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Contextualising Jihadi Thought



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CONTEXTUALISING JIHADI THOUGHT

to Bin Laden on MBC Television in September 2007. A puritanical Saudi *alim* who was jailed for his opposition to US forces in the Kingdom during the 1990s and supported jihad against US troops after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-'Awda began his career as a preacher through a radical Islamic agenda. And yet, six years after 9/11, he publicly asked: 'Brother Osama, how much blood has been spilled? How many innocent children, women, and old people have been killed, maimed and expelled from their homes in the name of al-Qaeda... Have your means become the ends themselves?'⁹⁴ The stirring eloquence of the address aside, a more authentic voice in the campaign against al-Qaeda is rarely found—yet the Western media, by and large, failed to cover the event. Moreover, given the often-cited dangers of 'self-starter' radicalisation, the speech was not made readily available in languages such as Urdu and English. Of course, al-'Awda is not alone in his ideological turnaround, as a range of important figures from Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, the Egyptian jihadi ideologue, to the leadership of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group have also issued theological refutations. While these men will inevitably be dismissed as agents of vicious regimes who recant under torture, their messages are essential resources in the campaign against al-Qaeda. They engage with the moral tradition of radical jihadi theology and contest it on its own terms and in its own terminology. That is the realm in which the battle will be lost or won.

⁹⁴ Shaykh Salman al-'Awda, 'A Ramadan Letter to Osama Bin Laden', aired on *MBC Television*, 14 November 2007 available at [http://www.islamtoday.com/showme2.cfm?cat_id=29&sub_cat_id=1521] [Last accessed 10 December 2007].

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'LISTEN, PLAN AND CARRY OUT "AL-QA'IDA"'

THEOLOGICAL DISSENSION IN OSAMA BIN LADEN'S FORMER AUDIOCASSETTE COLLECTION¹

Flagg Miller

In the spring of 2000, questions posed by Afghan militant training camp students to top al-Qaeda leaders were recorded in a notebook that appears to have been authored anonymously by a secretary for Osama Bin Laden. While most questions focus on the strategy and tactics of sustaining the militant movement worldwide, a segment entitled 'Questions Section' considers dissension among Muslims themselves, especially in Arab and Afghan contexts. Among these questions is the following, notable for its pronounced vocabulary of Islamic law:

¹ Special thanks are due to the participants in the 'Contextualising Jihadi Ideologies' workshop at Oxford University, scholars and staff at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs, Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, the University of California in Davis, translation assistant Nour-Eddine Moukrabis, David Edwards, Alexander Knysly, John Kelsay, Nahed Zehr, Katherine Zimmerman and two anonymous readers.

You know that every dissension (*fiurqa*) involves disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) but every disagreement does not involve dissension, because there are various types of disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) from contradictory (*aladad*) to comprehensional (*ijfham*) to aspectral (*taanaawuu*). As you know, comprehensional and aspectral disagreements are healthy for one's consciousness—scientific, political, legal, and practical (*al-ua'i al-'ilmi wa-l-shay'asi wa-l-shar'i wa-l-waq'i*). Yet dissension still lingers among the ranks of Arab strugglers (*mujahidin*). Are we to understand that such dissension results from contradictory disagreements [disagreements, that is, which are] (knotty (*'aqidi*), whether accompanied by good evidence or by wild fantasy)?²

Scholars who study Muslim militant movements, including al-Qaeda, frequently recur to the writings of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb or Pakistani reformer Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi to narrate modern Islam's turn from classical to socio-revolutionary jihad. If classical jihad focused on a legitimate Muslim ruler's call to arms against infidel forces occupying Muslim lands, socio-revolutionary militancy aims to overthrow corrupt Muslim leaders themselves, especially those influenced by the West, in the interests of just Islamic rule. Much attention has been drawn to the ways al-Mawdudi and Qutb exploited such concepts as the 'age of ignorance' or 'servitude' (*jahiliyya*) and divine sovereignty in worship (*hakimiyya*) to license charges of excommunication (*takfir*) and bolster arguments for killing apostates. Complementing such studies, scholars have also explored how the state-centred discourses of Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and its off-shoots inadequately capture the transnational, hybrid and even secular trajectories of political thought that inform the views of militants.³ Although Qutb and al-Mawdudi regularly portray the West as Islam's adversary, their postcolonial frameworks for social reform share founding premises with Western political thought. Their visions of Islam as a total system (*nizam*) and method (*manhaj*), for example, reify religion as a category distinct from other spheres of life, giving Islam an ideological cast that obscures its historical embedding within a wide variety of cultural practices.⁴ Other scholars, attuned to diverse strands

² Combating Terrorism Center Document AFGP-2002-801138, p. 215.

³ Faisal Devji, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Roxanne Euben, 'The New Manichaeans', *Theory and Events* 5, no. 4 (2002); Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, 'The Dialectic in Contemporary Egyptian Social Thought: The Scripturalist and Modernist Discourses of Sayyid Qutb and Hasan Hanafi', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 29 no. 3 (1997); William E. Shepard, 'Islam

of socio-revolutionary thought in Islam, have drawn attention to the shortcomings of Western political theory, especially to its over-emphasis on rational actors and modernising state projects. If Islam is a project of self-fashioning that is engaged deeply with questions of sociality and community as well as with counter-liberal critiques of modern state systems,⁵ political theory must go equally deep, both historically and ethically. The writings of Qutb and al-Mawdudi are inadequate primers.

This chapter contributes to discussions about Salafism, a reformist project that has long held theological matters of creed (*'aqida*) to be central to Islam's political objectives.⁶ In part, Salafism has been defined through legal vocabularies, including discussions about the legitimate use of violence configured within discourses of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*). Managing in-house disagreement (*ikhtilaf*) has been part of this legal fabric insofar as it centres on the interpretation of orally-transmitted reports about the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (*ahadith*; sing. *hadith*). Questions of disagreement are also projects of social construction, however.⁷ In this respect, they recruit broader cultural and symbolic resources for defining community, self and forms

as a 'System' in the Later Writings of Sayyid Qutb', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 25 no. 1 (1989).

⁵ Talal Asad, 'The Limits of Religious Criticism in the Middle East', in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Noah Saloman, 'The Salafi Critique of Islamism: Doctrine, Difference and the Problem of Islamic Political Action in Contemporary Sudan', in Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009); Stephen Vertigans, *Militant Islam: A Sociology of Characteristics, Causes and Consequences* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶ Bernard Haykel, 'On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action', in Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Muhammad Hisham Kabbani* (ed.), 'Beliefs (*'aqida*)', *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, CA: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1998); Saloman, 'The Salafi Critique of Islamism'; Joas Wagemakers, 'Framing the "Threat to Islam": *Al-Wala' wa al-Bara'* in Salafi Discourse', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 30 no. 4 (2008). The Arabic term for 'theology' is difficult to translate given its complex history. In this essay, I use it to refer to broader inquiries into the nature of the divine and its relation to human lifeworlds rather than to early Greek-influenced scholastic theology (*'ilm al-kalam*).

⁷ Muhammad Khalid Masud, 'Ikhtilaf Al-Fuqaha: Diversity in Fiqh as a Social Construction', in Zainab Anwar (ed.), *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family* (Kuala Lumpur: Musawah/Sisters in Islam, 2009).

of political agency. Here I aim to move beyond the narrow legal terminology of scholarship on Salafism to explore how potential ruptures in legal arguments (such as varieties of 'contradictory disagreement' mentioned above) grant militants license to invoke supra-legal foundations of human agency, some of which espouse violence. In much sociological literature on Muslim militancy, such legal exceptionalism is narrated as a sign of modern secularism and of a disenchantment with established frameworks of Islamic law and authority, and as such a confirmation of militancy's underlying social, economic or psychological causes.⁸ In the interest of resisting neat categorisations of 'religion' and 'non-religion' that accompany such analyses and that so often recur to oversimplistic discourses of what makes a good Muslim, I begin with the postulate not simply that that all humans have the capacity for violence and evil but also that a theological turn in modern religious thought can provide an extremely credible way to augment the agency of humans in relation to God. My focus here is on the concept of the foundational 'base' or 'precept', *al-qā'ida* in Arabic. Setting aside debates about the organisational coherence of al-Qaeda since its inception by Bin Laden and others in the late 1980s, I explore the broader legal and ideological purchase of this concept for Salafism generally, and specifically for militants who seek to co-opt Salafi reform for violent ends. I will argue in particular that a theological rendering of the concept leads not toward discourses of apostasy (*takfir*) but rather toward a subtler framework of exclusionism whose terms are drawn from modern cultural elaborations of the pious community (*umma*). Policy studies of Islamic militancy, I will suggest, can be improved by attending not only to the politics of theology but also to how militants gain public sympathy by highlighting connections between 'quietist' doctrinal concerns over such issues as legal reasoning, knowledge and self-abnegation and broader debates about the trajectory of modern global subjects.

