



Radical Islam: Five Years after 9/11

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

Speaking at a Capitol Hill meeting on September 18, New York University's Bernard Haykel, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, offered congressional staff a perspective on the divisions and challenges facing salafis.

Salafis—puritanical Muslims who avowedly follow in the path of Muhammad—are not utopian, fascistic, or nihilistic, but base their actions on a complex set of Islamic legal precepts, argued Haykel. Although salafis pursuing jihad attract the most global attention through their acts of violence, there is an intense debate within the diverse salafi movement (often mislabeled Wahhabi) on a broad range of issues including killing non-Muslims and strategies to confront the West and Arab regimes allied with the West. Haykel made his comments on September 18, 2006 before a group of Congressional staff members as part of the CSIS Congressional Islam Forum. Haykel has spent considerable time studying salafi writings and meeting with a range of Islamic scholars in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and around the world.

According to Haykel, Islamic law bars the killing of innocents. Consequently, radicals affiliated with al Qaeda and other salafi jihadi groups have established a complex framework by which it is acceptable for them to deliberately attack non-combatants, kill other Muslims (particularly Shi'ites), and post beheading videos on the internet. Many of these tactics, however, remain a source of debate among salafi sub-groups.

The fundamental legal justification that guides violent salafis' tactics and ideology is that the Muslim world is engaged in a defensive war against a barbaric West. This distinction between an offensive and defensive war is important, because Islamic law compels all Muslims to take up arms in a defensive war. Supporters of violent actions also argue that the asymmetry of power between the West and the Arab world nullifies the traditional rules of war, allowing them to use tactics the West considers terrorism. The final piece of the radical ideological framework is that much of the Muslim world is ruled by apostate regimes that must be overthrown or killed. This line of reasoning is important, Haykel noted, because Islamic law traditionally does not permit rebellion against Muslim regimes.

Despite basic legal assumptions that radicals use to justify their tactics, salafi groups continue to face both philosophical and legal challenges, as well as in the battle for public opinion of Muslims around the world. The killing of Muslims (both as innocent bystanders and those labeled apostates), the killing of Shia, and the gruesome videos depicting beheadings and other atrocities have alienated many Muslims.

Throughout his presentation Haykel stressed the diversity of views within salafism and the ongoing debates within different streams of the broader movement. He said when he categorized salafi groups, he came up with 14 different strands of thought in Saudi Arabia alone. Though they are literalists when interpreting Islamic law, Haykel argued that salafis also display

rationality, can be ideologically flexible, and enter tactical alliances with nominal enemies in order to achieve their broader goals. They also continually learn from each other and from non-salafi groups.

Haykel pointed out two major debates that fuel salafi thinking at the moment. The first centers on the role of Shia Muslims. Hardcore jihadi groups argue that Shia, including movements such as the Lebanese Hezbollah—which they believe is composed of heretics—represent the biggest danger to Islam. They see a growing danger in the alliance struck between the Hezbollah and Hamas, part of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood movement, and the growing prominence of Hezbollah throughout the region. The second debate focuses on Iraq, which has brought many jihadis together to fight and has helped energize potential supporters. At the same time, some jihadis argue that Iraq has diverted energy from the goals of global jihad into a mere regional struggle and civil war.

Haykel noted that salafis, including jihadis, skillfully use the internet and satellite television to reach their constituencies. Their propaganda methods have become extremely sophisticated and include employing professional production companies to produce videos for wide distribution on the internet and sold in various formats such as DVD.

Congressional staffers were engaged in a lively discussion of Haykel's presentation. Many were eager to understand what if any inroads al Qaeda had made in the United States since September 11. According to Haykel, al Qaeda has failed to metastasize in the American Muslim community, which was an initial goal of the organization after September 11. This lack of appeal is in large measure because Muslims have integrated into American society in a way different than Muslims in Europe, who in many cases remain alienated and cut off from mainstream European society. He also noted, however, that American Muslims tend to be cautious and seem "terrified" of openly expressing their religiosity because of numerous terror trials and a generally hostile atmosphere towards Muslims. In the Muslim world itself, Haykel suggested that the West is losing the battle of ideas. He said he thought progress on Arab-Israeli peace could help, but by itself would not be enough to reverse the tide.

Haykel was skeptical that a solution to terror and the appeal of jihadi groups could be found either by U.S. government interference or non-interference in Middle Eastern politics. He suggested that a more practical policy should seek to manage the issue of terrorism by confronting it wherever it poses a risk. He thought, however, that jihadism was a problem that did not have a Western solution and would have to be managed for some time. He argued for allowing the societies of the Middle East to grapple with the issue and find their own solution. Haykel noted that the war in Iraq has become a new breeding ground for radicalism and has played into al Qaeda's worldview.

When asked about the challenges Middle Eastern governments face from jihadis, Haykel said that the Saudi government has gone to great lengths to undercut al-Qaeda-type radicals. They have used traditional scholars to undercut the radical religious arguments and have imprisoned and attempted to reeducate jihadi preachers. In general, these strategies were ineffective until the May 2003 and November 2003 bombing attacks in Saudi Arabia that killed dozens of Muslims and galvanized public opinion against al Qaeda. Generally, Haykel pointed out, Salafi jihadi ideology carries a lot of cache in Muslim countries until it comes to Muslims in those countries actually being killed.