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Leveraging Islamic Philosophy as a Counterterrorism Strategy

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University Honors in International Studies

Fall 2012

**Abstract**

This capstone analyzes the divide between ancient philosophy and Islamist ideology and proposes a shift in US counterterrorism strategy away from solely military operations to a combination of that includes philosophical arguments. In order to win hearts and minds, the United States military should understand the arguments of terrorist organizations and early Islamic thinkers so as to engage Muslims on an intellectual level and disprove incorrect or misinterpreted information disseminated by Islamists. Ancient Greek philosophy shaped not only the Western world, but also medieval Islam. Before Islamist fundamentalists declared philosophy contradictory to Islam, a vibrant debate which centered on developing philosophy and theology existed in the Islamic world. With the loss of traditional philosophy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic philosophy was stifled. Prominent Islamist thinkers like Ibn Taymiya and Sayid Qutb emphasized practice over intellectualism. Philosophy provides counterterrorism strategists with a medium to connect with Muslims on a personal and intellectual level and engage Islamists and potential terrorist recruits in a debate on the tenets of their beliefs.

**Introduction**

Combating terrorism has been one of the most important foreign policy issues of the past decade, but the United States' counterterrorism strategy of 'decapitating' the terrorist organizations is not succeeding in stamping out such organizations. While the military tactical approach succeeded in taking out Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda cells continue to survive around the globe.

Terrorist organizations are networks with ties to each other and the surrounding community; the US military is no longer fighting state actors with centralized governments. The decentralized

aspect of terrorist groups has allowed them to exist under the radar. The US counterterrorism strategy needs to change to fit the changing enemy. Professor Audrey Cronin of George Mason University touched on this point when she said, "U.S. strategic thinking in counterterrorism has aligned comfortably with the sophisticated intellectual tradition that developed during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This is not necessarily wrong, but it is an imperfect fit when applied to terrorism."<sup>1</sup>

The many different 'brands' of terrorists (eco-terrorists, ethno-nationalists, religious...) and the different tactics used to incite fear or spread a message prevent the creation of an overarching counterterrorism strategy. This study specifically focuses on terrorist organizations which use Islam to justify violence and acts of terrorism, and concludes that a US counterterrorism strategy towards such terrorists must use knowledge of Islam, its theology, philosophy, and history in a particular region in order to be effective. This study will discuss the uses of Islamic philosophy as a tactic in a counterterrorism strategy by examining past and present strategies, counterterrorism goals, and the history of Islamic philosophy and how it was used or abused by early political Islamists. The final section will focus on moving forward, making reforms to existing policies, or creating new counterterrorism strategies.

### **US Counterterrorism Strategy in the Past Decade**

The United States has used several types of counterterrorism strategies in the past decade, ranging from drones to boots on the ground. While military operations as counterterrorism strategy may succeed in the short term, killing and capturing terrorist leaders does not stop the organization from planning and carrying out terrorist attacks. Scholars and experts have noted that military operations alone cannot hope to succeed. Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman stated

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<sup>1</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, "U.S. Grand Strategy and Counterterrorism," *Orbis* 56, no. 2 (2012).

that "The predominantly tactical 'kill or capture' approach and metric that has largely guided our counterterrorist and counterinsurgent efforts to date is too narrow and does not sufficiently address the complexities of these unique operational environments."<sup>2</sup> The nuances of culture, history, language, and religion play important roles when combatting terrorism and should not be overlooked.

One tactic used in counterterrorism strategy is psychological operations (PSYOP) which have been "defined as 'the planned use of communications to influence human attitudes and behavior. It consists of political, military, and ideological actions conducted to induce in target groups behavior, emotions, and attitudes that support the attainment of national objectives.'"<sup>3</sup> In other words, psychological operations try to manipulate emotions and behaviors of terrorist organizations or individual members to cause them to act in a certain way; instead of reacting to terrorist attacks, the terrorists are reacting to psychological attacks.

This concept is not new or unique. Dr. Jerrold Post, a professor of political psychology at George Washington University, states that "Terrorism is a vicious species of psychological warfare waged through the media. It is a war for hearts and minds. If one accepts this premise, then the war against terrorism will not be won with smart bombs and missiles. One does not counter psychological warfare with high-tech weapons."<sup>4</sup> The war of ideas wins hearts and minds; psychological operations have an advantage over strict military operations since – when conducted effectively – they call for an understanding of the mindset and behaviors of a person or group.

However, psychological operations traditionally have only been used as a tactic in

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Hoffman, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the Obama Administration," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 3 (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jerrold M. Post, "Psychological Operations and Counterterrorism," *Joint Force Quarterly* Second Quarter 2005, no. 37 (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

conjunction with military operations, not as a standalone strategy; in addition, psychological operations take place over a number of years and do not provide immediate results. Changing the way a population views their actions or ideology, or perceives the United States takes time and dedication. Such a long process has future benefits, but would not be able to deter an immediate terrorist attack.

Scholars like Post and Hoffman have compiled lists of the goals of psychological counterterrorism strategies, which include “inhibiting potential terrorists from joining terrorist groups, producing dissention within groups, facilitating exit from groups, reducing support for groups and their leaders”<sup>5</sup> or countering terrorists’ ideologies and hindering “the resonance of their message, their ability to attract recruits and replenish their ranks, and their capacity for continual regeneration and renewal.”<sup>6</sup> These goals require knowledge of the culture, the intricacies of Islam, and the capabilities of the government or military running the operation. The expertise, flexibility, time, and central authority needed to successfully organize and carryout a psychological operation are rare in any government or military. A civilian-military coalition would be the best option for psychological operations, but the question of who is in charge would cloud the mission and bureaucracy would hinder the operation.

