Beyond Jihad: the New Thought of the Gamā‘a Islāmiyya*

Sherman A. Jackson

Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

The last few decades have led to a veritable global conflation between “Islamic movement” and violence. Unnoticed in all of this has been an ideological evolution within certain Islamist circles themselves. One such instance is that of the notorious Gamā‘a Islāmiyya of Egypt, which in 1997 began a campaign not only to renounce political violence per se but to declare such violence to be Islamically improper and to present an Islamically reasoned argument to this effect. This article traces this evolution in the Gamā‘a’s thinking and examines key aspects of its new ideological stand, including its critique of contemporary jihādism overall, not least of which the ideological outlook of al-Qā‘ida.

Keywords: Jihad; violence; Islamic movements; Sharī‘ah; fiqh al-wāqi‘; terrorism; extremism; fundamentalism; America; west; Muslim world; Anwar Sadat; Egypt; maslaha; maqāsid al-sharī‘ah; Osama Bin Laden; Ayman al-Zawahiri

In his recent book, Security First: Towards a Muscular and Moral Foreign Policy, 1 Professor Amitai Etzioni argues that the political fault-line between the US and the Muslim world should not be conceived of as running between Islam and the West. According to Etzioni, there is an important distinction to be drawn between “Muslim warriors”, whose primary currency of exchange is violence, and “Muslim preachers”, whose preferred medium is persuasion. While both share a common commitment to Islam, warriors oppose and threaten the West’s security; preachers, on the other hand, merely oppose some of the West’s ideals. Failure to appreciate this distinction, Etzioni warns, both forfet the opportunity to augment the ranks of potential allies and contributes to the self-fulfilling prophesy that greater adherence to Islam can only imply greater danger for the West.

Of course, such pastel optimism will prove a tad dyspeptic for many. Like Guy De Bord’s infamous “spectacle,” the memory of 9-11 continues to wear away at our collective “faculty of encounter”. 2 Rather than risk the kinds of vulnerabilities that typically attend the enterprise of genuine human engagement, it is simply easier to indulge the Muslim world, and especially the Islamists, through the safe and

Corresponding Address: Email: sajackson@umich.edu

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psychologically distancing medium of oversimplification. And yet, the only comfort such oversimplification can really bring is to reassure us that we are right in our commitment to defend ourselves. It would seem, however, that what one would really want is to know both that it is possible to reduce the actual threat of what one might have to defend oneself against and that there are those on the other side who, even if for their own reasons, have a parallel interest in this very enterprise.

In what follows, this article will preliminarily examine what may turn out to be one of the most important developments in “fundamentalist Islam” in the past decade or so. We refer here to the decision by the notorious Gamā’ā Islāmiyyah, the largest and most active of that crop of young, radical, jihadist movements to emerge out of Sadat’s Egypt, to renounce political violence. Given the limitations of space, this will not be an exhaustive treatment. It is hoped, however, that it will draw greater attention to this important development, which has already produced its own rapidly burgeoning body of literature. In this context, the focus will be not so much on why the Gamā’ā came to its decision but on how it actually vindicated it, not merely as a tactical political maneuver but as an actual change in religious ideology and orientation. As we shall see, the Gamā’ā adduced no fundamentally new arguments in defense of its position. Yet, its leaders were able to press old arguments to “new” ends and reach audiences that other religious authorities were apparently less able to reach. In this context, the “meaning” of their achievement may go beyond the mere transcendence of violence per se and have much broader implications for the future of “fundamentalist”—and, indeed, non-fundamentalist—thought and practice in contemporary Islam.

In order to throw the Gamā’ā’s ideological evolution into historical relief, a number of generally known facts in Egyptian history will first be given. The basic mechanics of the Gamā’ā’s campaign will then be summarized, and this will be followed by a look at a few principle aspects of their core argument and then a consideration of the way the Gamā’ā has extended its argument into a more general critique of contemporary “jihadism” as a whole, including most notably the ideological outlook of al-Qā’ida. The article will end with a few speculations on the broader meaning of this development for the future of religious discourse in Islam, as well as the future of Muslim-world–West (i.e., American) relations.

