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# The Local & the Global in Saudi Salafism

MADAWI AL-RASHEED

Global jihad is a constructed category, perpetuated in the discourse of academics, think tank consultants, politicians, policy makers, terror experts, and journalists on the one hand, and Jihadi ideologues and sympathizers on the other hand. The first group identify a global menace that requires the mobilization of governments, military strategists, civil society activists, and media campaigns across the world to justify the global War on Terror. The second group endeavours to mobilize Muslims across cultures, nations, and geographies in the pursuit of deterritorialized battles that nevertheless take place in specific localities, including world financial centres, train stations, and discos, expatriate residential compounds, tourist resorts, shrines, mosques, and markets.

The contradictions and tensions within the Saudi Jihadi project are the focus of this short exposition.<sup>1</sup> Saudi Jihadis represent post-national non-state actors who draw on the rhetoric of the global jihad, yet remain immersed in the locality of Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Rather than selecting famous contemporary Jihadi ideologues, this article draws on the messages of lesser known Saudi authors of Jihadi texts to demonstrate the centrality of the local in the global project: Faris al-Shuwayl writes about the priority of local jihad while Lewis Atiyat Allah<sup>3</sup> glorifies the global project. Both seem to exhibit the tension between the local and the global.

## Contesting the local state

In both Faris al-Shuwayl and Lewis Atiyat Allah's writings, the first Saudi state (1744-1818) is glorified as *dawlat al-tawhid* (the state of monotheism), a political entity unbounded by defined territorial boundaries, unrecognized by the international community, and uncontaminated by international treaties and legal obligations. The first state is a local political configuration that defied regional and international contexts and promised to make true Islam hegemonic. They regard this state as a revival of the state of prophecy where the community was subject to divine law. Membership was determined not by recognized frontiers but by submission to the rightful Imam, whose authority over

distant territory was recognized by paying zakat, receiving his judges, and performing jihad under his banner. In the first state, unity was expressed in the belief in the one God, applying His commands, and swearing allegiance to His political authority on earth.

Both Faris al-Shuwayl and Lewis Atiyat Allah regard the main agent of this state to be Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab rather than Muhammad ibn Saud; the former was the interpreter of God's words while the latter was the executive force that enforced these words. This state had no name apart from *dawlat al-tawhid*, a deterritorialized polity pursuing the ultimate message of Islam, subjecting the individual to the sovereignty of God. As such, this state cannot be confined to

man-made borders, cultural and historical factors, ethnic and linguistic considerations, or any other attribute common in defining the modern nation state. As such it was the ideal Muslim state that rebelled against blasphemy, religious innovations, and man-made law. The collapse of this state in 1818 at the hands of Ottoman troops temporarily sealed the fate of *dawlat al-tawhid* whose advocates impatiently waited for its revival in the twentieth century.

**Jihadi ideologues in Saudi Arabia are advocates of global jihad aiming to establish an Islamic world order. At the same time they remain closely tied to local Saudi identities. Rejecting the national Saudi state and emphasizing tribal affiliation, Saudi Jihadis construct a discourse in which the Arabian peninsula is crucial. Yet when action is concerned, as in the pursuit of jihad, the tension between the local and the global creates contradictions that remain unresolved.**

In contrast, the current state of 1932 evokes only negative responses among Saudi Jihadi Salafis. They contest its legitimacy, name, law, borders, and foreign policies. Many of them regard it as an aberration of the first experience. They attribute its creation to an illegitimate relationship with an infidel power (Britain). Its name "Saudi Kingdom" is denounced as a family fiefdom; its nationality is rejected as a modern innovation that is not anchored in Islamic

text or historical practice; its foreign relations, especially its alliance with the West, violate the tenth principle of *iman* (faith) in Wahhabi theology, namely *al-wala wa al-bara* (association with Muslims and dissociation from infidels). Against the global Jihadi message, the local state remains a rejected aberration.

Faris al-Shuwayl (detained in Saudi Arabia since 2004), and also known as Shaykh Abu Jandal al-Azdi (*nom de plume*), replies to queries posted to him on the Internet about differences between the first state and the contemporary one. His reply outlines how a Muslim should proceed in his evaluation of the first state. He glorifies the first state and argues that in each family there are those who are good and those who are bad. One must distinguish between the good and the debauched from among the Al-Saud family. The first state was one that corresponded most to the ideal Islamic polity. He lists its assets: making religion triumphant, fighting blasphemy, applying Sharia, and purifying Islam from Sufis, philosophers, and innovators. Its unity is derived not from the cultural or ethnic characteristics of people, common economic interest, or geographical boundaries, but from belief in one God.