A military or counterinsurgency strategy that incorporated aspects of religious and cultural values in psychological operations, coordinated with military operations, could have some success. General David Petraeus understood the importance of culture and religion to a counterinsurgency strategy. In the Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, Petraeus and Army Headquarters laid out a progressive plan for counterinsurgency that included cultural and religious sensitivities. FM 3-24 warned soldiers and Marines that "Cultural knowledge is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffman, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the Obama Administration."

essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency. American ideas of what is “normal” or “rational” are not universal. To the contrary, members of other societies often have different notions of rationality, appropriate behavior, level of religious devotion, and norms concerning gender.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the intentional or unintentional imposition of American values on a population could cause resentment from the people and strengthen the position of the terrorist organization. Understanding that the terrorists only survive within the context of a supportive population is necessary before beginning to dismantle the support system and the terrorist network.

FM 3-24 also discussed religious extremists:

The rigid worldview of such extremist groups means that friendly actions intended to create good will among the populace are unlikely to affect them. Similarly, if a group’s ideology is so strong that it dominates all other issues, dialog and negotiation will probably prove unproductive. The challenge for counterinsurgents in such cases is to identify the various insurgent groups and determine their motivations. Commanders can then determine the best course of action for each group. This includes identifying the groups with goals flexible enough to allow productive negotiations and determining how to eliminate the extremists without alienating the populace.<sup>8</sup>

Successful psychological operations require skills necessary to deconstruct the terrorist organization without losing the hearts and minds of the local population. Petraeus and the military developed this improved counterinsurgency strategy, which can also apply to counterterrorism in some instances, that prepares soldiers and Marines for the difficult and confusing realities on the ground.

The newer, more culturally detailed tactics require more time spent training the soldiers and Marines. As Hoffman notes, "In addition to traditional ‘hard’ military skills of ‘kill or capture’ and destruction and attrition, ‘soft’ skills such as negotiations, psychology, social and cultural anthropology, foreign area studies, complexity theory, and systems management will

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<sup>7</sup> "Counterinsurgency," ed. Headquarters Department of the Army (Washington DC2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

become increasingly important in the ambiguous and dynamic environment in which irregular adversaries circulate.”<sup>9</sup> The American military recognized these needs and began a unique<sup>10</sup> program to win the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan while decreasing the influence of terrorist or extremist groups in the regions.

In 2009, President Obama created the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands (APH) Program to understand the cultures and develop relationships and alliances with tribes against the Taliban. APH consist of both civilians and military personnel from all branches of the service and provides intense language, culture, religion, and counterinsurgency training. The Hands are placed in specific regions and form relationships with the local tribes instead of living in separate bases and only conducting military operations. FM 3-24 discussed the importance of working with the locals and showing respect for their governing structures. “If military forces remain in their compounds, they lose touch with the people, appear to be running scared, and cede the initiative to the insurgents. Aggressive saturation patrolling, ambushes, and listening post operations must be conducted, risk shared with the populace, and contact maintained.”<sup>11</sup> Living and working alongside the people shows that the US is not trying to impose its ways of thinking and operating on the people.

Although the goals and ideas behind the APH were strong, the implementation and reality was substantially different. To better understand the program, I interviewed two members of the APH, Lt. Col. Vincent Littrell, USAF, and Lt. Col. Michael Motley, USMC, about their experiences in Afghanistan and how they felt the program was working to combat insurgency.<sup>12</sup>

When I asked about the effectiveness of the US counterinsurgency strategy in the region,

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<sup>9</sup> Hoffman, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the Obama Administration."

<sup>10</sup> Note: US Special Forces also train in local culture and languages.

<sup>11</sup> "Counterinsurgency."

<sup>12</sup> The following interview was conducted on September 27, 2012; the views and opinions expressed are not representative of the US government or military.

Littrell and Motely told me that “killing the Taliban to the negotiating table” was proving ineffective; we can’t kill our way out of the conflict. The APH program was designed to create strong relationships between American servicemen and –women and Afghani tribes; the training process includes intense language immersion, sensitivity to culture, religious beliefs, and counterinsurgency tactics. Although the main objective of the operation is to provide a link between the US government and military leaders and the Afghani people, and not necessarily to conduct military operations, the APH teams need to be ready to help their tribe and defend themselves against the enemy. Littrell and Motely stated the importance of letting the tribes “do their own thing” in terms of military action. The US forces can support them, but need to remember that the Afghanis are protecting their own homes and deserve to be a part of the fight. If things go badly, the US will be there to “pick up the pieces.”

The unique position of the Hands to experience life as part of a tribe and learn about the culture and societal norms of the area is an invaluable resource for the United States. The US cannot win the fight against the Taliban alone. Littrell and Motely spoke about the cultural similarities and differences between Americans and Afghanis that should be important when working with the Afghanis. Littrell began by emphasizing that no matter who you are, you should treat others as you would be treated. So many Americans act arrogantly around the Afghanis and, whether intentionally or not, insult them. The Afghani people are very proud and do not respond well to slights from Americans. When talking to elders or tribal chiefs, Americans should be humble, not show anger, and be patient; Afghanis will circle talk and interpret time stamps differently, meaning that direct conversation and American concepts of punctuality would be useless. The Americans should work on their terms and respect the tribe’s social boundaries. Respect for the tribe and a friendly personality can go a long way.



