



How foreign imams radicalized Syria's war

The war barged into [Aleppo city](#) rudely and was an uninvited guest, bringing with it not only death and suffering, but also the dangerous specter of extremist radicalization at the hands of the seasoned fanatics that started pouring into the city almost as soon as its eastern part fell to the rebellion. "There are no atheists in foxholes" and there are certainly none in cities brutally devastated by death and war, the perfect fertile ground for the unscrupulous to poison unsuspecting and helpless populations.

Before the battle of Aleppo in July 2012, I worked with a number of local aid groups that had been providing food and basics to the many displaced who had arrived in Aleppo from other war-ravaged areas in the country. This is when I first met Mahmoud, a gentle and soft-spoken opposition activist in his late 20s. He struck me as being knowledgeable about Islam as well as being moderate and accepting of other faiths.

I recently caught up with Mahmoud, and he recounted how radicalization first started seeping into [Aleppan society](#). Himself a devout Muslim, he explained the allure those ultraradical preachers had. "They filled not only a spiritual gap that was there, but they manipulated the fears of the people. They promised them their fears would soon turn into joy in this world and the next if they followed their word. They glorified 'shahada' [martyrdom] and 'sabr' [patience while suffering] as the holiest and divinest of Islamic virtues, which is completely wrong," he said.

Mahmoud described to me how one Friday shortly after the rebels took over many of Aleppo's southern and eastern neighborhoods in the summer of 2012, foreign-looking

armed militants joined the congregation in his local mosque in Sha'ar in full combat gear with their rifles. As the imam stood up to give the sermon, one of them rushed forward and took his place on the pulpit and started giving his own fiery sermon, much to everyone's surprise and shock. He even took his rifle up with him. They had never seen anything like this in their lives, as previously all mosques were tightly regulated by the [Syrian regime](#) and sermons were scrutinized and vetted to weed out anything subversive or critical of the status quo.

"He started quoting from the Quran and hadiths, but imperfectly because he made mistakes about fighting the kufar [infidels] whom he said were the Syrian regime and those who supported it as well as the West," Mahmoud said, adding: "The jihadist fighter, who spoke with an accent I thought was from the Arabian Gulf, then told us about how they are rebuilding the glory of the Islamic caliphate and that it would be the greatest one yet. He said, 'I swear to you my brothers, I saw the banner of Islam on the White House in a 'ro'ya' (revelation), our victory is very near. It starts here in Bilad al-Sham [Greater Syria] and will spread the world over through our jihad. Which is why we call you to jihad, brothers, and it is demanded upon you by religion to join it.'"

Mahmoud said that after the long sermon was over, people were bemused. The older men seemed mortified and mostly unconvinced, but sensed that a new and far more extremist phase in their country's civil war was about to unfold. But some young men were enthusiastic and taken by fervor, shouting "Allahu akbar" (God is great) after the gun-toting imam had stood down from the pulpit.

The local moderate rebel groups, including the powerful Liwa al-Tawhid Brigades, seemed unperturbed and uninterested in this startling new phenomenon. They did nothing to stop the jihadist preachers, even after some elders conveyed to them their fears about young men joining. "Let them join, we are all fighting on the same side," was the common response, according to Mahmoud.

The radicalization did not stop at the pulpit, Mahmoud explained, and the jihadists were later superseded by radical clerics — proper ideological holy men who were better versed in Islamic scripture, more coherent and more capable of convincing the skeptics and would-be recruits of their fanatical interpretation of Islam. Many of them were foreign, from all sorts of nationalities, some spoke with a thick foreign accent and clearly did not look Arab, and were possibly from the Caucasus.

This seemed to be quite an organized affair, as these clerics would set up shop in mosques after sundown prayers and ran special classes. All were welcome to attend, and those who did were given vouchers for aid and food was handed out by special distribution centers that had started to spring up across east Aleppo. They were attempting to win over the people and more fighters to their cause through a clever campaign of providing much-needed aid to the poorest of areas, and free classes mostly focusing on religious

education, but also including basics such as Arabic reading, writing and grammar. The emphasis, however, was on Quran recital and there were monetary prizes for those who would memorize chapters by heart. This would be mixed with radicalization as there would always be stories glorifying the martyrs of global jihad, including the freedom fighters of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mahmoud described to me his horror at what was going on. "I knew what they were doing, but I was helpless to stop it. We simply didn't have the resources to take them on, they were well supplied and financed. We couldn't provide all the aid they could, they must have spent millions." This went on for quite a while until relations with the nascent Islamic State in Aleppo soured and internecine war broke out in January 2014. "Suddenly, those jihadists were now turning their guns on each other. They had shown their true face, they were not fighting the kufar, but each other. People saw this and began to be disgusted at their deception," he said.

Unfortunately, this still did not convince those local recruits who had already joined, and instead they simply switched factions, most according to who their holy mentor followed. Many would become cannon fodder for the upcoming jihadist fratricide, as their grand aspiration of fighting and defeating the kufar was cynically twisted. But this also provided an opportunity for Mahmoud and people like him, who wanted to win back the souls of the believers from the extremists.

"As soon as this inter-rebel fighting broke out, people became disillusioned. 'Why are Muslims killing each other?' they would ask. None of the answers the jihadists gave them were convincing. This is where I would try to explain to everyone I could, while working at the soup kitchens or aid centers, that those people were "daleen" [had lost their way] and their type of jihad was wrong as it distorted the values of our religion and made us seem like just savages and butchers. Thank God, I was successful of convincing many that they were wrong, and I felt happy that I was winning my people back," Mahmoud said.