The intellectual leverage of 'the base' (*al-qā'ida*), and its complex valences for militants, have become apparent to me through my work on an audiotape collection formerly deposited in Osama Bin Laden's house in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Acquired by the Cable News Network in the months following the fall of the Taliban in December 2001, the collection of over 1500 tapes provides an unprecedented glimpse into the discussions and debates that formed in and around Bin Laden's compound during the years leading up to

⁸ Rudy S. Sayres, 'Subjectivity, Political Evaluation, and Islamist Trajectories', in Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg (eds.) *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

September 11th.⁹ Among the over two hundred featured speakers are twenty-two previously unpublished recordings of Bin Laden himself, as well as many tapes by al-Qaeda's core militant leaders. To date, I have found only one cassette referring to 'al-Qaeda' as a militant organisation or base associated with Bin Laden.¹⁰ Far more frequently, the term is employed by speakers in discussions of Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic grammar and the foundations of moral knowledge, the complexities of which I have discussed elsewhere.¹¹ The closest approximation to its deployment as an organisational term, so common in the years following September 11th, is found on three identical copies of a tape whose cartridge label reads 'My brother struggler: Listen—plan—carry out "*al-qā'ida*" (*Abhi al-mujahid: isma'—dabbir—i'mal al-qā'ida*' [the last word in quotes]).

The featured speaker on this tape is Syrian preacher and jurist Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahim al-Tahhan, a figure heretofore unacknowledged in Western scholarship despite the centrality of his thought for Bin Laden and other militants, as I discuss below.¹² No other speaker in the collection is represented on as many tapes (one hundred and one counted to date).¹³ A controversial cleric whose work has been commended by prominent Salafi jurists such as Saudi Shaykh 'Abdalla Ibn Jibrin as well as militant clerics such as Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, al-Tahhan has attracted an even greater range of book-length rebuttals from such prominent Salafi thinkers as Nasir al-Din al-

⁹ The tapes are currently being digitalised at Yale University for public release within the next few years. They are currently catalogued as the 'Islamic Fundamentalist Tape Collection'.

¹⁰ Tape no. 11164, produced by 'The Media Department of al-Qā'ida' in October 2000, features a recording of a wedding celebration in Afghanistan involving one of Bin Laden's bodyguards. Additionally, a cassette jacket in the collection reads 'A political course on Bin Laden's Base (*qā'ida Bin Laden*)'. Since jackets were separated from their original cassettes during shipping, however, a tape associated with this jacket has not yet been identified. No other recorded material yet found mentions the concept in this way.

¹¹ Flagg Miller, 'Al-Qā'ida' as a Pragmatic Base: Contributions of Area Studies to Sociolinguistics', *Language and Communication*, vol. 28 no. 4 (2008).

¹² Al-Tahhan's work can be found on his website [<http://www.al-tahaan.com>]. Between the years 2006–8, his name and recordings were removed from one of the largest on-line databases for Islamic recordings [www.islamway.com], a conservative Saudi site operated out of 'Asir, where al-Tahhan lived for sixteen years.

¹³ The next three most frequently represented speakers are 'A'id al-Qarni, Ahmad al-Qattan and 'Abdalla 'Azzam, the widely recognised luminary for Afghan Arab militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the early 1980s.

Albani, Jamil Zaynu, Muqbil al-Wad'i and the Grand Mufti of Oman Ahmad al-Khalili, among others. The sheer range of his lectures may suggest some of the reasons for these controversies: over six hundred recorded audiocassettes (as well as nearly one hundred print publications) provide not only broad introductions to Islamic law and jurisprudence, exegesis (*tafsir*), creed (*'aqida*), religious education and etiquette (*adab*) but also extensive considerations of Islamic sects (*madhabbiyya*), the relation of Muslims with non-Muslims, divine sovereignty (*bakimiyya*), the urgency of expelling non-Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula, penance for manslaughter and the defensibility of tomb visitation, along with experiences of hierophanic witnessing (*ru'ya*), intercession (*shafa'a*) and blessings (*karamat*), the latter of which are subjects of particularly heated discussions among Saudi Salafis.¹⁴ Al-Tahhan's bold scholarly forays into central issues of religious practice challenge conventional boundaries of Salafism; indeed, his association with the movement is debated among students of his whom I have interviewed, some of whom view his Hanafi legalism as situating him at the margins if not beyond the pale of Salafi thought. Critics levy charges against him of 'Wahhabism', 'Sufism', 'Shi'ism', 'sectarianism' and 'excessiveness' (*ghulubuu*), among others.

The cassette label that draws my attention here represents a selective red-employment of al-Tahhan speech. As explored below, the leading al-Qa'ida' cartridge label is affixed only to the second of a three-volume cassette series featuring a lecture entitled 'The position of the astute on people's disagreement' (*Ma'uqif al-akhyar min ikhtilaf al-nas*). After a broader analysis of the lecture, I consider below the implications of this selective labelling for understanding the intellectual arsenal of militants.

¹⁴ The question of tomb visitation was especially contentious among Afghan Arabs, since the Taliban widely accommodate its practice. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, also from an Aleppo family with prominent historical links to Sufi brotherhoods, was one of the most outspoken apologists for the Taliban in this regard, though he lacked the deeper theological and legal vocabularies to defend tomb visitation. Al-Tahhan's competence in situating tomb visitation within the purview of Salafi doctrine suggests an important reason for the support given him by al-Suri and other training-camp leaders as they sought to bridge fierce ideological divisions among transnational jihadis.

'Abd al-Rahim al-Tahhan: a brief biographical sketch

Born in Aleppo, Syria in the early 1950s, 'Abd al-Rahim Bin Ahmad al-Tahhan descends, via the al-Nu'aymi clan, from the noble family of the Prophet's cousin 'Ali Bin Abi Talib. Although his father was not a religious scholar, he prioritised his sons' religious education, both in primary school in Saudi Arabia, where the family lived during 'Abd al-Rahim's early adolescence, as well as later in Aleppo, where the legacy of one of Syria's most influential Sufi scholars, 'Isa al-Bayanuni (d.1943) of the Khalidi brotherhood (Naqshbandi oriented), weighed heavily in his sons' more advanced studies.¹⁵ Immersed in heated debates about the value of Sufi allegiances to modern Islamist reform, al-Tahhan inclined toward more Saudi-influenced discourses than other family members. Returning to the Kingdom after completing secondary school, he pursued higher education at the Islamic University in Madina. He studied Islamic law under Maliki jurist Muhammad al-Amin al-Shanqiti, one of the most influential non-Saudis to have risen through the ranks of the traditional Riyadh-based Najdi clerical establishment. In the 1970s, al-Tahhan matriculated at Egypt's renowned al-Azhar University, completing his graduate degree in exegesis (*tafsir*) with highest marks. Soon after leaving Cairo he moved to Abha, the capital of Saudi Arabia's 'Asir province and a city known for its political preachers. There he taught at a branch of the Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud University as well as at a religious college for women. While in Abha, he is reported to have taught a number of students from non-Najdi families who would become prominent reformers during the 1980s.¹⁶ Toward the end of the decade, al-Tahhan's credentials appear to have been called into question due to his lectures supporting the value of tomb visitation and intercession from the dead, both anathema to the Saudi Wahhabi establishment, and he was expelled from the Kingdom. Subsequently, he taught at branches of the Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud University in the Emirates as well as in Jakarta,

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Rahim's own training in Syria, acknowledged abstractly on several of his tapes, seems to have been expurgated from biographies. His elder brother Mahmud al-Tahhan (confirmed through personal communication with his students in Doha) is a *hadith* scholar and professor at the University of Kuwait with a wide following and studied jurisprudence from Jum'a Abu Zalam, a student of al-Bayanuni. His brother's training would have set a formidable precedent for the family, even if as a source of differentiation for 'Abd al-Rahim.

