

Understanding jihad and jihadism

Since the rise of al Qaeda and, most recently, ISIL/Da'esh, the term jihad has become a ubiquitous part of public discourse on terrorism and radical Islam. Although jihad does not constitute one of the 'Five Pillars' of Muslim faith, many consider it to be a duty of the Muslim community as a whole. It is therefore important to understand the origins of the term as well as its religious and political evolution: from jihad (different kinds of religiously inspired efforts) to jihadism (a modern ideology).

Origins and understandings of jihad

While often equated with 'holy war', jihad generally [means](#) a religiously inspired 'effort' or 'struggle' towards a goal of a spiritual, personal, political or military nature. Islamic tradition [distinguishes](#) between 'lesser jihad', understood as just warfare for the sake of Islam and its adherents, and 'greater jihad', referring to the struggle to improve one's own character. Gradually, as a consequence of [occasional](#) (or, according to other scholars, [frequent](#)) use of the term in the context of warfare, the understanding of jihad as a religiously sanctioned armed struggle has become the most prominent interpretation among both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The definition of legitimate goals and conduct during jihad, and the authority required to invoke it, have been contested. In a variety of [historical contexts](#), the invocation of jihad has served as a vehicle to defend Muslim lives and belongings against aggressors, including during the Crusades and the anti-colonial struggle. It has also been referred to in order to widen the influence of Islam through conquest. Governments (even [non-Muslim ones](#)) and revolutionaries have called for jihad – with varying results – in order to claim religious legitimacy for their military endeavours. Nowadays, scholars [still rely](#) on an eclectic choice and interpretation of Koranic passages and hadith (traditions relating words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) to advocate their respective positions.

The evolution towards jihadism

The origins of [contemporary jihadism](#) as a modern revolutionary ideology can be traced back to the fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Even though the conflict was rooted in the [Mujahidin's](#) conservative understandings of jihad (i.e. defending a Muslim country against invaders), it later evolved into a full-blown proxy war along ethnic and sectarian lines, with substantial involvement of external powers (i.e. Pakistan aided by the United States) and recruits from all over the Muslim world. Even though with time the nature and goal of the conflict had changed considerably, clearly exceeding the boundaries of traditional jihad, the claim to religious legitimacy remained in place. This is crucial because, as mentioned above, armed jihad is allowed only under certain conditions. Even though their exact content was often debated, the concept was always linked to temporal and territorial restrictions and, to some extent, rules of conduct. [Jihadism](#) attempts to [remove](#) these constraints. According to the jihadist narrative, Islam finds itself in an eternal confrontation with its enemies, who have to be defeated by any means necessary. At the same time, many different movements which have at some point invoked jihad are not necessarily considered jihadist organisations. For instance, militant groups like [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon and the Palestinian [Hamas](#) adhere to a more conservative understanding of jihad. Jihadist groups like al Qaeda and ISIL/Da'esh regard them with hostility: Hezbollah due to its Shia origins; Hamas because of its involvement in man-made structures of governance, including the [fight against](#) jihadi groups.

Conceptual influences on contemporary jihadism

Jihadism is not an organised, singular movement but rather a loose network of actors, connected through vaguely similar views and subject to constantly changing [alliances and rivalries](#). Nevertheless, the spiritual and political foundations of this diverse group are based on two main pillars: religious puritanism propagated by Salafism and the inspirational dimension of political Islam/Islamism.

Salafism and Wahhabism

[Salafi currents](#) within the [Sunni branch](#) of Islam aim to 'return' to a more [authentic](#), pure Islamic society. Although Salafi positions vary considerably and do not necessarily prescribe the use of violence, their rejection of large parts of Islamic tradition and jurisprudence has *de facto* created [favourable conditions](#) for the spread of jihadist ideology. In Saudi Arabia, a particularly rigid brand of Salafi thought has become the state doctrine, usually referred to as Wahhabism. Its state-backed [proselytisation efforts](#) have been instrumental in spreading [this version of Islam](#) throughout the world. As a result, jihadist [opposition](#) towards the Wahhabi religious establishment is not so much driven by differences about the content but rather by their perceived unwillingness to act in accordance with their own teachings.

The concept of takfir

Since its inception, parts of the Wahhabist movement have been especially rigorous in denouncing as non-believers those Muslims who do not share Wahhabi views, thereby rendering them outside the umma, 'the community of believers'. While traditional scholarship strongly disapproves of this practice, commonly known as takfir, [its propagators](#) invoke the authority of, among others, 14th century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah. His wide-ranging writings contain polemics against non-Muslims and different Islamic currents, and remain enormously [popular](#) among contemporary jihadists. Despite its alienating effect on the majority of Muslims, jihadists resort to takfir in order to [justify](#) attacks in Muslim countries, wounding and killing Muslim civilians. The traditional distinction in jihad between dar al-Islam (the land of Islam / peace) and dar al-harb (land of war) is thereby [reframed completely](#) in order to accommodate the jihadist self-image as the only true representatives of Islam. This is further emphasised when Arab governments are referred to as the '[Near Enemy](#)', as opposed to the '[Far Enemy](#)' usually understood to be Israel, the US and other Western states.

Political Islam / Islamism

Even though jihadist movements are unwilling to admit it, they draw their inspiration from the success of Islamist politics in countries like Egypt or Iran. The demise of Socialism and Arab Nationalism in the twentieth century left religious movements in that part of the world without significant competition in the political realm. Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb – respectively, the founder and the spiritual guide of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) in Egypt – filled this void by demonstrating the potential of [Islamist politics](#). The Brotherhood established itself as the most effective organised resistance against British domination but at the same time promoted [Islamic law](#), values, and morals. Nowadays, the Muslim Brotherhood is widely [despised](#) among jihadists for embracing the electoral process within the existing state system. Similarly, Ruhollah Khomeini's overthrow of the Shah served as an inspiration across the Sunni-Shiite divide, proving that a movement with an explicitly Islamic identity could take on a modern, Western-backed police state and win.

Jihadism and the importance of context

Social and political factors allowing jihadist movements to recruit new followers vary. In Iraq, traditional actors like tribes or ethnic groups join forces with jihadist actors like [ISIL/Da'esh](#) out of political and economic pragmatism. In Nigeria, [Boko Haram](#) has pledged its [allegiance](#) to ISIL/Da'esh in the hope of gaining additional funding. Polarisation along sectarian lines has been [exacerbated and exploited](#) by the takfirist orientation of the major jihadist groups, including in [Yemen](#). The domestic context in [Europe, sub-Saharan Africa](#) and [south and south-east Asia](#) also plays a role. Widespread inequality and political oppression in many of the affected countries, and a sense of disenfranchisement among Muslim youths in predominantly non-Muslim societies, can [facilitate](#) identification with jihadist actors. Perceived Western double standards in approaching these problems in the region also fuel sympathy for jihadist propaganda. The ability of such movements to [spread their message](#) has accelerated with the increasing use of the [internet](#). But the overall picture [remains blurred](#). The [vast majority](#) of Muslims around the world still hold negative opinions of religious extremism in general and jihadist organisations, in particular.