

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Shia Militarism Upstages Salafi Jihadism in West Asia

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S*ummary*

Shia Iran and its proxies have captured Sunni Arab support, notwithstanding the Arab Spring sectarian carnage a decade ago.

It is curious to note that the ‘jihadist’ tag is almost exclusively given to violent Sunni extremists.¹ In fact, Western experts usually use the term ‘militias’ when referring to Shia violent non-state actors and just a few journalists like Danny Postel ever employ the term ‘Shia jihad’.² In fact, the Arabic term of *muqawama* (resistance) is now replacing jihad across West Asia and the neologism *muqawamist* is being used by English-speaking Arab commentators while referring to Iran-backed militancy.³ Deriving its resonance from the Shia ideology of resistance against the ‘oppression’ of Islam’s larger Sunni community, the term is now getting applied to rising pan-Islamist opposition towards the US-Israeli sway over the region.⁴

The recent popularity and support for Iran-backed Shia groups in the Arab world is remarkable, because it seems to have significantly reduced the intense hate and animosity generated by the Syrian civil war and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) hostilities over the last decade between the Sunni and Shia communities. Today, Sunni states like Salafi Qatar and the Deobandi Taliban regime are coming closer to Shia Iran and have apparently turned away from their old allies—the Salafi jihadists.⁵ No wonder, ISIS and its global affiliates are now targeting Iran, Russia and Shia groups out of sheer spite and desperation.⁶

But perhaps Salafi jihadists are themselves to blame for their present predicament. Al-Qaeda and the ISIS always opposed the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and even Hamas for fighting a nationalist Palestinian cause,⁷ rather than opposing the Westphalian and democratic nation-state system of the so-called ‘taghut’.⁸ By resorting to indiscriminate violence against civilians (particularly women and children), targeting the existing international political and economic order, by alienating all Western and Eastern countries (even Hanafi Sunni nations and

¹ [“What is Jihadism”](#), *BBC*, 11 December 2014.

² Danny Postel, [“Theaters of Coercion: Review of 'Children of Paradise: The Struggle for the Soul of Iran'”](#), *Democracy (A Journal of Ideas)*, No. 42, 14 October 2016.

³ Daniel Gerlach, [“Are Shia Militia Jihadists?”](#) *Zenith*, 20 December 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Shahram Akbarzadeh and Niamatullah Ibrahim, [“The Taliban: A New Proxy for Iran in Afghanistan?”](#), *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 5, 2009, pp. 764–778.

⁶ Zachary Laub and Bruce Hoffman, [“Why Did Islamic State Target Tehran”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 8 June 2017.

⁷ Monica Marks, [“What the World Gets Wrong About Hamas”](#), *Time*, 30 October 2023.

⁸ In Islam, Taghut refers to worship of deities and demons other than God, but in ISIS literature it refers to tyrannical power. Moojan Momen, “Ṭāghūt”, in John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995.

groups like Turkey, Taliban and Hamas), Salafi jihadists are today seen in West Asia as strategically demented doomsday cultists, perpetually baying for blood.⁹

On the other hand, Iran has projected itself as a pan-Islamist power, and not just a Shia theocracy. By following this strategy, it has managed to extend its influence up to the Mediterranean, and has successfully brought the Lebanon, Syria and Iraq under its hegemonic sway. Unlike unruly Salafi jihadist groups that often turn on their own patrons, Iran has exercised effective command and control over its regional proxies, equipping them with latest know-how in warfare and weaponry as well as the use of sharp power to infiltrate and attack opponents. It has made them competent militias in their own right, fighting regional wars with greater strategic acumen and self-reliance. In fact, the inability of Salafi-jihadists to establish an enduring Islamic State has denied them the ability to promote proxies around the world and is the main cause of their failures.

In comparison to Salafi jihadists and Israel, Iran has also proven to be more adept at running successful media and public relations campaigns that has been able to extinguish the flames of vengeance from its Sunni rivals in the Levant and by targeting mainly military sites in its attacks that has presented it as a more responsible military force to the world thus far. The impact of Iran’s mostly precise intermediate range ballistic missiles and drone attacks—making unprecedented forays into Israeli airspace, undermining its much-vaunted air defence systems and its supposed and still unverified nuclear status—seem to have captured the fancy of demoralised Arab masses, who are blaming Israel and not Iran for the plight of Palestinians, at least for now.

Meanwhile, the theocratic state has also promoted its image as a champion of the developing world, voice of the Global South and supporter of humanitarian causes,¹⁰ even though it has conveniently ignored the plight of Uyghur Muslims to please the Chinese government and allegedly oppresses minorities and women within its borders. By focusing solely on the so-called ‘Far Enemy’—the West and Israel—Iran has successfully exploited the anti-liberal political discourse presently popular around the world and has upstaged the myopic Near Enemy outlook of

⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, [“The Taliban’s Campaign Against the Islamic State: Explaining Initial Successes”](#), RUSI Occasional Paper, Royal United Services Institute, October 2023.

¹⁰ Lakshmi Priya, [“Iranian Approach-II: Pivot to Asia and the Global South”](#), Indian Council of World Affairs, 7 December 2023.

Salafi jihadist groups like ISIS by calling them ‘takfiri’ (Muslims who commit the big sin of accusing fellow Muslims ‘kafir’).¹¹

It is noteworthy that Shia theology like traditional Judaism practised political quietism for centuries as the community patiently awaits the manifestation of its promised saviour (the Divinely Guided Mahdi).¹² Again like Zionism, Shia thinkers and clergy started advocating militant activism only in modern times, as Red Shiism of Shariati culminated into the Khomeini-led Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979.

According to Shia tradition, only the most senior theologians (mujtahids), have the authority to declare a ‘defensive’ jihad, while only the 12th or ‘hidden’ Imam—who the Shia believe is still alive after disappearing 1,100 years ago—will declare an ‘offensive’ jihad on his return.¹³ Although most orthodox Sunni jurists also advocate defensive jihad, modern-day jihadists like Qutb, Faraj and Zawahiri ridicule the difference between ‘defensive’ and ‘offensive’ warfare,¹⁴ with ISIS being particularly notorious in killing the so-called Shia ‘Rafida’ (Rejectors of the First Three Pious Caliphs).¹⁵

The moot question here is how long Iran and its three main proxies—Hezbollah, Hamas and Houthis—sustain their ongoing campaign in West Asia? Can the Islamic Republic of Iran depend on Russian and Chinese support for a favourable resolution of the present conflict? Will the highly demoralised and weakened Arab states, that continue to suffer from the so-called Stockholm syndrome, switching loyalties from one regional hegemon to the other—championing the slogans of Abraham Accords and non-sectarian pan-Islamism in the same breath—ever hold their own? However, even in the current context of the beleaguered Arab states, continuing internecine sectarian feud and ever-escalating regional conflicts, the declining Salafi-jihadist threat can be discounted only at one’s own peril.

¹¹ Jamileh Kadivar, “[Exploring Takfir, Its Origins and Contemporary Use: The Case of Takfiri Approach in Daesh’s Media](#)”, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 7, No. 3, May 2020.

¹² Anthony H. Cordesman and Jose Ramos, “[Quietism and the U.S. Position in Iraq](#)”, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 19 June 2018.

¹³ “[What is Jihadism](#)”, no. 1.

¹⁴ Muqtedar Khan, “[Syed Qutb: John Locke of the Muslim World](#)”, Brookings, 28 July 2003.

¹⁵ Etan Kohlberg, “al-Rāfiḍa”, in P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition.

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