The first state embodied a borderless Salafiyya uncontaminated by practices of the contemporary nation-state. Rather than spreading the flames of jihad, the contemporary state prohibited it under foreign pressure. Furthermore, it opened its territories to foreign troops and allowed military bases to be established in the land of Islam. In addition, it allowed *istitan*, the settlements of foreigners who brought their ways of life to sacred space, which should have remained pure and uncontaminated by the *kafir* ways of Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists.

## Local and global identities

Jihadis who reject the contemporary state accept only two identities, one extremely narrow defined in either regional or tribal affiliation, and one extremely global defined in a deterritorialized utopia, the Muslim ummah. Jihadi ideologue Faris al-Shuwayl clearly articulates this position. In a famous letter entitled "Saudi Nationality Under my Foot," he introduces himself as Faris ibn Ahmad ibn Juman ibn Ali al-Shuwayl al-Hasani al-Zahrani al-Azadi, thus anchoring his identity in Zahrani, one of the Hijazi Qahtani tribes of contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Faris al-Shuwayl asserts that he does not recognize Saudi nationality in stating: "I am a Muslim among Muslims. I read history and did not find something called *jinsiyya* (nationality). Each Muslim must operate in *Dar al-Islam* wherever he wants and without borders restraining him or passports confining him and without a *taghut watan* (despot nation) to worship. My fathers are known, my family is known, my tribe Zahrani belong to the Azdi. Therefore I do not belong to Al-Saud who have no right to make people belong to them."<sup>4</sup>

Faris al-Shuwayl calls upon the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula to remember that the return of their glory will be dependent on their return to Islam and rejection of a state that reveals *kufur bawah* (obvious blasphemy), governs by rules other than those of God, opens the land for Jews and Crusaders, and kills pious Muslims, arrests people of knowledge, and steals public wealth. He calls upon the "lions of the

"I do not belong to Al-Saud who have no right to make people belong to them."

Peninsula," the grandsons of *muhajirun*, early Muslim converts who migrated with the Prophet to Medina, and *ansar*, the Medinians who supported them, to dissociate themselves from the contemporary state.

Tribal affiliation becomes the first important marker of a narrow identity that defines the individual and anchors him in an old hierarchy of noble tribes, whose prestige and standing stem from their early historic support for the message of the Prophet. While this identity is constructed on the basis of kinship and blood ties, the tribe acquires local significance in the war on blasphemy and the purification of the land from polytheism. It is incumbent on this narrow tribal construction to make Islam dominant and hegemonic. The narrow local identification should be put at the service of the global message.

From the narrow confines of local tribal identity, Faris al-Shuwayl moves to the global Muslim ideal, where brotherhood is established as a result of *tawhid*, in its spiritual rather than geographical meaning. In this typology of identities that move from the very local to the global, there is no space for modern constructions such as *jinsiyya* (nationality) and *wataniyya* (citizenship). Faris al-Shuwayl invites Muslims to reject these modern constructions, considered as instruments of division between Muslims, whose unity cannot be established on common economic interest or any other interest except belief in one God.

Nationality and citizenship cannot mediate between the very local and the very global, as had become the norm and practice in the world. There is only one path that can mediate between the local and the global. This is the space of *jazirat al-Arab* or *bilad al-haramayn*, an identity that derives its legitimacy from Arab heritage and sacred space, the two holy mosques. The Arabian Peninsula becomes the regional mediator between the tribe on the one hand and the ummah on the other hand. This model is the only possible and legitimate one. Arab identity, where it first emerged in the Arabian Peninsula, becomes a source of pride.