While individual Hands might be able to make a difference and work well with the tribes, the APH strategy is not successful as a whole. According to sources, the failures of the program reflect a failure of leadership within the military. Generals and advisors do not have good relationships with the people they are fighting, while the lower ranks are afraid to report the truth to their commanding officers. Careerism within the military makes it difficult for someone to decide to “tell truth to power” and potentially jeopardize their future. Military and government officials do not want to hear harsh realities, so younger officers tell them what they want to hear instead of the truth. In addition, the use of the National Guard instead of professional military is hurting the US in Afghanistan. The inexperienced officers and small town politics driving policy on the ground is detrimental to the US grand strategy in Afghanistan.

On the Afghani side, the failures stem from corruption and weak central government. Littrell and Motely spoke of the government checkpoints that require the citizens to pay multiple bribes just to pass through while Taliban checkpoints only require one bribe. When I asked about the recent increase of blue on green attacks, Littrel and Motely explained that the Afghanis are operating in survival mode after decades of war and turmoil; they see the US getting ready to withdrawal and the Taliban ready to sweep in, so the long term strategy is to be on the winning side. They do not want to be seen as cooperating with the Americans when the Taliban come back into power. Even though the Taliban had a strict regime, the Afghanis want stability and a strong government, two goals they have yet to reach.

When I asked about the emphasis on religious training and how often they used it in the field, Littrell and Motely told me that, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the people loved to talk about religion; they even discussed the similarities between Islam and Christianity, but Motely warned me that the Americans were still considered infidels after long discussions of religion.

Littrell also noted the persecution of the Sufis by the Taliban as an inroad to take advantage of the intellectual and mystic side of Islam. Sufism has strong ties among the tribes and people of Afghanistan and could provide a resource for the US to use Sufism and philosophy to combat insurgency and terrorism. The intellectual and spiritual side of Islam is rarely spoken of in the news, but a thriving subculture of religious tolerance and philosophic ideas survives despite the constant threat from strict Salafi and Taliban militants.

### **Islamic Philosophy: Historical**

Islamic spirituality and intellectualism have deep roots within the religion; however, the extremist groups attempt to destroy these traditions in favor of misquoted and misinterpreted verses from the Qur'an and the stamp of approval from a charismatic and authoritarian leader. According to one rehabilitated Islamist, "In the madrassa in Zanzibar, the participant was taught never to question learned authorities, especially those with religious credentials."<sup>13</sup> The inability to think and decide for oneself is a crucial flaw in the tradition of Islamic intellectualism that gives more power to the terrorist leaders. The lack of philosophy and legitimate theology in terrorist organizations will, ultimately, be their downfall. By provoking the correct questions and challenges to the extremists' ideologies and teachings, the United States can undermine the organization by causing internal divisions. In order to see how such a feat can be accomplished, one must first understand the basic tenets and historical figures of classical Islamic philosophy.

The philosophic tradition within Islam flourished during the Golden Age of the Islamic State, the time of the Abbasid dynasty (750 AD–1258AD). After the sack of Baghdad, the Islamic civilization was no longer the most powerful civilization, especially compared to its weak European neighbors. Several important figures lived during this Golden Age: Al-Ghazali,

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<sup>13</sup> Post, "Psychological Operations and Counterterrorism."

Averroes, and Ibn Taymiya. These men all played large roles in the development of philosophy in the Islamic world; Averroes was a staunch defender of philosophy, while Al-Ghazali was torn between philosophy and theology and Ibn Taymiya hated the philosophers. The Sufi intellectual tradition and the modern Islamists got their roots from these medieval thinkers.

### **Al-Ghazali**

Perhaps one of the most important and revered Islamic philosophers and Sufi thinkers, Abu Hamad Al-Ghazali was born in 1058 AD in Khorasan in northern Iran.<sup>14</sup> A noted scholar and teacher, Al-Ghazali lived and taught in the court of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustazhir bi-Allah where he was a respected member of the *ulama* and adviser to the young Caliph. Al-Ghazali was a popular intellectual figure and often gave lectures on philosophy, theology, or the law. However, he suffered a spiritual crisis and breakdown in 1095 and retreated from the public life to the life of a Sufi mystic. Al-Ghazali continued studying and writing about theology and philosophy; one of his most famous works *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”) is frequently sourced as the book that caused the death of classical philosophical tradition in Islam. Before the book was published, Al-Ghazali spent three years learning and “so thoroughly absorbing and mastering the vocabulary and the arguments of the philosophers that he could refute them on their own terms” and prove that their tenets were incompatible with Islam and therefore, heretical and false.<sup>15</sup> Who were these philosophers and what were their heretical theories?

Most Islamic philosophy during the middle ages was based on Hellenistic philosophy; Aristotle and Plato were two of the most popular philosophers in Al-Ghazali’s time. Originally,

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<sup>14</sup> Eric Ormsby, *Ghazali: The Revival of Islam*, ed. Patricia Crone, Makers of the Muslim World (Oxford: OneWorld, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Al-Ghazali studied and taught philosophy and wrote the book *Maqasid al-Falasifa* (“The Intentions of the Philosophers”) which he used to expose the basic beliefs of the Greek philosophers before attacking them in his later book. The notion of being, causality, Aristotle’s physics and metaphysics are some of the main points that Al-Ghazali refuted and declared false and heretical. He said in a fatwa on philosophy that it is “the foundation of all folly, the cause of all confusion, all errors and all heresy. The person who occupies himself with it becomes colorblind to the beauties of religious law, supported by brilliant proofs...As far as logic is concerned, it is a means to philosophy. Now the means of access to something bad is also bad.”<sup>16</sup> Compared to his earlier claims that logic was part of philosophy that should be retained, this fatwa shows the transition that Al-Ghazali underwent in regards to his ideas about philosophy. The removal of logic from thought processes had a profound effect on later scholars and theologians who wished to remove personal thought from decision making. The hazards of discrediting logic, as Al-Ghazali did, demonstrate the switch from Mu’tazili to Ash’ari school of thought happening in the Islamic world at the time.

