical qualities that another member of the group – the later Jordanian leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006) – provided. As it turned out, al-Maqdisi had been useful in facilitating these youngsters' ideological radicalisation, but it was the radical nature of his ideology, rather than its Salafi arguments, that they were interested in. As a result, many radical Jordanian youngsters left the scholar al-Maqdisi for the fighter al-Zarqawi, particularly when he began to criticise the latter for his excessive use of violence in Iraq as a result of his less than full adherence to Salafi ideological purity.[11]

# The Radicalisation of a Leader: Muhammad Ibrahim Shaqra

The second case study involves Muhammad Ibrahim Shaqra (1934-2017), a Palestinian-Jordanian Salafi scholar who was one of the leaders of the Jordanian quietist Salafi community because of his seniority and scholarly credentials, second only to the famous Muhammad Nasir al-

---

5   Wagemakers, Quietist, 109-19.

6   Thomas Hegghammer, Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism Since 1979 (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 113-226.

7   Madawi al-Rasheed, Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139.

8   Wagemakers, Quietist, 127-44.

9   Beverley Milton-Edwards, "Climate of Change in Jordan's Islamist Movement," in Islamic Fundamentalism, ed. Abdel Salam Sidahmed and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1996), 123-34.

10  Wagemakers, Quietist, 198-212.

11  Id., "A Terrorist Organisation That Never Was: The Jordanian 'Bay'at al-Imam' Group," Middle East Journal 68, no. 1 (2014): 59-75; id., "Reclaiming Scholarly Authority: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Critique of Jihadi Practices," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 34 (2011): 523-39.

Din al-Albani (1914-1999). In the 2010s, however, Shaqra increasingly drifted in the direction of Jihadi-Salafi scholars like al-Maqdisi. This has been ascribed to a theological difference of opinion on the nature of faith between Shaqra and other quietist Salafis,[12] but there was actually more going on, which shows how ideology and context can strengthen each other and cause further radicalisation.

Although there was a theological difference of opinion between Shaqra and other Jordanian quietist Salafis, it was not until the question of leadership of their community after the death of al-Albani came up that it turned into a conflict. Shaqra, expecting to be made the new leader of the community, was turned down in favour of younger, less formally educated men who were closer to the often young Salafis they sought to guide than the elderly civil servant that Shaqra himself had become. Frustrated about this, he eventually broke with the quietist Salafi community and, using the theological difference of opinion he had with them as an excuse, radicalised and grew closer to Jihadi-Salafis, who not only agreed with him on his specific views on faith, but – much more importantly – gave him the respect he felt he deserved.[13]

## Conclusion

Both case studies dealt with above show that ideology has been important in the radicalisation of certain Salafis, but in very different ways and always greatly influenced by the context in which it occurred. Al-Maqdisi's Jihadi-Salafi writings had little influence among the Saudi sahwa, even though the context seemed quite favourable, because they were quite radical and steeped in religious Salafi tradition; to the Jihadi-Salafi QAP, however, they were of great importance, precisely because of these qualities.

In Jordan, al-Maqdisi's writings first proved quite popular for their radical appeal among disparate youngsters looking for a guiding philosophy; later, however, their radicalism prevailed over their desire for Salafi doctrinal purity and many Jordanian Jihadi-Salafis sided with the tougher and more militant fighter al-Zarqawi. The influence of al-Maqdisi's Jihadi-Salafi ideology among Salafis critical of the regimes they lived under was thus very diverse and highly dependent on the context in which his ideas were received.

The example of Shaqra shows that radicalisation can happen under the guise of ideology (a theological difference of opinion), masking the real reason (frustration about being passed over for a leadership position). While the former connected Shaqra with Jihadi-Salafis, it was the latter that got him to seek their company in the first place. As such, Shaqra's case not only shows the significant (though limited) importance of ideology in radicalisation, but – like in the case of al-Maqdisi – that ideas and context are intimately entangled and cannot be seen in isolation of each other.

---

12  Daniel Lav, Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 160-6.

13  Joas Wagemakers, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community* (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 131-7.