On 6 October 1981, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was assassinated. This was part of a plan to take over the country and establish an Islamic state. It was carried out by an amalgamation of militant Islamic groups brought together the previous year by two fundamentalist leaders: Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj from Cairo; and Karam Muhammad Zuhdi from Upper Egypt.1 Faraj, an engineer by training, had recently completed an incendiary tract entitled, Al-farīda al-ghā’iba (The Neglected Duty), in which he condemned the Egyptian state—not the Egyptian people—as an apostate regime and called for its overthrow.2 Zuhdi, meanwhile, who was known for his forceful

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1 Actually, the Jordanian, Muhammad Sulim al-Rahhāl, leader of another incipient group, was also a part of this initial merger. But his group basically melted into Faraj’s after al-Rahhāl was deported in 1979. See Ni’mat Allāh Junayn, Tanẓim al-ḥiṣb: ḥal ḥowāl al-baḥīt al-islāmi fi Mīṣr? (Dār al-Hurriyyah al-Ṣiḥāfa wa-al-Tiba’ī wa-al-Nashr, Cairo 1409/1989) 101–02.

personality and strident radicalism, was a co-founder of al-Gamāʿa al-Islāmiyya. The coalition forged by these two men became popularly, though somewhat misleadingly, known as Tanẓām al-Jihād (the Jihad Organization). The blind cleric Shaykh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahmān oscillated between functioning as tactical amīr and legal/spiritual guide.

The supreme decision-making body of this coalition was its majlis al-shūrā or Consultative Council. It consisted of Faraj, Zuhdī and nine others. Faraj was executed in April 1982, along with Khālid al-Islāmī and three others, for assassinating Sadat. Zuhdī and most of the remaining members of the Consultative Council were part of a parallel operation to seize control of Asyut and from there move northward, taking over cities along the way and culminating in a grand crescendo in Cairo, where they would reunite with Faraj’s faction and complete their takeover of the government. Their execution was almost comical in its blunders and complications, as a result of which the plan failed and Zuhdī and other members of the Consultative Council were arrested and given long prison sentences.

In prison, internal differences led to the dissolution of the Cairo–Upper Egypt coalition, and al-Gamāʿa al-Islāmiyya resumed its status as an autonomous organization. Throughout the 1980s and early 90s, it continued its campaign of political violence to the tune of about a thousand deaths, raining down murderous mayhem upon Coptic Christians, Western tourists, Egyptian security forces, police, intellectuals, and government officials—including the murder of the speaker of the Egyptian parliament.

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2According to Junayna (op. cit. 30 (footnote)), this was not the name the coalition assigned itself: Karam Zuhdī, meanwhile, who became the uncontested leader of al-Gamāʿa al-Islāmiyya, would later refer to the group that descended from Faraj’s efforts as simply “al-Jihād or “Jamāʿat al-Jihād”. See Makram Muhammad Ahmad, *Mu’tama‘un muḥājatū’u ‘l-bīnār na‘a qādat al-ta‘ārum fī sīn al-aqrāb* (2nd edn, Dār al-Shuruq, Cairo 2003) 49. This group should not be mistaken, of course, for the group later assembled and led by Aymān al-Zawāhirī, which was first called Tanẓām al-Jihād and then later “al-Jihād al-Islāmī” (Zayyat, op. cit. 85).
3The role of ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahmān, an Azhari shaykh, in the early evolution of the Gamāʿa remains controversial. Some assign him a central role and claim that it was he who issued the fatwā proclaiming Sadat an infidel just a few months before his assassination. Others deny that he issued any such fatwā and even that he was a member of the nascent Gamāʿa (Junayna, op. cit. 109). That Shaykh ‘Umar played some role is certain, as witnessed by the fact that some within the coalition (not necessarily members of the Gamāʿa) are on record as having challenged his eligibility to be amīr (tactical commander) based on the defect of his blindness. Among the most vocal in this regard was ‘Isām al-Qamārī and, under his influence, Aymān al-Zawāhirī (Zayyat, op. cit. 27, 85). Meanwhile, as late as 2002, Zuhdī would state that, though he was now de-facto amīr, had Shaykh ‘Umar been present, this position would be his. Incidentally, Zuhdī’s wife and the wife of Shaykh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahmān are full sisters (Ahmad, op. cit. 28). We might also note, to avoid future confusion, that Aymān al-Zawāhirī was not directly involved in the early coalition or in Sadat’s assassination. He was rounded up, rather, in a general sweep following the murder of Sadat and given a three-year prison sentence for possession of a fire arm (Zayyat, op. cit. 22).
4On some of these complications, see, e.g., Junayna, op. cit. 161–162.
5Ibid. 161, 175.
Rifāʿ at Mahjūb in 1990, and an attempt on the life of President Husnī Mubārak himself in 1995 during a visit to Addis Ababa. All of this would be reciprocated, of course, by government reprisals, mass-imprisonsments, summary executions and the torture of Gamāʿa members.