The Mu’tazili school focused on the role of reason, as described by the Greek philosophers, in understanding God. Based in Aristotelian philosophy, the Mu’tazilites believed the God was the First Cause of all things, but “acts indirectly through secondary causes, such as the physical law of gravity. In other words, God does not immediately and directly do everything.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Mu’tazilites believed that the Qur’an was created and, therefore, open to interpretation; the opponents of the Mu’tazilites, the Ash’arites, in part, used the argument that the Qur’an is eternal to overthrow the Mu’tazilites. The Ash’arites denied the rationality of theology and claimed that humans could never understand or seek to understand the ways of

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<sup>16</sup> Robert R. Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

God. Presuming to do so was heresy and disrespectful to the all-knowing and all-powerful God. Al-Ghazali helped the spread of the Ash'ari school by attacking several aspects of Aristotle's philosophy and his Islamic "imitators."<sup>18</sup>

Al-Ghazali addressed the notion of causality, the immortality of the soul, and the knowledge of particulars in *Tahafut*. One of his most serious criticisms of the Aristotelian notion of causality is its un-Islamic teachings about the existence of miracles and the resurrection of the body on the Last Day. Al-Ghazali rejects the idea that causes and effects are necessarily linked; "for Ash'arites, God is the sole agent whose will determines and effects every action. What we think of as causality is nothing but 'God's habit' (or 'custom')."<sup>19</sup> Why did Al-Ghazali reject the idea of natural causality? How does causality go against Islam? Scholar Robert Reilly postulates that Al-Ghazali, like Al-Ash'ari, "embraced this view because he...thought that the acceptance of cause and effect in the natural order would mean that God acted out of necessity rather than free will."<sup>20</sup> The Ash'ari had a strict belief in the free will of God; for example, cake is good because God wills it to be not because cake is good in itself. For the Ash'ari and Al-Ghazali, God is the first and only Mover who causes all things. Secondary causes cannot exist because a secondary cause would have the same power as God and thus would claim equality with God. Through this reasoning, natural causality became heresy since it violated the absolute unity of God.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Ghazali's argument against causality also centers on the existence of miracles since miracles are actions that cannot be explained by nature. When it comes to miracles, the cause and effect are not necessarily linked; Al-Ghazali, in his skepticism, notes that we cannot know when events are coincidental or causal. God's habit can include both coincidental and causal, so we

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<sup>18</sup> Ormsby, *Ghazali: The Revival of Islam*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

cannot know which is which.

The Islamic belief in the resurrection of the body cannot be explained through physics or theories of the philosopher. Most philosophers discussed the immortality of the soul, but did not mention the resurrection of the body. Al-Ghazali “asserts that God can recreate the body at the resurrection, just as He had created the body in the first place.”<sup>22</sup> God, as the First Mover, and direct cause of all other actions is capable of resurrecting the body; to say He could not recreate a body would be heresy.<sup>23</sup> These objections to classical philosophy were revolutionary at the time and inspired later philosophers to both support and refute his ideas.

Al-Ghazali’s harsh criticisms of the philosophers, including calling them unbelievers,<sup>24</sup> may not be his only thoughts on philosophy. After suffering his breakdown, Al-Ghazali turned to mystical Sufism to find the meaning in life. During this time, he wrote many papers and letters about his new found mysticism, theology, and philosophy. Noted scholar Fazlur Rahman attempted to make sense of Al-Ghazali’s disdain for philosophy and his inability to stop using philosophical arguments:

Nevertheless, in spite of the open revolt, it is impossible to gauge the extent to which he really renounced the doctrines of the philosophers. For, he began to write esoteric treatises in which he admits philosophical doctrines which he rejects in works meant for the public. It is quite clear that these esoteric treatises must have been written after he became fully conscious of the discord between philosophy and Sunni orthodoxy and therefore after his professed 'disillusionment' with philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

Despite his own personal struggles with philosophy and the role of reason in theology, Al-Ghazali and his writings have continued to play an important role in the Islamic world. While both revered and hated, Al-Ghazali inspired future generations to debate the role of philosophy in Islam.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London: C. Tinling & Co. Ltd., 1958).

<sup>24</sup> Ormsby, *Ghazali: The Revival of Islam*.

<sup>25</sup> Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*.

## Averroes

Ibn Rushd, or Averroes, was born in Cordoba, al-Andalus (present day Spain) in 1126. As one of the last great philosophers of the Islamic Gold Age, Averroes attempted to disprove Al-Ghazali's *Tahafut* and show that there is no disconnect between Islam and philosophy. Much of his work includes commentaries on all of Aristotle's writings, Plato's *Republic*, and works by another Islamic philosopher Ibn Sina or Avicenna. "As one of the greatest interpreters of Aristotle, Averroes had a far greater impact upon medieval Europe than upon his own world;"<sup>26</sup> Averroes' influence reintroduced ancient Greek philosophy to Europe.