¹⁶ These include 'Awad al-Qarni 'Aid al-Qarni (a preacher with the third-highest number of tapes in the collection), Sa'id Bin Musaffar al-Qahtani (the thirteenth-highest number of tapes) and 'Ali Bin 'Abd al-Khaliq al-Qarni.

Indonesia. In 1993, he moved to Doha, Qatar, where his lectures kept pace with the city's frenzied construction boom. Through his use of audiocassettes as well as the internet, by the end of the decade his audiences expanded considerably. With patronage from Qatar's emir Shaykh Khalifa Al Thani as well as the head of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, Shaykh 'Abdalla Bin Hamad, to whom he gave personal lessons, al-Tahhan's fortunes turned after a coup by the emir's son Hamad in 1995.¹⁷ Launching a new era of warm relations with the United States and global development corporations, Shaykh Hamad found al-Tahhan's tirades against the West, particularly his criticism of Qatar's growing passion for soccer, too much to ignore. Stripped of his office and pulpit, al-Tahhan was forced into silence after 2000, his cassettes and books banned throughout the country. Today, he lives isolated and withdrawn, though an active website devoted to his work continues to grow. According to a family member, students and others I have interviewed in Doha, he exemplifies the virtues of abstinence (*al-zuhd*), a theme deeply elaborated in lectures about self-abnegation, the false promise of worldly attachments and the urgency of returning to early source materials to rediscover common principles for an Islamic community (*umma*).¹⁸

To date, al-Tahhan's work and influence have been altogether ignored in Western studies of Muslim reform. The lacuna in studies of militancy is especially odd given that al-Tahhan's tapes were marketed in an over-fifty-volume series by the well-known Office of Services, established by 'Abdalla 'Azzam and Bin Laden in Peshawar, Pakistan during the mid-1980s.¹⁹ More surprising is al-Tahhan's significance as a tactical and strategic advisor to Bin Laden himself during key junctures of his development as a militant. In a letter composed to al-Tahhan in the mid-1990s, for example, Bin Laden thanks the theologian for detailed 'advice' (*nasiha*) on his first open letter to the Saudis in which he excoriates the administration for allowing American, Jewish and Western military forces to expand operations on the Arabian Peninsula.²⁰ Al-Tahhan's

¹⁷ Book review of *La'ib Kharij Al-Mal'ab* in *Arab Times* available at [http://www.mms.zain.sd.arabtimes.com/writer/05.htm].

¹⁸ Interviews conducted in April 2010.

¹⁹ Evidence from a cassette jacket in the Bin Laden tape collection that was designed and marketed by the Office of Services' media wing.

²⁰ Combating Terrorism Center Document AFGP-2002-800073. In a two-page letter, Bin Laden thanks al-Tahhan for his advice in confronting the Saudi authorities and clerical establishment: 'We have taken the advice that it would not be suitable to quote any scholars serving. We have decided to omit those quotes from this let-

theological and legal counsel to militants has been commended in more emphatic terms by fellow Syrian Abu Mus'ab al-Suri in his monumental volume *Call to Islamic Global Resistance* (2006), widely recognised as one of the most influential treatises on modern global jihad. In a section of the book entitled 'The first arena of education: creed and legal learning' (*al-'aqida wa-l-'ilm al-shar'i*), al-Suri recommends reading classic accounts of creed by such figures as Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi and Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya as well as more contemporary militant theoreticians such as 'Abdalla 'Azzam, 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Turning to readers more attuned to affairs on the Arabian Peninsula and the growing strength of the Afghan Arab movement in particular, he adds: 'I also suggest listening to the lectures and recordings of the symbols of the 'awakening' (*al-sabwa*) in the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries that were published between 1980 and 1995. They contain outstanding material on creed and legal learning and jihadi movement ideology, especially the tapes of Shaykhs 'Abd al-Rahim al-Tahhan...'²¹ Al-Suri refrains from providing further details on how exactly al-Tahhan's tapes provide militants with guidance.²²

ter and only mention other available evidence'. Most of the letter is devoted to a point-by-point defence of his rationale for having waited until the mid-1990s to present the Saudis with such a heated communiqué. Overall, the letter positions al-Tahhan as a public relations advisor to Bin Laden, one specially attuned to the tactics and diplomacy of manoeuvring within the Saudi clerical establishment. Although the letter is undated, it appears to have been written in 1994 or 1995, just after the establishment of the Advice and Reform Committee in London.

²¹ His mention of al-Tahhan is followed by other figures better known in the West such as Safar al-Hawali, Salman al-'Awda, Nasir al-'Umar, and 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Taniri. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *Da'wa ila al-muqawama al-Islamiyya al-'alamiyya* (2006), pp. 1129–30.

²² See footnote 14. In the spring of 2005, one of al-Tahhan's students would have been able to provide further insights. An Egyptian resident of Doha, Qatar, computer engineer 'Umar 'Abdalla 'Ali was completing a book manuscript on his teacher. Further details on the manuscript, as well as interviews with 'Ali, became inaccessible on the evening of 19 March, however, when the author drove a truck laden with explosives into the British sponsored Doha Players' Theater during a performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Along with the death of British national Jonathan Adams and the injury of twelve others, Qatar mourned its first modern suicide-attack [http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=290218&issueno=9615].

Al-Tahhan and the Saudi Salafi establishment

In a recent volume on Salafism, Bernard Rougier categorises Salafis into three groups: 'literalists', who castigate political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood for abandoning their commitment to studying texts and adhering quietly to credal priorities; 'reformists', who readily invoke contemporary political events, if only to insist that religion comes before man-made law; and 'jihadis', who push for militancy through arguments focusing on the ossified legal conventionalism (*taqlid*) of leading clerical establishmentarians and the urgency of bringing independent legal reasoning (*jithihad*) to new horizons of activism.²³ The challenge of situating al-Tahhan within a single trend of Salafism is manifest not solely in the diversity of his lectures and rhetorical aplomb. While al-Tahhan tends toward literalism in subordinating collective social action to the study of *sunna* (e.g. the *Qur'an* and *hadith*) and credal works, he readily decries the Salafi-Wahhabi establishment for its quietism, at times employing apocalyptic scenarios to urge militant action by individuals and small groups against its hegemony.

Al-Tahhan's reputation for outspoken dissent was affirmed during his years as an undergraduate student at the Islamic University of Madina in the late 1960s. In a class on creed (*'aqida*), while listening to a lecture about the ways deviant groups had misinterpreted God's divine names and attributes, al-Tahhan is reported to have rebuked his teacher: 'We have not come to the Kingdom from abroad to study Wahhabism!' Shortly later, when being forced to report his comments to the university rector 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Baz (later the chief juriconsult of the kingdom), he was told, 'Review your lessons again, my son', whereupon he replied to Ibn Baz, 'But you are the grandmaster of Wahhabism!'²⁴ Critics report his prompt expulsion from the university.²⁵

Al-Tahhan's courage in confronting the Saudi establishment on matters of creed and, more broadly, subservience to state ideology ensured a rocky road ahead. Unable to secure appointments in more the country's more prestigious institutions of learning and worship, he accepted employment in Abha, one

of the kingdom's provincial capitals. After that time, a host of books, statements and *fatwas* emerged among Salafi authorities who sought to impugn his credentials and curtail his influence. This barrage of criticism has played no small part in obscuring his legacy. These detractors can be categorised into four camps: Traditionalist scholars (*ahl al-hadith*) led by non-Saudi authorities Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Muqbil al-Wadi'i;²⁶ Saudi religious authorities who position themselves against al-Tahhan in attempts to reaffirm the authority of Riyadh's traditional Najdi establishment²⁷; prominent theo-

