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# Inside the Jihadi Mind: Understanding Ideology and Propaganda

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## SUMMARY

The ideology of global extremism can only be countered if it is first understood. This combination of theology and political objectives needs to be uprooted through rigorous scrutiny, and sustained intellectual confrontation.

# This report identifies what ideology is shared by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as revealed in their propaganda, to inform effective counter-narratives.

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After the 9/11 attacks, Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda had approximately 300 militants. ISIS alone has, at a low estimate, 31,000 fighters across Syria and Iraq. Understanding how ideology has driven this phenomenon is essential to containing and defeating violent extremism.

But violent ideologies do not operate in a vacuum. A fire requires oxygen to grow. A broader political culture overlaps significantly with some of the assumptions of the jihadi ideology, without necessarily being extreme or agreeing with its violence.

### KEY FINDINGS

- There is a distinct difference between the ideology of Salafi-jihadism and the Islam practiced by the majority of the world's Muslims. The Salafi-jihadi ideology is built upon Islamic religious principles, which it distorts to produce a single-minded focus on violent jihad.
- The three groups share fundamentally similar ideologies, challenging the concept that "ISIS is more extreme than al-Qaeda".

- An emphasis on the nobility of jihad runs throughout the propaganda, often presenting it in chivalric terms, with pictures of fighters on horseback, or references to Saladin. Altogether, such references appear in 71 per cent of the propaganda.
- The importance of honour, and the solidarity of the *ummah* is also central, appearing in 68 per cent of the propaganda. The virtue of martyrdom – common to many religions, but here applied deliberately to death in battle – forms a significant part of the value of honour, appearing explicitly in 32 per cent of the propaganda, and implicitly in 68 per cent.
- Altogether, justifications from the Quran, Hadith or from scholarship appear in 87 per cent of the propaganda. One ISIS statement contained 24 references to the Quran, making up 26 percent of the entire statement. Of these 24 references, 13 different surahs (chapters) were referenced.
- While Quranic justifications are usually presented without context, reinforcing the accusation that the groups 'cherry pick' passages that support their case, the ideology makes extensive use of scripture: half of the propaganda references the Quran, with 63 out of the 114 surahs referenced.
- Hadith justifications are used much less than Quranic justifications, appearing in only 22 per cent of the sample. The accusation that Salafi- jihadi groups pick Hadith that suit their vision may be bolstered by the ways in which they use them: authoritative Hadith are cited with the full details of their origins; the referencing of those of more doubtful provenance is much more vague.
- When the groups are criticised for their actions by rival Salafi- jihadi groups or others, the Quran and the Hadith are the first reference points that are used for the rebuttal. Hadith in particular are used in bulk when groups are attacked by other followers of the ideology.
- Nevertheless, the vaunted Salafi rejection of much Islamic scholarship as 'innovation' (ISIS refers to established scholars as "donkeys of knowledge") is belied by references throughout the propaganda to 45 different scholars from all the major schools of jurisprudence apart from the Hanafi school.

The ideological themes presented above appear throughout the propaganda, with a clear internal logic, although its application is often inconsistent. The themes – whether found explicitly or by implication – form a hierarchy, with the ideological values providing a basis for groups' objectives and ideal conduct, and thus their group identity. The themes come together to form a coherent ideology, representative of Salafi- jihadism.

It is this ideology that drives the groups' behaviour. When they attack one another, it is not ideological differences that drives the conflict, but differing narratives: the ways in which they apply their ideology to reality. The Salafi-jihadi movement will not be defeated by focusing on these narratives: it will only be defeated if we understand and engage the ideology. This report works to provide that understanding through detailed qualitative and quantitative analysis.

## DOWNLOAD

Download the full report. ([/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC\\_Inside%20Jihadi%20Mind\\_18.08.17.pdf](/sites/default/files/inline-files/IGC_Inside%20Jihadi%20Mind_18.08.17.pdf))

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This report identifies what ideology is shared by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as revealed in their propaganda, to inform effective counter-narratives.

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