Nearly a half century after Al-Ghazali's death Averroes wrote a response to *Tahafut* titled *Tahafut al-Tahafut* ("The Incoherence of the Incoherence") in which he defends Aristotle and reason. He says, "The activity of reason is 'nothing more than its knowledge of existing entities through the knowledge of their causes'."<sup>27</sup> In other words, by denying causality, Al-Ghazali was, in fact, denying reason. Averroes goes on to state that "denial of cause implies the denial of knowledge, and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in the world can really be known."<sup>28</sup> Such an advanced form of skepticism paralyzes the mind and does not allow one to think clearly. All knowledge is no more useful than opinion and nothing can be proved. According to Averroes, this type of sophistry leads to a logical paradox in which if nothing is certain, then the statement 'nothing is certain' is itself not certain.

He also points out another of Al-Ghazali's flawed arguments such that the rejection of causality leads to the denial that all things are distinguishable from everything else and "all things would be one."<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, Al-Ghazali used this same argument in a satirical critique

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<sup>26</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ormsby, *Ghazali: The Revival of Islam*.

of the Ash'ari; the faulty argument is made by his opponent!<sup>30</sup> If Al-Ghazali recognized the weak argument, why did he try to prove it in another piece? This is another example of the divide within Al-Ghazali between loving and hating philosophy. Unfortunately, Averroes' philosophical rebuttals to Al-Ghazali were not well received in the Muslim world and he was not able to reinstate the prominence of philosophy.

### **Ibn Taymiya**

Born in 1263, Ibn Taymiya became one of the most controversial figures of Islamic reform. He was a follower of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence and sought to return Islam to its purest form at the time of the Prophet. Ibn Taymiya's teachings inspired many fundamentalist movements including the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia; his ideas on strict interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah later became the basis for the Salafi movement.<sup>31</sup>

Within his writings, Ibn Taymiya criticized and attacked both Al-Ghazali and Averroes for their stances toward philosophy. Ibn Taymiya and his opinions on philosophy and Islam greatly influenced the Wahhabis and other Salafi terrorist organizations. In order to better understand the mindset and views of the terrorist movements, we must first understand what they consider *bid'a* (innovation) and how they use selective interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith to garner support. Then, counterterrorism experts can dissect those arguments and use respected and revered philosophers to counter the Salafi arguments.

When confronting the philosophies of Al-Ghazali and Averroes as well as the Mu'tazili and Ash'ari schools, Ibn Taymiya took bold stances in his criticisms. He declared that the Ash'ari "by denying causation were diminishing the rational bases of religion and the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Baheer M. Nafi, "The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and Its Challenge to Traditional Islam," in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. S. Taji-Farouki and B. Nafi (London: I.B. Tauris 2004).



responsibility of man”<sup>32</sup> and through reinterpretation of the attributes of God, making God more like man and visa-versa, while the Mu’tazili were “undermining tawhid by ‘negating any sense of God’s attributes, and making reason the sole and supreme reference for man’s action.’”<sup>33</sup> For Ibn Taymiya, both the Ash’ari and the Mu’tazili did not understand the notion of the unity of God and did not offer Him the proper respect befitting a true Muslim.

Ibn Taymiya also accused his contemporaries of “fanatic adherence to the *fiqhi* (juristic) schools, or *madhhabs*” which prevented Muslims from thinking for themselves and interpreting the Qur’an independently; the blind following of a particular school of jurisprudence is known as *taqlid*. As “reformist thinker Tarek Heggy states: ‘Exalting a man [Al-Ghazali] who did not believe the human mind capable of grasping the Truth as ordained by God set into motion a process that continues to this day with devastating effects on the Arab mindset, which has become insular, regressive and unreceptive to new ideas.’”<sup>34</sup> Although Heggy seems harsh, the dangers of blindly following a school of thought while the gates to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) were closed led to a civilization-wide groupthink that did not have new ideas. Instead scholars like Ibn Taymiya proposed going back to the days of the *rashidun* where Muslims were free to think for themselves. Although Ibn Taymiya’s ideas inspired Islamic fundamentalists, his thoughts on *taqlid* and *ijtihad* were more modern than other thinkers of his time.

When criticizing the philosophers like Al-Ghazali or Averroes, Ibn Taymiya compared their understanding of the meaning of life as based on the Greek philosophers with his own understanding of what it meant to be a Muslim. Rahman summarized Ibn Taymiya’s position when he stated, “According to Ibn Taymiya, the goal of human life is neither the philosophic contemplation of God nor the mystic type of love of Him... but the active concept of *‘ibada*, a

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*.

knowledge of God's will and its fearless implementation in life. God is not something to be merely perceived, or admired and cherished but must be recognized as the One to whom alone our allegiance is due.”<sup>35</sup>

His dismissal of contemplation and mystical love for God reflects his opinions of the Sufi movement to which Al-Ghazali and he himself belonged. John Esposito writes, “Although a pious Sufi (a practitioner of Islamic mysticism), he denounced as superstition the popular practices of his day such as saint worship and the veneration of Sufi shrines and tombs.”<sup>36</sup> Ibn Taymiya’s derision towards popular devotions and Al-Ghazali’s goals of knowledge and renunciation of the world stems from his devotion to *tawhid*, the oneness of God, as “true love of God.”<sup>37</sup> He saw devotion to saints and types of mysticism as making humans equal to God, which was the worst kind of heresy in his opinion.

Throughout his controversial life and teachings, Ibn Taymiya remained staunch in his desire to return the *umma* to the pure days of the Prophet and refused to capitulate to a political leader on his beliefs, which caused him to be jailed many times and eventually die in exile. Later, Islamist political leaders would look to him and his teachings for inspiration; terrorist organizations and extremists often refer to Ibn Taymiya and follow his example.