## Between the local and the global

Lewis Atiyat Allah, who has a prominent presence on Jihadi websites, advocates global jihad. His vision encompasses an Islamic world order that opposes and defies the current international world order labouring under US hegemony.<sup>5</sup> His jihad is very much dependent on the notion of an Islamic ummah, encompassing different races, nationalities, and cultural groups. The unity of this ummah is derived from faith rather than race. However, Lewis Atiyat Allah turns his attention to his homeland, the most sacred territory and the core of the Muslim world, the "Land of the Two Holy Mosques." His homeland is central in the establishment of the Islamic world order, but unfortunately, according to Lewis Atiyat Allah, it has become, under the current Saudi leadership, a vehicle for Western hegemony. Lewis Atiyat Allah seems to blur the boundaries between the so-called national and the transnational Islamists, a dichotomy that has become fashionable in several academic studies of the Islamist movement after 9/11.

When Lewis Atiyat Allah "returns" to *bilad al-haramayn*, he is transformed into a nationalist who invokes notions of sacred territory, historical responsibility, and the glorious past. For Lewis Atiyat Allah *bilad al-haramayn* is not only Mecca and Medina, theoretically closed to non-Muslims, but the whole Arabian Peninsula. As such, the land of Islam needs to be freed from acts of defilement, manifested in the actual physical presence of non-Muslims. This foreign presence encompasses not only US soldiers and military bases, but also non-Muslim workers, especially Western expatriates. According to Lewis Atiyat Allah, foreigners, obviously regarded as profane, violate the purity



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of this geographical entity. Here the boundaries of *bilad al-haramayn* are seen as having become porous, allowing in the process a greater defilement and molestation to take place not only on the periphery but also in the core of this sacred territory.

He calls upon the "grandsons of the companions of the Prophet to expel the infidels from *jazirat al-arab*," following the prophetic tradition. *Jazirat al-arab* is a central term for Lewis Atiyat Allah. Syntactically, it invokes "Arab" possession of a territory, which the descriptive nomenclature *al-jazira al-arabiyya* fails to capture. Furthermore, *jazirat al-arab* conveys a different meaning from that implied by *bilad al-haramayn*. The first implies the centrality of the Arab dimension of the jihad option and the historical responsibility of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula to take the lead in the struggle. When Lewis Atiyat Allah invokes *jazirat al-arab*, there is no doubt that he is an Arab nationalist, thus exposing the tension between the universal Muslim community, the ummah, and the particular, his own homeland. He tries to resolve this tension by ascribing a central role to his own native land, fusing the local—his homeland—in the global project, the envisaged Islamic world order.

## Road to Mecca, Riyadh

The centrality of the local in the global Jihadi project manifests itself in the desire to cleanse the Arabian Peninsula and Arabs from the sin of not only having actively contributed to the destruction of the Islamic Caliphate in the First World War but also of having been the vanguards of this destruction. While the Ottoman Caliphate is not held to be the desired Islamic Caliphate especially in its later years, Jihadis lament its downfall and the Arab contribution to its demise. Accordingly, the participation of Saudis in Jihadi projects on the periphery of the Muslim ummah (for example in Afghanistan and Iraq) is an act of both purification and reclamation of a lost glory.

Saudi Jihadi discourse and practices create unresolved contradictions. In Saudi Arabia, dissident Jihadis recognize only two identities, one originating in tribal affiliation and one in a global Muslim construction with the Arabian Peninsula mediating between these two distant poles. Other mediating constructions such as nationality are rejected as forms of innovation and blasphemy whose main purpose is to divide and undermine Muslim unity. However, when action is concerned, for example pursuing jihad, there is an on-going debate that may not be resolved in the near future. Some Saudi Jihadis will remain at home to correct the aberration and topple the contemporary Saudi state while others will choose to pursue jihad abroad as an act of purification of Arab sins. From afar, they will aspire to make Islam once again dominant and hegemonic. In pursuing this project, Saudis are called upon to play a leading role. Their local identity is paramount in the global project, yet the local remains problematic, or at least in need of justification.

## Notes

1. This article draws on Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
2. Although Saudi involvement in Jihadi projects abroad was initially state sponsored, for example in Afghanistan, it later escaped the control of its sponsors.
3. I can only speculate on why this Jihadi chose this unusual *nom de plume*. He explains it as resulting from a conversation he had with a US immigration officer. When Lewis said that his name was Lewis, the immigration officer remarked that this name was not the one written in the passport, Lewis then replied that he was "gonna change it to Lewis." See Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*, 175-176.
4. Faris Al-Shuwayl, [www.islah.tv](http://www.islah.tv).
5. For a full biography, see Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State*.

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