²⁶ For *Ahl al-Hadith* scholars led by non-Saudi authorities Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani and Muqbil al-Wadi'i, al-Tahhan errs in misapplying the science of critique and just evaluation ('*ilm al-jarh wa-t-ta'dil*). Specifically, al-Tahhan is accused of abridging and wrongly combining *hadiths*, as well as drawing on weak *hadiths*, in order to bolster his arguments for believers' access to 'blessings' (*karamat*), the intercession (*shafa'a*) of the Prophet and saints, and communication with the dead. According to both scholars, such stances reflect the literalist and anthropomorphic ('*mujassama*') interpretive methods that characterized the early Hanbali legal school and that have been mistakenly imported into more contemporary traditions of Wahhabi thought. See Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, *al-Huda wa-t-tur cassette series*, vols. 801–2, available at [<http://www.ahlalhadith.com>], and Muqbil al-Wadi'i, *Iqamat al-hurhan 'ala dalal 'Abd al-Rahim al-Tahhan* in *Fa'ala ih wa nasa' ih* (Cairo, Dar al-Haramayn, 1999), pp. 204–83, and *al-Aman min abatil al-Tahhan*, audio recording available at [<http://www.muqbl.com>]. Their positions represent a tendency among Traditionalists, emergent in the nineteenth century but developed especially under al-Albani's influence, to decry the legal conventionalism (*taqlid*) of Islam's established legal schools and instead champion independent legal reasoning (*jithihad*) through reliance first and foremost on the science of *hadiths*. In response to al-Albani and al-Wadi'i, al-Tahhan aligns himself with the legal establishment, rebuking al-Albani and his supporters for rejecting the legal schools. Al-Tahhan's reasoning for such a position, however, distinguishes him more as a theologian who is willing to foreground ethical issues over the traditional heavy moralism of legal specialists. Al-Albani's legal anti-establishmentarianism grants his followers, as well as the *Ahl al-Hadith* community more generally, the luxury of avoiding questions of political action.

²⁷ In *fatwa* no. 17831 issued by The Permanent Council of Scientific Research and Fatwas (overseen by the Saudi Ministry of Religious Endowments), former Grand Mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Baz, current Grand Mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaikh and three others address concerns among Egyptian Salafis that al-Tahhan's works are being cited by Sufi sympathizers to assemble legal and theological support for intercession. Especially grievous are al-Tahhan's credal assertions that 'spiritual insight' (*ru'ya*) can be obtained in this life from seeing visions of the Prophet or hearing the dead in their graves. Knowledge of the 'unseen' (*al-ghayb*), they state, is accessible only to God. In their view, al-Tahhan commits the sin of major polytheism (*al-shirk al-akbar*) and cannot be relied upon for sound religious counsel. See Muhammad Bin Jamil Zaynu,

²³ Bernard Rougier, *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?* Proche Orient, general ed. Gilles Kepel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008), pp. 15–19.

²⁴ Islamic University of Madina documents produced in 1995 [<http://www.d-sunnah.net/forum/printthread.php?t=43521>].

²⁵ By contrast, supporters allege that his name is still featured on a list of the university's 'most honored graduates'. Chatroom participant in June, 2006, available at [<http://www.almanhaj.com/vb/showthread.php?t=167748>].

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logians who teach in the Kingdom and focus on rebutting al-Tahhan's credal arguments;²⁸ and finally 'Ibadi religious scholars in Oman led by the country's Chief Mufti Ahmad al-Khalili.²⁹ The formidable battery of critics should not deflect attention from al-Tahhan's supporters, both in the kingdom and beyond. Foremost among these are 'Abdalla Ibn Jibrin, one of the most eminent Saudi scholars and *muftis* whose name was associated with the formation of the Saudi 'awakening' (*al-sabua*) in the 1960s and who served on the Higher Council of Clerics before his death in 2009.³⁰ Another supporter of al-Tahhan is militant Jordanian jurisprudent Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, webmaster for the widely accessible pro-al-Qaeda website *al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* and one of the most influential jihadi theorists today. Al-Maqdisi devotes special praise to al-Tahhan for rebutting loyalist Saudi scholar Rabi' al-Madkhali with stronger arguments for critical intellectual and political activism of the kind articulated by Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb in his book *Milestones*. After his expulsion from Saudi Arabia, al-Tahhan was awarded honorary status as a Saudi 'exile

Tahdhir al-Ikhuwan min inhirafat al-Tahhan (2009), pp. 168–9 available at [http://www.albanyon.yoo7.com/montada-f15/topic-t4615.htm].

²⁸ Among prominent theologians on the Arabian Peninsula, fellow Aleppan theologian Muhammad Jamil Zaynu, a notable jurisprudent in Mecca, excoriates al-Tahhan for following Sayyid Qutb's path in excommunicating large groups of Muslims for reasons relating to non-essential ritual practices (*mu'amarat*) and also for commending the invocation of blessings by deceased religious notables such as Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal in Sufi ceremonies (*dhikr*). *Ibid*.

²⁹ For al-Khalili, al-Tahhan represents the quintessence of Wahhabi zealotry, particularly with regard to unquestioning allegiance to fourteenth-century jurisprudent Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya. The principal error of Ibn Taymiyya, as well as his student Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya, is their anthropomorphic tendency to assign God attributes resembling those of a human being. Defending such a likeness leads them toward Trinitarian perspectives notorious among Christians as well as Jews. Ultimately, al-Khalili finds al-Tahhan especially dangerous because his arguments for divine insight favour a strain of interpretive activism that has long eschewed the conventions of religious establishments. See Ahmad Bin Hamad al-Khalili, *Wa saqat al-qina'* (1997). Available at [www.alfida.jeeran.com/wasqul.htm#25]

³⁰ Ibn Jibrin commends al-Tahhan's argument that God's light can literally be seen by those who dwell in paradise. According to Jibrin's website, al-Tahhan adopts a sound Salafi position that rebuts the rationalist arguments of 'Mu tazilis', originally an eighteenth-century sect of speculative theologians who insisted on the impossibility of direct encounters with the divine. Available at [http://www.ibn-jebreen.com/book.php?cat=7&book=93&toc+6620&page=5847&subid=29368].

'LISTEN, PLAN AND CARRY OUT "AL-QA'IDA"'

by the Committee for the Defense of the Legitimate Rights of Arabia, the main organisation for the Saudi opposition abroad, which lists him as third in importance after two of his Saudi students, 'A'id al Qarni and 'Ali 'Abd al-Khalil al-Qarni.³¹

'The Position of the Astute on People's Disagreement' repackaged as: 'My Brother Struggler: Listen—Plan—Carry Out "al-Qa'ida"'

In what follows, I examine one of al-Tahhan's most explicit lectures on 'the base' (*al-qa'ida*) with an aim of understanding how he situates Muslim ethical and political action at the intersections of law and theology.³² As I have argued elsewhere, the concept of 'the base' is only obliquely related to the militant frameworks of computer databases, military or terrorist bases, or even ideologically 'solid bases' (following popular interpretations of 'Abdalla 'Azzam's concept that are frequently cited by theoreticians of jihad, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.³³ Rather, the concept is far more flexible, conditional and redeployable, its foundations in legal theory as well as Arabic linguistics highlighted by speakers as they explore the situated contingency of generalised ethical precepts.

Al-Tahhan's almost four-hour lecture, recorded on three separate audio-tapes, does not venture into the tactics or strategies of militancy. Instead, he lays out ethical groundwork for enabling a more disparate range of political discourses that include, but do not necessitate, militant uptake. With respect to 'the base', al-Tahhan situates the concept within a set of arguments about the urgency of theology (*aqida*) and Islamic law to political action. In particular, he invites listeners to consider the implications for mankind of God's own experiences of hesitation and death.

In the first of the three cassettes, al-Tahhan's lecture draws from standard elements of a Salafi treatise on 'loyalty and disavowal' (*al-wala' wa-l-bara'*). Much as other authors have done when employing the genre, al-Tahhan lays out his vision of the ways the doctrine of God's oneness (*al-tawhid*), so key to Salafi credal works, can be preserved amid the influences of polytheists, including Jews, Christians and especially fellow Muslims.³⁴ Of foremost importance

³¹ *CDLR Bulletin*, no. 34 (London, 10 February 1995).

³² The lecture's three volumes, uploaded from audio-cassette, available at [http://www.al-tahaan.com/K.html].

³³ Miller, "Al-Qa'ida" as a Pragmatic Base: Contributions of Area Studies to Sociolinguistics.