### **Impact of Classical Philosophy on Modern Islam**

Today, these three different figures remain popular and respected in their own right. Al-Ghazali is known for his spiritual piety and intellectual treatises on theology and philosophy. Averroes is credited with bringing philosophy to Europe where it was translated from Arabic to Latin; his work in philosophy, physics, and medicine is still taught around the world. Ibn

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<sup>35</sup> Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*.

<sup>36</sup> John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy*.

Taymiya's theories about government and Islamic reform continue to strike cords with political Islamists and fundamentalists groups who wish to return to the days of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Ibn Taymiya's ideas were adopted by Mohammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula and disseminated around the Islamic world as the strict Wahhabism. Many Islamic fundamentalist movements trace their theoretical roots back to Ibn Taymiya and the theory of *takfir*, which will be discussed in detail later.

Fazlur Rahman warned about the influence of Ibn Taymiya's theories and the danger of excluding philosophical traditions; "Rejecting the philosophers altogether, rejecting also Sufism but affirming spiritual values within the framework of Islam, stands the influential figure of Ibn Taymiya who has contributed largely to the resurgence of Islamic anti-classicism and Islamic 'Modernism'."<sup>38</sup> The persecution of Sufis and moderate/tolerant Muslims by the extreme groups who are threatened by and hate the innovations and spirituality of the peaceful Sufis and the Western ideas or values adopted in Muslim countries. Classical Philosophy is traditionally Greek with a history of polytheism and different values regarding behavior and pleasure. The Islamist groups refuse to allow Western ideas corrupt Muslim countries; Western philosophy is no exception. Several popular Islamist leaders looked to Ibn Taymiya's example when developing their own ideas on Islam in government and attitudes towards the West. Hassan al-Banna and Sayid Qutb were two of the most influential Islamist leaders in the twentieth century; this study will analyze how the arguments of these leaders agree or disagree with Islamic philosophy and expound on the interpretations of jihad from a philosophical standpoint.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

## Islamist Leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

### *Hassan al-Banna*

As the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna is considered the father of modern Islamism. When he, his brother, and four friends founded the Brotherhood in 1928, the group was merely a spiritual and moral reform movement, but soon grew into criticizing Egyptian politics; just over twenty years later in 1949, al-Banna was assassinated. During the founding years of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Banna developed a mission statement and goals for his organization. His inclusion of Islam into public life included the practice of jihad which he argued was an obligation on all Muslims just as the five pillars.<sup>39</sup> In a 1947 letter to the king of Egypt and several other rulers of Muslim nations, al-Banna laid out his thoughts on the responsibilities of the rulers, arguments for the inclusion of Islam in the workings of the state, and suggestions for reform.

The letter, titled *Toward the Light*, argues the superiority of Islam over the West and urges the rulers to turn towards Islam and away from the West; “it would be inexcusable for us to turn aside from the path of truth – the path of Islam – and to follow the path of fleshly desires and vanities – the path of Europe.”<sup>40</sup> Using various verses from the Qur’an, al-Banna presented a comprehensive list of reforms from political (“A reform of the law, so that it will conform to Islamic legislation in every branch”<sup>41</sup>) to social and educational (“An end to the foreign spirit in our homes with regard to language, manners, dress, governesses, nurses, etc., with all these to be Egyptianized especially in upper-class homes”<sup>42</sup>) and economic (“The prohibition of usury, and

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<sup>39</sup> Shmuel Bar, *Warrant for Terror: Fatwas of Radical Islam and the Duty of Jihad*, ed. Peter Berkowitz and Tod Lindberg, Hoover Studies in Politics, Economics, and Society (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

<sup>40</sup> *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*, ed. Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

the organization of banks with this end in view. Let the government provide a good example in this domain by relinquishing all interest due on its own particular undertakings, for instance in the loan-granting banks, industrial loans, etc.”<sup>43</sup>). Despite the fact that such reforms are nearly impossible for any government to enforce, al-Banna’s suggestions reveal an agenda that only has the imposition of Islam over all aspects of life in mind. “al- Banna ...declared his movement to be the inheritor, and catalyst, of the most activist elements in the Sunni traditionalist and reformist thinking by describing it a 'a *Salafiyyah* message, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a scientific and cultural link, an economic enterprise and a social idea.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to appeal to all Muslims in the *umma* and unite under the flag of Islam. Al-Banna’s political philosophy reveals a strict interpretation in terms of politics and society, but a populist nature in economics. While he does not address philosophy in his writing, Al-Banna’s support for the clergy to be included and trusted further blurs the lines between government and religion; the establishment of an Islamic state is a common theme for Islamist in general, but was also a goal of Ibn Taymiya. The Muslim Brotherhood played an important role in Egypt and the Arab world and produced many other (in)famous Islamists, such as Sayid Qutb.

### *Sayid Qutb*

Sayid Qutb, an Egyptian school teacher and minor government official, became known as the “Philosopher of Islamic Terror”<sup>45</sup> and wrote some of the most influential Islamist works; he inspired the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic Jihad, and Al-Qaeda to return to pure Islam, like Ibn Taymiya before him. In his writings, Qutb developed the terminology *jahiliyya* to mean the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought: The Respons of the Shi'i and Sunni Muslims to the Twentieth Century* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2005).

<sup>45</sup> *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*.

ignorant non-believers of the modern age instead of the original meaning that described Arabia in the time before Islam.<sup>46</sup> By using the contrasting images of the *jahiliyya* and the *umma*, Qutb painted a picture of a world ruled only by Islam and Sharia.