What Mahmoud told me was a grim tale of radicalization in the chaos and turmoil of war and lays bare the real dangers Syria faces even if the war ends, but it also provides hope that there is a way to win back people from the brink.

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Guest • 4 days ago

Finally an article that starts to look at the real problem instead of spending needless ink on the activities of the foot soldiers and pawns. The problem of the radical clergy. They gain power when there is more conflict as people seek them out for counsel and spiritual relief during times of conflict. They do not want to preach peace, as in a modern, peaceful world they are irrelevant. Educated people can read the Quran for themselves, but the imams need something to stay relevant or they will lose their livelihood, power and influence. So we get more and more aggressiveness from them especially as economies decline and over-population increases the amount of strife and conflict. It is their fight for survival that is being fought by their brain-washed foot soldiers and unless they are reined in, the problems will continue.

The revolution against Assad, Gaddafi, etc may or may not have been legitimate, but there needs to be a liberal ideology behind the Arab spring, otherwise what is the point? That is where the radical clergy and the money supporting them have been completely devious in destroying the people's chance at peace, legitimate revolution and progress.

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Zornorph • 4 days ago

Filthy radical Imams. They should be dragged out of their mosques and beaten up like the thugs they are.

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agitpapa • 4 days ago



You and your "moderate" pals opened the door for those Chechens and Saudis. Your "moderate" pals of the Tawhid started slitting throats even before the Chechens did. Your "moderates" are just plain bandits who robbed Aleppo blind. The Tawhid carted off the entire machine park of the Sheikh Najjar industrial city and sold it in Turkey. The Hayani gang robbed and humiliated the entire city at the Castello checkpoint. They robbed and raped the Kurds of Sheikh Maqsoud. They started the "Héll Cannon" fad, firing gas canisters into neighborhoods they didn't control for protection money. Now everybody is doing it. The "moderates" blew up the water mains so that they could control the water and shake you down for it.

At least the foregn jihadis have their own money and don't need to rob you. In fact the IS actually executes the robbers. Your "moderate" pals are no better than the foreigners, they are all scum. In fact your home-grown "moderates" are worse because they are just as vicious as the foreigners and join them at the drop of a hat, but they are common bandits as well.

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John Debba > agitpapa • 4 days ago

Let's not forget the so-called FSA were the first "uninvited guests" in Aleppo: Who then enthusiastically accepted the aid of their "brothers" Of course there is also Tayyip, who expedited the sacking of Aleppo.

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agitpapa > John Debba • 4 days ago

The Hayanis were/are FSA and they are also Turkmens. Tayyip still has his finger in Aleppo. He swapped hostages held by Tawhid with the Turkish hostages in Mosul.

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Lkoehn • 4 days ago

This is THE question that has plagued me for years. So many Muslims appear to be so devout and knowledgeable regarding their scriptures why do they allow heretic clerics to defile their mosques and religion?

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agitpapa > Lkoehn • 4 days ago

That's easy just look at what happens to Iraqi Sunnis who stand up to the heretics of the IS. The Salafist response to every deviation from their weird and twisted dogma is death and with all that Saudi and Qatari money in their pockets, they have the means to carry out the sentence. The real question is who is going to finance an anti-Salafist revolution? When is the world going to confront the oil sheikhdoms? It wasn't Gaddafi who deserved a knife in the bum but the Saudi "royal" family. They are and have always been the source of the Salafist plague.

I

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Lkoehn > agitpapa • 4 days ago

I appreciate the reply but all of the interwoven mystery of who is for what eludes me still. So much of the divisions within Islam stem from events hundreds of years old. They seem inconsequential to what heretics within Islam are doing today. It may be something impossible to grasp to an outsider.

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agitpapa > Lkoehn • 4 days ago

The different sects are just window dressing. All the players represent state interests, not ideas. They may switch state sponsors but there is always a sponsor. For example Hamas is supposed to be Salafist and originally was an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt but keeps switching between Iran and Qatar. Al Nusra started out as an offshoot of ISIS, which in turn was sponsored by Saudi, but then switched to Qatar, and is now cozying up to Israel.

Personally I completely disregard the religious rhetoric and consider it pure eyewash. All these supposed zealots were partying in clubs a few weeks before they grew beards and started slitting throats for Allah. None of their convictions are real. I just follow the money and the oil, that's all it's about.

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Lkoehn > agitpapa • 4 days ago

Follow the money seems to work all over the world and I just ever thought that it applied in the Middle East because of all the religious insults and professions of faith. It never occurred to me that keep in simple stupid applied here too. Thank you once again.

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Guest > Lkoehn • 3 days ago

Check out the wikipedia page on wahhabism and the section titled "funding factor". The money cited there is an outdated figure, but it gives you a sense of the "follow the money" factor.

From that page:

"Estimates of Saudi spending on religious causes abroad include "upward of \$100 billion", between \$2 and 3 billion per year since 1975. (compared to the annual Soviet propaganda budget of \$1 billion/year), and "at least \$87 billion" from 1987-2007"

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Lkoehn > Guest · 3 days ago

It is ironic that I have an MCP and a couple of other network certifications but I don't do much research on the internet. That was a long read and very informative.

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Lkoehn > Guest · 3 days ago

Thank you, I'll do that.

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agitpapa > Lkoehn · 4 days ago

You're welcome but don't forget tribalism. It's not THAT simple :)

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