³⁴ Muhammad Bin Sa'id al-Qahatani's well-known book *al-Wala' wa-l-bara'* launches a

is the matter of independent legal reasoning in Islamic law (*ijtihad*), a subject which, although occasionally grounds for dispute among Muslims, should be understood as a framework for accommodating pluralism above all. Postponing further elaboration on *ijtihad* for the second tape, however, al-Tahhan moves to what he considers to be the more serious a threat to Islam: the question of 'love' or 'friendship' (*al-mahabbah*). Some Muslims befriend Islam's sworn enemies, foremost among them Western-influenced Muslim intellectuals who peddle theories drawn from modern psychology to defend their expositions of 'things as they really are'.³⁵ The hubris of human secularism, then, imperils the Islamic community by implanting into Muslims a false sense of friendship. After elaborating upon the nature of this threat by recourse to the concept of radical 'ignorance' or rebellion against God's sovereignty (*jahlīyya*), so marked in the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdudi, al-Tahhan strikes upon a wholly different and more Saudi-influenced Salafi path by moving to the core theological assertion of his lecture: believers must learn to cultivate 'two wills' (*iradatān*) that inform their life as modern Muslims. First, he asserts, they must learn to love properly; second, they must learn to hate in equal measure. The necessity of coming to terms with these two wills, moreover, is made manifest by the fact that God, too, shares this experience of opposing wills; indeed, it is one of his 'essential attributes' (*sifat*). The name for this characteristic is 'hesitation' (*taraddud*). Drawing from a *hadith* narrated from Abu Hurayra in which God is depicted as conflicted over taking the human being's life,³⁶ al-Tahhan states the following:

diatribe against fellow Muslims who seek means (*sawassul*) to ameliorate their condition through supplication and intercession. Al-Tahhan's *ikhtilaf* narrative leads this discourse toward Hanafism's greater tolerance for Muslim pluralism even as he moves to draw ranks against a common enemy.

³⁵ Al-Tahhan asserts that the roots of modern psychology are in Greek-influenced Islamic theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), the errors of which were expounded by twelfth-century philosopher Abu Hamad al-Ghazzali. The ultimate source of Muslim erancy, then, hails more from within the Muslim community rather than from the West. Such an argument situates al-Tahhan's narrative of 'loyalty and disavowal' closer to a tradition of Saudi-influenced religious discourse than to political treatises on the topic by such militants as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi or Ayman al-Zawahiri (see Wagemakers, 'Framing the "Threat to Islam": *Al-Wala' wa al-Eara'* in Salafi Discourse').

³⁶ Al-Tahhan narrates the *hadith* as the following: 'It is reported in al-Bukhari's compendium and elsewhere that Abu Hurayra (may God be pleased with him) [said] that the Prophet praise be upon Him, said that God, glory be to Him, said: 'I declare war on whoever shows enmity towards an ally of Mine. My servant will not seek my

If there are both obedience and disobedience [to God] in a person, we shall love him to the extent of his obedience and dislike whatever disobedience and violations he is guilty of. Thus, in our hearts there would be love for him from one perspective and hatred (*bughd*) towards him from another perspective.

This matter [of love and hatred]—just as they exist simultaneously in us, they also exist concurrently in our Lord, may He be glorified and exalted.

Co-existing in our Lord, then, are two opposing wills (*iradatān*). This is the reality of hesitation (*al-taraddud*); that two wills oppose each other. Then, God, may He be glorified and exalted, grants precedence to one of the two matters due to its benefits (*masalih*) for the believer. It is inevitable (*la budda labu minha*).

And you, my brother in faith, when you see obedience and disobedience in your brother, you [should] love him from one perspective and from another perspective hate the acts of disobedience in which he engages. You [should] give precedence to that which is more just than the other. Thus, he whose obedience is greater [than his disobedience], our love for him shall be greater [than our hatred]; and the contrary is true. We must acquire this attribute. God, may He be glorified and exalted, has this attribute, and it is a matter which happens to us—and that is death.

For these two reasons, I wish to talk about this great topic: 'The stance of the astute in regards to people's differences.'

The central premise of al-Tahhan's lecture, then, is that God's attribute of hesitation is defined by what humans experience: namely, death.³⁷ This character-

nearness through anything that is more beloved to Me than that which I have made obligatory on him. And my servant will continue to seek my nearness through voluntary actions until I love him. Once I love him, I shall bless the hearing with which he hears, sight with which he sees, hands with which he acts and feet with which he walks. If he asks of me, I shall grant him that which he asked for. If he seeks refuge in me, I shall grant him refuge. I do not hesitate in anything that I intend to do as much as I hesitate in taking away the soul of my faithful servant; he dislikes death and I dislike displeasing him, but it is necessary for him.'

³⁷ The Qur'an not infrequently characterises God in a state of suspended decision, having a 'wait-and-see attitude' that is resolved only through human initiative, as noted by Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra Shirazi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), p. 180. The concept of *al-taraddud* is richly elaborated in traditions of 'mystical' or esoteric knowledge, including Mu'tazili strains of Shi'i philosophy and Sufi narratives of the perfect human being (*al-insan al-kamil*) that were perfectly familiar to Aleppo scholars who influenced al-Tahhan's early intellectual development. Such narratives center on a half-divine, half-human mediator who connects man with God through his own bridge of love and who, in the process of migrating between experiences of God's majesty and God's beauty, can intervene in creation. The mediator's intervention is enabled through hesitation (*taraddud*) as

istic is perfectly expressed by God, of course, and al-Tahhan, along with other established Saudi jurists, defends this characterisation of God from critics' charges of anthropomorphism by saying that human 'hesitation' is altogether different, since humans lack a knowledge of what is to come in the future and thus hesitate because they are uncertain.³⁸ Critics such as Grand Mufti Ahmad al-Khalili, however, remain unconvinced and view such positions on God's 'two wills' as indicative of Wahhabi tendencies to liken God to humans (*tashbih*), a profound violation of divine unity (*tawhid*) founded in dangerous theological arguments that God changes 'states'. As al-Tahhan's lecture continues, he further elaborates the ways ethical action is to be grounded in humans' experience of the conflicts and contradictions of sentiment and sensory observation. In the struggle to recognise that, within each of us, love and hatred both vie for supremacy, the Muslim's task lies in balancing the two sentiments together while giving a slight advantage to love. The challenge of keeping love and hate proportionally balanced is exacerbated by Western orders of secular humanism—especially psychologists, 'callers at the Gates of Hell'—who accentuate and pervert older forms of Islamic theological rationalism (*'ilm al-kalam*). Still, al-Tahhan's focus on factionalism is directed primarily to inter-Muslim strife, a discord that is informed by a more profound ontological condition: Muslims are a fallen people, and the knowledge once held by the pious predecessors (*salaf*) during Prophet's time and in the two generations that followed has been irretrievably lost. Having succumbed to whims of desire, Muslims can best repair their moral community by showing absolute loyalty to rulers lest dissension further erode their unity. Indeed, the surest ethical anchor for Muslims is not public involvement and action but rather seclusion and hesitation, accompanied by physical and sensory abstinence (*al-zuhd*). Much in the manner of sleep, labelled elsewhere the 'small death', such retraction from the common-sense world opens access into the far more powerful experience of 'spiritual insight' (*ru'ya*) in which visions of divine authority grant Muslims a practical means for combating injustice in this world.³⁹

his heart vacillates between four experiences: ignorance, doubt (*shakk*), probability (*zann*) and knowledge (*'ilm*) (Bahram Jassemi, 'The Dimensions of the Mystical Journey', n.d.)

³⁸ See explanations by Salih Al al-Shaykh and others available at [http://www.ahlal-h-deeth.com/vbe/showthread.php?t=5817].