When discussing philosophy in the Islamic tradition, Qutb grouped it with other Western innovations that threatened the existence of Islam, which he viewed through practice rather than intellectual theory; Islam was about the right practice not intellectualism or philosophy. As Rueben and Zaman state, “Qutb’s claim that there is an authentic Islam, the essence of which is praxis rather than theory, also provides the terms in which he discredits religious scholars and secular intellectuals as *jahili* pawns who traffic in abstractions and technicalities that blind them to what really matters in the world.”<sup>47</sup> He used the ‘us versus them’ mentality to separate Muslims from those in the West or of the West in Egypt.

Qutb, like many other Islamists wanted to return to the pure Islam of the generation after the Prophet. He wrote: “Thus, the Qur’an was the only spring from which this [first] generation drank, the only source that shaped, molded, and educated it.”<sup>48</sup> For him, the Qur’an was the only source of law that guided every aspect of life, social, political, military, and economic. He also wrote about the failures of the later generations: “Successive generations thus drew from sources such as Greek philosophy and logic...As a result, subsequent generations were educated by a corrupted source, and so a generation like the first has never again appeared.”<sup>49</sup> According to Qutb, the Greek philosophy and its influence in Islam did not add to Islamic thought, but negatively influenced the ability of the Muslims to travel on the way of Allah. He believed that knowledge from the Qur’an and Islamic sources required action, not philosophical deliberation.

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<sup>46</sup> Mark A. Gabriel, *Journey into the Mind of an Islamic Terrorist* (Lake Mary: Front Line, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

He criticized philosophers saying: “This understanding – that knowledge is for action – opened vistas of delight and perception that would not have been available to them if they had approached the Qur’an for the sake of debate, academic study, and information.”<sup>50</sup> The corruption of Islamic society and practice stemmed from all aspects of Western life that encroached upon Islam. In a bold statement that summed up his beliefs about *jahiliyya* and philosophical tradition, Qutb said: “Everything around us is *jahiliyya*: people’s ideas, their beliefs, their habits, their traditions, the sources of their culture, their art, their literature, rules, and laws. Even all that we have come to consider Islamic culture, Islamic sources, philosophy, and thought – these are all products of *jahiliyya*.”<sup>51</sup> Dividing the world into the *umma* and *jahiliyya* is a first step on the path to declaring certain governments, ideologies, or people unbelievers even if they are Muslim.

### **Interpretations of *Jihad***

The idea of *jihad* has much significance in Islamic tradition and history as well as many manifestations. The literal translation is ‘struggle’ and most commonly refers to an internal struggle against oneself. According to an anthology of religious philosophy of Islam:

To achieve peace in society, Islam calls upon Muslims to work together towards what is right and to keep away from what is evil. This joint effort to root out evil and establish truth is called *jihad* which means to try one’s utmost to see Truth prevail and Falsehood vanish from society. The aim of *jihad* is to earn the pleasure of Allah.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, *jihad* can be interpreted as a means to defeat evil within the soul or a community; the community (*umma*) provides a support group for Muslims on their spiritual journey.

Unfortunately, many Islamists chose to interpret *jihad* as a struggle against the far enemy. As John Esposito notes, “*Jihad* is a concept with multiple meaning, used and abused throughout

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> *Religious Philosophy of Islam*, ed. M.R.K. Afridi, Arif Ali Khan, and M.H. Syed (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2007).

Islamic history. Although *Jihad* has always been an important part of the Islamic tradition, in recent years some Muslims have maintained that it is a universal religious obligation for all true Muslims to join the *jihad* to promote a global Islamic revolution.”<sup>53</sup> Men like Hassan Al-Banna and Sayid Qutb believed that Islam was under attack from the West and that *jihad* required the rejection of Western corruption.

Through these Islamic leaders, the traditional understanding of *jihad* as a personal struggle almost disappeared; because Western media picked up the notion that *jihad* meant holy war, the idea that *jihad* is a violent struggle against the enemies of Islam is better known in the West. How did the Islamists misinterpret the meaning of *jihad*? The Islamists claim that the military *jihad* is the greater *jihad* based on a number of hadith and the Sword Verses in the Qur'an. As Shmuel Bar claims, "The frequent juxtaposition in Islamic sources of jihad and martyrdom leaves little doubt that the early Muslims say *jihad* first and foremost as military confrontation with the enemies of the ummah, particularly in "*jihad* on the path of Allah" (fi sabil Allah), widely interpreted as a strictly military *jihad*."<sup>54</sup> Not all scholars agree with this explanation since the majority of Muslims, who use the same sources, condemn violence and acts of terrorism.

The Islamists also use a fatwa produced by Ibn Taymiya for their legal justification of terrorism against those they consider unbelievers. The Mongols had invaded the Islamic State in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and laid waste to the land. Eventually, they converted to Islam and lived among the people, but they continued to follow the Yasa code of laws of Genghis Khan instead of Sharia law.<sup>55</sup> Ibn Taymiya, in his quest to purify Islam, viewed the Mongols as not true Muslims because they did not follow Sharia law; since they were not true Muslims, they could be killed as

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<sup>53</sup> Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*.

<sup>54</sup> Bar, *Warrant for Terror: Fatwas of Radical Islam and the Duty of Jihad*.

