

**Shiraz Maher.** *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 256 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-065112-1.

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**Published on** H-War (September, 2017)

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Post-9/11 observers struggle not only to understand the radical ideology that drives fighters to sacrifice their lives to kill innocents but also to identify its scope and to even name it. Scholars and policymakers refer to Islamist-motivated terrorists by almost as many different names as there are attempts to understand them: extremists, jihadis, salafis ... the list goes on. It is safe to say that Western understanding of the religious narrative that motivates such adversaries is elusive. For these reasons, Shiraz Maher's book, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, is a critically important work. Maher clarifies and packages these adversaries' historical and religious narrative with unique skill, while giving these fighters a well-researched and well-justified name, an anchor of sorts to understand their theoretical and historical motivations. In the process, he does more than simply provide Western readers with an outline to help understand how and why the Salafi-Jihadist narrative is so compelling for its adherents. He also introduces Salafi thinkers who believe the narrative but reject the violence. Most important, for policymakers, Maher makes a strong case for how military intervention into Muslim lands, both before and after 9/11, serves as motivation that fuels transformational growth of Salafi-Jihadism. Maher's work is a compelling and worthwhile book—a must read

for Western scholars and policymakers striving to understand one of the strongest adversaries of our generation.

Maher's most straightforward contribution to understanding the ideology of these extremist fighters is to simply identify and define the main components of Salafi-Jihadist thinking. This Maher does with precision, in identifying and describing five main components of the Salafi-Jihadist belief that distinguish it from more mainstream Islam. According to the author, these five components are *jihad*, *takfir* (excommunication), *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal), *tawhid* (oneness of God), and *hakimiyah* (rule of God, referred to often as political Islam). Maher clarifies these ideas not only by distinguishing them from more mainstream beliefs but also by defining in plain terms what Salafi-Jihadists mean by them. Maher's emphasis is helpful to the Western reader because he unpacks some of the terms—like political Islam, *jihad*, and *takfir*—that are routinely used in Western parlance to refer to radical extremists but rarely well explained. Maher explains them.

An equally valuable benefit of Maher's book is that it provides historical linkages for scholars and observers of Islam, Islamism, and Islamist violence. Maher brings the history of the idea to life, linking it to early Islamic thinkers and charting its

progression and development to the modern day. He elucidates the historical contours of the narrative. He anchors Salafi-Jihadist thinking to ancient scholars many Westerners may recognize, including Mamluk-era scholar Ibn Taymiyya; ninth-century founder of the Hanbali School of Islamic jurisprudence, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal; and eighteenth-century founder of Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored Wahhabi doctrine, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Maher links to these ancient names many of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Islamic writers whose works have become synonymous with both terrorism and political Islam in the modern-day social and scholarly discourse. These names include Muslim Brotherhood spokesman Sayyid Qutb, Indian founder of modern political Islam Abul 'Ala Maududi, 1980s Afghanistan mujahedeen leader Abdullah Azzam, and Al-Qaeda mastermind Ayman al-Zawahiri. Maher's stellar research comes to life because he connects the ancient names to the modern names through important ideas of lesser-known but critical modern scholars who drive the Salafi-Jihadist debate. These include such names as Saudi Al-Qaeda leader Yusuf al-Uyayri, Al-Qaeda theorist Abu Yahya al-Libi, and Afghan mujahedeen theorist Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Maher's research intertwines the ancient theological components with more recent developments, and brings out and clarifies nuances heretofore elusive to Western non-Muslims.

Interestingly, Maher's research brings out the fact that some modern-day Salafi-Jihadist scholars drive the narrative but at the same time reject much of the violence. These somewhat moderate Salafi-Jihadists shape the contours of the debate, but their moderation proves that even Salafi-Jihadism is a living corpus of discourse, with nuances that elicit disagreement among its most strident adherents. This is an important concept, because it alerts non-Muslims to the varied texture of the Salafi-Jihadist discourse. If some Salafi-Jihadists reject violence, that fact may help guide a more productive Western narrative to counter

and perhaps even engage with the Salafi-Jihadist dialogue. These moderate voices include such men as Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, and Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan.

The most practical takeaway from Maher's book is his skillful characterization of the profound influence (read: negative influence, from a Western view) of Western-led military conflict on Salafi-Jihadist ideology. According to Maher, Western military policy not only fueled Salafi-Jihadist thinking but also transformed it. Many writers argue that Western policy decisions have strengthened terrorists more than weakened them. If this is true, Maher gives a theological and historical account of why and how this happened. He shows how the Western-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (including the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) motivated Salafi theorists to energetically apply their thinking, and provided critical proving grounds for concepts like *tawhid* and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*. Most poignantly, Maher describes the 2003 invasion of Iraq as the "crucible of Salafi-Jihadi thought." He explains that, whereas before 2003 many groups were "influenced to varying extents by Salafism," Iraq "brought together all of the various aspects ... into a consolidated and coherent belief structure" (pp. 17-18).

With *Salafi-Jihadism*, Maher's portrayal of Salafi-Jihadist ideology provides depth and clarification for Western, non-Muslim readers. He presents Salafi-Jihadism as a complex, deeply rooted living philosophy that engenders lively debate among its most strident adherents, even now. Maher distinguishes facets that make the belief different from more mainstream Islam, while also showing how some Salafi-Jihadi scholars feed the ideology but reject some of the violence. While his prose can be at times repetitive, it does not take away from the book's importance. Most critically, Maher shows how the ideology gained depth and momentum from the counter-extremist wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. With this knowledge, Western scholars and deci-

sion makers can temper future military action and counter-terror policy with an accurate understanding of what drives Salafi-Jihadist adversaries.

*The views expressed in this review are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the US government.*

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**Citation:** John Zavage. Review of Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

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