³⁹ While the term *ru'ya* is not explicitly mentioned on 'The Position of the Astute', al-Tahhan evokes it explicitly in his subsequent discussion of Muhammad Bin Aslam

Such abstinence proves to be a preparatory stage, then, an 'initial fortification' best exemplified by seventh-century Arab Companions of the Prophet. With Apocalyptic themes of hellish gatekeepers ('psychologists'), earthquakes, deformations and End Times, al-Tahhan says 'loners' (*ghuraba'*) can rebuild the community.⁴⁰ In fact, to undertake such action in a contemporary world marked by greater perversions of desire and liberal intellectualism than the Muslim community has ever known is to invite divine rewards grander than even the Prophet's own Companions could have enjoyed.⁴¹

The second of the three tapes focuses on Islamic law, especially the question of disagreement (*ikhtilaf*). First, al-Tahhan continues discussion of a small vanguard of loners—a small group (*jama'at*) can be formed of several persons or even one individual—and argues that this group can form its own 'majority' upon which consensus over Islamic law and *sunna* can be assembled. The model for such a path-breaking collective is the Persian 'Imam, godly scholar and Sheikh of Islam' Muhammad Bin Aslam al-Tusi, a contemporary of Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, who challenged the vainglorious Khurasani *amir* 'Abdalla Bin Tahir and was condemned to suffer in prison for his impudence.⁴² From with-

al-Tusi's exemplary act of self-abnegation (*zuhr*) in which he directs his vision toward the heavens rather than at the 'changing faces' of the unjust Muslim tyrant 'Abdalla Bin Tahir (discussed below.)

⁴⁰ The reference to 'strangers' expounds on a well-known *hadith*: 'It is narrated on the authority of Abu Hurayra that the Messenger of Allah, praise be upon Him, said: Islam began as something strange, and it would revert to its being strange—so good tidings for the stranger.'

⁴¹ Excluded among the Companions, in this respect, are those who participated in the battles of Badr and Uhud and in the Al-Ridwan pledge of allegiance. Additionally, the reward of 'companionship' will never be as great for modern activists as it was for the Companions.

⁴² The role of such a small group (*jama'at*) in leading the Muslim community is elaborated in militant terms on al-Tahhan's cassette 'The Separation of Religion from the State' [*Fash al-din 'an al-dawla*]. Discussing the legitimate uses of violence in *jihād*, he argues that a group consisting of as few as three individuals can appoint its own *amir* and re-establish righteous Muslim governance through the twin forces of the 'text and the sword' (*al-mushaf wa-l-sayf*). Drawing upon *hadiths* to argue that the Antichrist himself is less frightening than 'errant Imams', al-Tahhan ventures to suggest that enemies' eyes be plucked out and throats cut' and in a less impassioned portion of the lecture, falls back to the position that they should be fought, taken captive, chained by the neck and forced to convert or else remain chained. In most of the lecture, the enemies concerned are secular Muslims, especially Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leadership, who have been misled by Western secular nationalism and humanism.

drawal and seclusion, then, comes extraordinary political redemption, first and foremost against errant fellow Muslims. The weapons for such redemption are ideally forged not through militant training but rather through Islamic law. Al-Tahhan cites the importance of prayer, in particular, but moves quickly to matters of managing disagreement (*ikhtilaf*), a healthy and necessary element of Islamic law that ensures a tolerance for pluralism as expressed and defended through reasoned debates about concrete legal norms (*al-furu'*).⁴³ Striking a more optimistic tone, al-Tahhan devotes the entirety of the second and third cassettes to examining the intellectual and affective resources for managing *ikhtilaf*. In summary, disagreement results primarily from differing methods of independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*). Disagreement can be 'aspectual' (*zanawun*), focusing on statements or reasoning methods that, while ostensibly incompatible, are reconcilable by virtue of their relation to each other within broader classes and types of knowledge (historical, legal, exegetical, linguistic, dispositional). In contrast with aspectual disagreement, contradictory disagreement (*tadaad*) involves two positions that are not mutually correct. Al-Tahhan states that while this is the most dangerous form of disagreement, it may still be tenable and sustained if no conclusive evidence from *hadiths* and consensus can be provided to reject one of the two views. Comprehensive disagreement (*sham*), noted by Bin Laden's secretary in the quotation at the outset of this chapter, occurs when *hadith* interpreters have recourse to personal and cultural knowledge that does not impinge on correct legal practice and so is not addressed by al-Tahhan.⁴⁴

The conditions and qualifications for disagreement hinge on a key concept, as the label appended to volume two of al-Tahhan's trilogy suggests: the *qa'ida*, a flexible 'base' or template of attunement that steers Muslims toward what they share in common. While the concept is deployed indirectly in a range of narratives about the contingency of sacred law, it is mentioned explicitly twice during the lecture, both times on the second cassette. In the first instance, reference to the *qa'ida* follows a defence of the allegorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) of Qur'anic verses that are deemed ambiguous (*mutashabihat*). Portraying such reasoning as integral to legal interpretation (*tafsir*) based on personal opinion (*ra'y*), an especially important concept for Hanafi scholars, al-Tahhan urges

⁴³ A well-known *hadith* states that 'The disagreement of my community is mercy.'

⁴⁴ Ibn Taymiyya's *Ma'ajim al-fatawa* treats aspectual and contradictory disagreement but not comprehensive. See Nawaf Bint Majid al-Farm, *al-Farq bayn al-ikhtilaf al-zanawun wa-ikhtilaf al-tadaad* (2008).

his listeners to ground their insights in a mastery not only of Islamic legal texts but also of Arabic:

Legal interpretation based on [personal] opinion: is it permissible or not? If one looks into the books of later authors, one would see strange things. [Some authors] say that scholars considered it permissible, providing evidence for their stance, while other scholars say it was not considered permissible, providing other evidence. Take it easy, my man, and be fair with scholarly issues! There is no need to provoke a difference of opinion about an issue when there is no difference of opinion.

Legal interpretation based on [personal] opinion has two possible conditions. Each of the two conditions is agreed upon by our scholars with no differences of opinion. Interpretation based on opinion which is done in accordance with the *rules (qa'awa'id) of the Arabic language* and the texts of the Islamic law is unanimously considered permissible. Interpretation relying on [personal] opinion based on whims, however, not drawing upon either [the Arabic] language or a legal text, is unanimously prohibited.

In this instance, the *qa'ida* (plural *qa'awa'id*) is obtained through recourse to the established conventions of Arabic discourse and signification that have been identified and standardised by Islam's earliest grammarians and legal specialists. Many of them worked from the eighth century onward to formalize Arabic rhetoric so that Islamic law and the *sunna* could be developed in accordance with the original utterances of the Prophet Muhammad and his Arab community. Elsewhere I have explored the cultural politics involved in contested claims to competence in Arabic and its 'rules'.⁴⁵ On a set of tapes in the collection, a sound knowledge of Arabic is described by speakers as instrumental to winning support for armed jihad, although militants differ from legal specialists insofar as they elaborate narratives of Arab ethnic exceptionalism in the interests of privileging militants from the Arabian Peninsula. In this case, al-Tahhan avoids potential tensions between the legal derivation of 'personal opinion' (*ra'y*) and privileged competences in Arabic by invoking a contrast with the kind of 'opinion' that ostensibly marked pre-Islamic Arabs and that—driven by 'desire' (*hawaa*) and egotistic intellectualism—has culminated in Western psychology influenced by Freud, Hegel and Hitler.

In the concept's second invocation, al-Tahhan is already deep into a discussion about the ways in which legal specialists may approach given cases through different processes of reasoning, arrive at dramatically different judgments and yet still be considered to have performed meritorious ethical action founded on a common 'base'. After reviewing several legal rulings that involve differ-

⁴⁵ Miller, "Al-Qa'ida" as a Pragmatic Base.

ences over 'general' (*amm*) and 'particular' (*khass*) applications, al-Tahhan asserts the following:

This is a *rule* (*qa'ida*) of the legal specialists which they believe in and support through considerable evidence. I don't want to say that one or another is stronger, but rather, that each of the two opinions relies upon well-established evidence from the Prophet, praise be upon Him. There is no need to accuse one another of misguidance, wrongdoing or heresy. There is no need for conflict or disagreement. He who thinks that a given position is stronger should practice accordingly and should leave the other to practice as he wishes. He should not say to him: 'You are violating the *sunna*!' No! If he were to desert him because of this, he would be the one who's [actually] violating the *sunna*, violating the unity of Muslims and creating dissension (*yufarriq*) in their communities.

The function of the 'rule' or 'base' (*qa'ida*) here proves central to al-Tahhan's narrative of the unifying foundations of 'creed' (*aqida*) for all Muslims. Indeed, to split with other Muslims over differences of sustained legal argument proves grounds for the charge of sectarianism. In al-Tahhan's formulation, then, the concept of the *qa'ida* is intended to be a unifying one, and is not meant to license the kinds of isolationist or extremist mandates that are frequently associated with the term al-Qaeda by those who would designate Bin Laden's group as a religious or ideological 'cult'.