<sup>55</sup> Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*.



apostates. Declaring Muslims to be unbelievers or *takfir* became a signature of Salafi movements like the Wahhabis. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, the former director and senior director for counterterrorism in the National Security Council, explain “by asserting that *jihad* against apostates within the realm of Islam is justified – by turning *jihad* inward and reforming it into a weapon for use against Muslims as well as infidels – he planted a seed of revolutionary violence in the heart of Islamic thought.”<sup>56</sup> Hassan al-Banna, Sayid Qutb, and Osama bin Laden, among many others, have looked to Ibn Taymiya for guidance and inspiration. The focus on orthodoxy and orthopraxy rather than theology and philosophy in medieval Islam continues to cause problems today. So the question remains, how can the United States and its allies undo the grave misinterpretations of Islamic doctrine or is it even their place to make such pronouncements?

### **Reforming US Counterterrorism Strategy**

The challenge facing US counterterrorism strategists and implementers alike is connecting to the population on a deep, personal level. The goal of a counterterrorism strategy has shifted from military operations that kill or capture to specialized operations that separate terrorist organizations from their support and recruiting pools; in order to accomplish this goal, counterterrorism implementers must win the hearts and minds of the population and develop strong relationships. By understanding the philosophical developments in Islam since the time of the Prophet, American military or civilian forces can better pave the way for honest and open dialogue with the Muslim world.

A reform of the counterterrorism strategy to feature philosophy and theology more prominently would involve more specific training in the subject matter and language skills to communicate at an advanced level. A combination of military personnel and civilians in teams,

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<sup>56</sup> Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War against America* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2003).

similar to the Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands Program, whose primary focus is building relationships and accurately reporting the situation on the ground. The APH program, with reforms such as more religious training and more flexible leadership, could fill that need and could become a useful tool in the general counterterrorism strategy.

Littrell and Motley recommended a public diplomacy project in which Americans, fluent in Arabic or another language, would discuss Islam, religion, and philosophy in the public square; reintroducing debate and discussion to religion and philosophy in the majority of Islamic world, not just the intellectual elites, would allow moderates and scholars, not just terrorist recruiters or fundamentalist clerics, to reach the people and provide options besides terror. The importance of language is paramount because these topics are complex and require a nuance within the language; intense language training would be necessary and linguistics would be the sole objective of these soldiers or civilians. Knowledge of a language can give a sense of legitimacy to the arguments, but having Muslims debate the issues of philosophy in public would place more weight on the argument.

The so-called silent majority of moderate Muslims must fight to defend their religion from terrorists. As one reformed terrorist said, “‘Their *jihad* is not my *jihad*.’ Nor is it the *jihad* of the majority of mainstream Muslims, yet they have been remarkably mute, giving free reign to the extremists to steer alienated youth into violence in the name of Islam.”<sup>57</sup> A counterterrorism strategy that includes Islamic philosophy and theology provides a perfect means for Muslims to argue against the irrational ideologies of terrorist organizations and create a new face for Islam. According to Reilly, “There are some extraordinarily intelligent Muslim scholars who would like to see something like a neo-Mu'tazilite movement within Islam, a restoration of the primacy of reason so that they can reopen the doors to *ijtihad* and develop some kind of natural law

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<sup>57</sup> Post, “Psychological Operations and Counterterrorism.”

foundation for human, political constitutional rule."<sup>58</sup> Whether or not Islamic scholars adopt a totally new way of approaching philosophy, the roles for Muslims to play in a philosophic counterterrorism strategy are critical for success.

Another way to combat terrorism through philosophy is the Sufi tradition; Sufi mysticism lends itself to philosophy. As Gabriel states, "Sufism is the most peaceful movement that has ever existed in the history of Islam. It focuses on the soul and the personality, challenging the Muslim to be a kind person and to establish peace with himself and others."<sup>59</sup> The promotion of Sufism rather than Salafism among the youth in particular has the potential to dry up the terrorist organizations' recruit pool. In addition, "Sufis said that Islam did not require physical *jihad*. Instead, they said *jihad* was a spiritual struggle, that is, an inner struggle to follow the teachings of Islam. Muslims were ready for this position."<sup>60</sup> The redefining of *jihad* as an internal struggle and the true greater *jihad* would undermine the terrorists' arguments. Of course the Islamists would deny all counterarguments to their ideology and would declare any speaking against them as puppets of the West, just as Qutb did. Nevertheless, the silent majority of Muslims must find their voice and speak against the attacks perpetrated in the name of their religion.

## Conclusion

Combating terrorism with philosophy may seem like a losing battle especially when the terrorist organizations do not seem to follow the same logic as most groups. The fierce opposition to philosophy from the terrorists harkens back to early Muslim thinkers like Ibn Taymiya; Reilly reports that "Another al-Qaeda source, showing al-Qaeda's lineage to the medieval anti-rationalists, announces its call for violence in direct opposition to philosophy: 'The

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<sup>58</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*.

<sup>59</sup> Gabriel, *Journey into the Mind of an Islamic Terrorist*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

confrontation that we are calling for with the apostate regimes does not know Socratic debates, Platonic ideals, nor Aristotelian diplomacy. But it knows the dialogue of bullets, the ideals of assassination, bombing, and destruction, and the diplomacy of the cannon and machine-gun.”<sup>61</sup>

The purpose of a philosophical outreach to Muslims is not to convince terrorists that their philosophy is incorrect, but to engage the youth in an intellectual debate and prevent new recruits from joining terrorist organizations.

This study sought to analyze the history of Islamic philosophy and how that history influenced modern Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. Understanding both the classical philosophic tradition and the modern interpretation of philosophy within Islamist circles is essential for a successful counterterrorism strategy. The United States is in the process of shifting from solely military operations strategy to a broader strategy that includes cultural, religious, and social awareness. Philosophy can play an important role in the future of Islam just as it did in the Golden Age of the Islamic civilization.

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<sup>61</sup> Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis*.

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