The third tape in the series extends the discussion of managing *ikhtilaf*. The most scholarly of the three tapes, it gives strong emphasis to legal reasoning and the dangers of ossified legal conventionalism (*taqlid*) in established legal schools. This discussion is accompanied by strong condemnations of those who excommunicate other Muslims for differences of ritual practice or belief that cannot be conclusively defended through recourse to *hadith* and consensus. Overall, for al-Tahhan the formalisation of Islamic law contains a seed of alienation of religion from its practitioners. He advocates re-discovering an earlier purity of knowledge that marked Hanbali thought, especially as transmitted through Hanafi legal scholars' more ecumenical horizons.

Branding 'al-Qaeda'

Given al-Tahhan's overt lack of militant incitements, how might his lecture have been appropriated by those seeking to brand Bin Laden's movement as 'al-Qaeda' for a wider audience before September 11th? How might al-Tahhan's careful legal and theological excurses have been distorted and re-deployed toward violent scenarios of world transformation? The marketing of al-Tahhan's lecture on audiotape provides tentative answers. Given the ninety-min-

ute limit on standard commercial cassettes, al-Tahhan's roughly four-hour lecture had to be split into three separate volumes.⁴⁶ When sold by Saudi-based cassette shops, the third volume, more scholastic than the others and more explicitly critical of excommunicating other Muslims (*sakfir*), was omitted altogether from their larger series of al-Tahhan's recordings.⁴⁷ No copies of this volume have been found in the Bin Laden cassette collection. Furthermore, of the first two volumes, both of which feature roughly equally in the Bin Laden collection, only copies of the second have the 'al-Qa'ida' message affixed to them. The result of such marketing is that volume two's emphasis on legal reasoning is branded under the rubric of a 'base' or 'precept' that should accommodate and also discipline diverse Islamic movements, while the more radical theological strains of volume one—including God's 'two wills' as well as the broader discourse on 'loyalty and disavowal', 'Western-influenced secularism and the necessity of isolation from one's own errant co-religionists—are bracketed separately. As the integrity of al-Tahhan's lecture is fractured, the relation between legal and theological disciplines becomes perilously strained. On the 'al-Qa'ida' cassette, leadership is portrayed as a moral enterprise founded in a comprehensive understanding of Islamic legal reasoning and exercised through doctrinal practice, including testimony (*shahada*), prayer, Qur'anic recitation, exegesis of the Qur'an and transmitted *hadiths*, and independent legal reasoning (*ijtihad*). The ethics of such leadership are expressed in the concept of the *qa'ida*, a term used by jurists to signify general legal principles that have been deduced from Prophetic sayings or from important rulings and consensus by jurisprudents.⁴⁸ Crucially, such principles are easily qualified in practice, given their generality; indeed, it is precisely their contingency in relation to culturally-situated ethical practices that makes knowledge of them essential for

⁴⁶ Internet copies of the lecture reflect the same compartmentalisation, digital versions having been made from cassettes.

⁴⁷ Riyadh-based 'Islamic Piety Recordings' (Tasjilat al-Taqwa al-Islamiyya) sold this lecture on one pair of cassettes only (nos. 8056 and 8057), and these were the inaugural tapes for a thirty-six-cassette series of al-Tahhan's lectures and sermons. Jeddah's 'Audio-Brigade Library' (Maktabat al-Liwa' al-Samiyya) followed the same procedure for their thirty-seven-volume series. Both shops also changed the word 'disagreement' (*ikhtilaf*) in al-Tahhan's title to 'division' (*iftiraq*), framing the lecture as a discourse on political factionalism rather than on variations of legal reasoning. Evidence for such abridgement is provided by cassettes in Bin Laden's former tape collection.

⁴⁸ Miller, "Al-Qa'ida" as a Pragmatic Base.

defending a broader range of Muslim interpretations. Militants such as Bin Laden who argue for indiscriminate violence against non-combatants, a position rejected by even the most conservative legal scholars,⁴⁹ take the contingencies of the *qa'ida* as a license not only to abrogate previous legal rulings and consensus about 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' but also to assert their inspired authorisation to dictate legal norms afresh. Bin Laden's own attempts to justify such exceptionalism lead him to elaborate narratives of continuing onslaughts on the Arabian Peninsula, whether from sixth-century Abyssinian Monophysites or from a twenty-first century Jewish-Christian Crusader Alliance' worldwide. As narratives of cosmic war against non-Muslims are mobilised territorially and historically through reference to the privileged claims of Arab leaders in particular, Bin Laden and other al-Qaeda militants would naturally have recourse to theological accounts of mankind's privileged relationship with God, especially if exemplified in the experiences of early Companions of the Prophet. Volume one of al-Tahhan's lecture not only focuses on this relationship but also gives it a radically existential turn that derives an essential characteristic of God from mankind's own struggles with hatred and death, especially those launched by a minority group or even a single individual taking action under assault from Western secular aggression. The volatile implications of such a position are dramatised, objectified and made subject to a more maverick range of interpretations when distributed on a cassette that is marketed and sold separately from its accompanying volumes. In effect, *al-qa'ida* becomes a bid for unity which, while ostensibly privileging an umbrella framework for diverse currents in Islamic activism, inaugurates and coaches listeners on how to manage a far more exclusionary set of claims to knowledge and justice. For al-Tahhan, the tactics of such critical reform begin with scholarly training, and even in their ultimate end must be fully compatible with the living tradition of the law; for militants armed with branding strategies, the tactics of reform begin with more accessible repertoires of technological and media manipulation.

Implications for policy studies

Al-Qaeda's goals and ideological trajectory, especially as developed by Osama Bin Laden, are typically considered distinct from other Islamic militant move-

⁴⁹ John Kelsay, *Arguing the Just War in Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 142–9.

ments insofar as they are 'global jihadi'. This designation highlights the organisation's difference from socio-revolutionary Islamism, which aims to replace corrupt Muslim leadership with Islamic rule, as well as classical jihadism, which focuses on a legitimate Muslim leader's call to fight infidels occupying Muslim territories. By contrast, al-Qaeda's leadership licenses the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants. The ideological momentum for such violent extremism is often traced to the writings of Abdalla 'Azzam, who argued that armed jihad is an obligation imposed on all Muslims and need not be sanctioned by legitimate Muslim leaders, as well as to both Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, whose focus on the American enemy has given the organization its distinctive stamp.

Evidence is emerging that al-Qaeda's 'ideology', despite what its leadership may seek to convey, has not been as coherent as this narrative suggests. Bin Laden's focus on the United States, for example, paramount in many public statements especially after his late summer 1996 Declaration of War, proved controversial even for close associates.⁵⁰ Among Saudi fighters who arrived in al-Qaeda's Afghani training camps and who supplied the bulk of the organization's manpower by the late 1990s, anti-Americanism appears to have been very infrequent, a situation that camp instructors sought to change.⁵¹ Rather than global jihadism, classical jihad in such places as Chechnya, Tajikistan and Bosnia was more frequently cited as a key motivation for al-Qaeda's recruits and acolytes. Socio-revolutionary goals, meanwhile, may have been more common than previously thought. Among top leaders who understood the symbolic value of a common American enemy for uniting diverse ideological currents, a notable contingent prioritised the fight against the 'near enemy'. In his recent study of Saudi jihadism, Thomas Hegghammer concludes from his analysis of internal al-Qaeda documents and under-reported militant attacks against American personnel and facilities in Saudi Arabia between 1996–2001 that a significant element of al-Qaeda's larger strategic vision was the overthrow of regimes at home.⁵² From this perspective, attacking Western targets was more a tactical objective designed to undermine government cred-

⁵⁰ Notable among Bin Laden's critics were Abu al-Walid al-Masri and Abu Mus'ab al-Suri. See Vahid Brown *et al.*, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qa'ida 1989–2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007.)

⁵¹ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 64–5, 135–6.

⁵² Hegghammer, *ibid.*, pp. 114–16. Also see 'Letter from Abu Hudhayfa to Abu Abdallah', Harmony Database AFGP-2002–003251 (20 June 2000).

ibility and incite domestic rebellion than a step along the road to a pan-Islamic caliphate.

Such studies underscore the value of understanding the ways global jihadism is conditioned and qualified by more enduring tendencies in Muslim political ideology. This chapter has explored how the most salient *'al-qa'ida'* tape in Bin Laden's Kandahar compound focused on legal disputation among Muslims themselves. I have argued that the initial exclusionary pietism of Shaykh al-Tahhan's lecture, developed on the first cassette through narratives about demonic Westernised Muslims, the roughly balanced virtues of love and hate, the urgency of abstinence and the prophesied ethical triumph of a lonely vanguard, is bracketed under a more marketable pan-Islamic compass on the second tape, which coaches listeners in Islam's historical appreciation for pragmatic legal exceptionalism. Those who arranged the branding of al-Tahhan's tape and were sympathetic to al-Qaeda's controversial militant and socio-revolutionary goals obviously stood to gain by such a pan-Islamic frame. Crucially, pan-Islamism was calibrated not through 'Azzam's controversial neo-classical jihadism, so important to al-Qaeda's founding charter: none of the volumes makes the slightest mention of Muslims' obligations to drive Jews, Christians or other infidels from occupied Muslim territories. Instead, pan-Islamism is cultivated through a theological turn whose modern and existential rendering lends service to the malleable frontiers of global armed jihad. A few broader clarifications are in order here.

Throughout Islamic history, theology has proven to be one of the most powerful and controversial weapons for reformers. Seeking to moderate debates about claims to succession that rippled through Muslim communities in the wake of the Prophet Muhammad's death in the seventh century, theologians ventured into discussions of sin, free will and reason that often provoked as much controversy as they resolved differences. While later generations of Muslim scholars generally closed ranks behind the idea that theological questions should be subordinated at all times to unifying legal principles, some scholars, especially those in the Hanbali tradition that is most prominent in Saudi Arabia today, emphasised the primacy of correct belief in guiding Muslim practice.⁵³ If theological tracts on creed (*'aqida*) have found a renewed popularity among Saudi-influenced reformers since the 1960s, so too have these tracts moved far beyond classical credal works in their efforts to demonstrate the relevance of theology to

⁵³ Joseph Schacht, 'Theology and Law in Islam', in G.E. von Grunebaum (ed.) *Theology and Law in Islam* (Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), pp. 5–6.

modern political debates. To some extent, such modern turns in theology should be no surprise: theology has always been an acutely human enterprise, posing existential questions about experience and the human condition that readily borrow from, and in turn influence, broader discourses about identity, society and selfhood. It is the political stakes of such a turn that remain under-appreciated in many studies of Islamic militancy. The challenge in accounting for the politics of theology lies not solely in studying Muslim attention to such practices as worship, bodily care, self-discipline and intellectual development but also in recognising how these ostensibly 'quiet' doctrinal concerns acquire central significance for Muslims because they engage broader debates about the trajectory of modern global subjects. Shaykh al-Tahhan's narrative of God's two wills' suggests the centrality of the universal human experience of death to theology, especially when cast as a Muslim aptitude to harness thoughts of death and worldly alienation toward more ethical ends than Westerners who are bound to orders of secular materialism. I have argued that militants make al-Tahhan's existential rendering of theology productive by further secularising it, an effect produced when the first volume of the set on religious belief is marketed and distributed separately from foundational companion volumes that focus on religious law. The appeal of such a break for cosmopolitan militants such as Bin Laden who have neither the training nor credentials for defending themselves through Islamic law can hardly be overstated.

What kind of thinkers attract militants with lectures and writings on what philosopher Slavoj Žižek has termed 'materialist theology'?⁵⁴ Specialists in Islamic law, although not those employed by major state legal institutions or those whose professional obligations require adhering to specific schools of legal reasoning; university and post-graduate professors who are able to find time for interdisciplinary research and who are not entirely bound to teaching obligations; intellectuals in post-industrial societies whose critiques of political establishments emerge partly from the coalition-building vocabularies of 'new social movements', especially their emphasis on quality-of-life issues, but whose experiences of state censorship and repression have led them toward more uncompromising and idealised formulas for this-worldly action.⁵⁵ I have explored the work of Shaykh al-Tahhan, whose theological lectures on creed have put him at odds with Saudi-influenced 'neo-Traditionist' Salafis. Ostracised by his former teachers at the Islamic University in Madina and later

⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

⁵⁵ Vertigans, *Militant Islam*, especially chapter two.

expelled from Saudi Arabia, he made exceptional use of audiocassettes and, especially after his forced isolation by the current Qatari administration in the late 1990s, the internet to reach students across the Arab world. The challenge of assessing his intellectual contributions lies not only in distinguishing between different and sometimes opposed interpretive traditions within Muslim reform but also in resisting neat causal equations between conservative legal arguments and the world-views of militants.

Attending to the theological purchase of modern militancy may seem relatively unimportant when compared to the value of more quantifiable social studies in identifying the nature and orientation of militants' objectives. Such a conclusion would be short-sighted, I suggest, for three reasons. First, such research can provide comparative insights into patterns of ideological discipline in Islamic militant movements. In the case of al-Qaeda, threats against the United States and the West may catch headlines across the world, but they must also be translated into the more proximate daily struggles of militants. Even and perhaps especially among Muslim militants living in the West, grander scenarios of world transformation must be situated in ordinary practice; daily threats to sacred values provide militants with opportunities for smaller victories when the battlefronts of larger wars remain distant. Given the controversy of global jihadism among Muslims, an extraordinary amount of time and energy must be devoted to justifying extreme violence through recourse to more conventional Muslim ethical frameworks. Theological discourses prove instrumental, not only because they explain how orders of human existence are subject to God's design but also because they often supply a more approachable vocabulary than Islamic law. Militants who lack advanced training in religion, especially those who are secular or non-practicing Muslims, are likely to find such vocabularies useful for cultivating and defending more controversial regiments of self-discipline.

Second, contemporary lessons in theology have proven valuable recruiting tools. In this essay, I have suggested that the selective branding and marketing of al-Tahhan's audio-recorded lecture re-tailored the jurist's theological lessons to the maverick interpretive license of global jihadism. Listeners expecting to find instruction on 'Azam's neo-classical jihad are coached in more controversial forms of global jihadi violence aimed at Muslim regimes at home. Militant memoirs confirm the power of theology in recruitment. Moroccan-born militant 'Omar Nasiri', who worked as an undercover agent for British and French intelligence services, held theological training to be a litmus test defining al-Qaeda's true leaders. While in London in the late 1990s, Nasiri

wrote of his first impressions of the Egyptian militant cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, currently in prison in the United Kingdom for using his sermons to incite racial hatred:

I was even more amazed when I heard Abu Hamza speak. He knew nothing at all about theology, which seemed odd for someone who had gone through the camps. He was very loud and very passionate, but to me he also seemed very stupid. He was trying to defend the GIA [Algeria's Groupe Islamique Armée] in terms of Islamic law, but it was clear to me that he didn't know what he was talking about. It was clear to Abu Qatada and Abu Walid as well; they demolished every argument he put forward... I came out of that meeting understanding two things very clearly: Abu Qatada was a true scholar, and Abu Hamza was nothing more than a demagogue.⁵⁶

When Nasiri tried to explain to British intelligence officers that Abu Qatada and Abu al-Walid al-Masri were far more dangerous figures, he was waved off and re-assigned the task of monitoring Abu Hamza al-Masri at Finsbury Mosque, a decision he laments in his book given far more serious militant influence of the first two since that time.

Finally, theological renderings of militant texts can invoke enemies whose subtlety and power may not be readily translated into the familiar lexicons of global media networks or even intelligence analysis. For this reason, attention to fields of theological radicalisation can help analysts assess the nature and severity of the threats posed by militants' statements. To what extent do individuals and groups view declarations to attack Western targets as credible calls to action? Are they credible enough to generate serious operational momentum? Failure to develop methods for assessing the ideological leverage of threats among militant networks can lead to misappraising their hierarchy of enemies, conflating their short-term tactics with broader strategic visions and missing opportunities to exploit their internal conflicts.

⁵⁶ Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with al-Qaeda* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), p. 275.