On 5 July 1997, however, the Gamāʿa stunned the nation. During his trial before a military tribunal on charges of blowing up banks, one of its members, Muhammad al-Amīn ‘Abd al-‘Alīm, stood up in open court and read a statement signed by six Gamāʿa leaders. This statement announced an immediate halt to all military operations inside and outside of Egypt. It also announced an immediate end to all communications in which the Gamāʿa leadership ordered, encouraged or condoned political violence.

This was the formal inauguration of what became known as the “Initiative to Stop the Violence” (Muḥāḍarat waʿaf al-ʿunf). Within the Gamāʿa, the initial reaction included a mixture of suspicion, incredulity, rejection and outright defections. This was especially the case among Gamāʿa members outside of prison, and, apparently, outside of Egypt. Indeed, some Gamāʿa members cast aspersions on the very provenance of the Initiative, doubting that the leadership itself would sponsor such a move. Among the most prominent defectors during this period was Rifāʿī Ṭāḥā, an old guard leader who ended up fleeing to Afghanistan and signing the infamous 1998 “fatwā” of Osama bin Laden, in which the latter called for the indiscriminate killing of Americans. These initial grumblings would find concrete expression just a few months after the Initiative was announced, with the massacre of some 58 Western tourists, along with a number of Egyptians, at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor, on 17 November 1997. Zuhdī would later describe this incident as a “hard stab in our

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12The master-mind behind this plot was Muṣṭafā Ḥamza, who later fled to Iran. His older brother, Mukhtār Ahmad Ḥamza, also a Gamāʿa member, was imprisoned for eight years. He has made some interesting remarks on combating recidivism and on Egyptian-Iranian relations (see Ahmad, op. cit. 120–21).


16Ibid. 5.

17Makram Muhammad Ahmad reports on the authority of Nāḥiḥ Ibrāhīm (a Gamāʿa Leader) that Ṭāḥā was relieved of his leadership in the Gamāʿa because of his position on the Initiative (op. cit. 45). Meanwhile, Zuhdī insisted that Ṭāḥā resigned after they sent word to him via “the lawyer” (who may be taken to be Muntasir al-Zayyāt) that he must either withdraw his support for Bin Laden’s fatwā or withdraw from the Gamāʿa (Ahmad, Muʿāmmara, 50). Cf. Zayyāt (op. cit. 89), who minimizes Ṭāḥā’s affiliation with Bin Laden and suggests that he was actually duped into signing Bin Laden’s fatwā and into joining his International Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders.
backs”. Indeed, as early as 17 July, not even two weeks after the Initiative had been announced, the Egyptian Minister of the Interior went on record casting aspersions on the Gamā’u’a’s sincerity, portraying the Initiative as a cheap ploy aimed at sentence-reductions and pardons. Nothing could have brought more credence to this charge of duplicity than the Luxor massacre.

By this time, the Gamā’u’a had grown to include a new generation of members and bidders for leadership. While Zuhdī was recognized as the leader inside the prisons, there were other first and second-tier leaders on the outside, although the insiders enjoyed a certain pride of place. And in an apparent effort to capitalize on this, the incarcerated members of the Consultative Council came to refer to themselves as the “Historical Leadership (al-qādā al-tāriikhīyīn)” of the Gamā’u’a. It was they who had conceived the idea of the Initiative, and it was now they who would press the effort to sustain and ratify it. In early 1999, their efforts received a boost when the blind cleric, Shaykh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahmān, who had been implicated in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York, sent word from his prison cell in America expressing his approval of the Initiative. This is said to have led to a “full endorsement (ta yīd kāmil)” for the Initiative among the Gamā’u’a leadership, both inside and outside the prisons. From that point on, i.e., from the time of “full endorsement,” i.e., in 1999, military operations by the Gamā’u’a ceased.

While it is reasonable to assume that Shaykh ‘Umar’s opinion was important, it was clearly not dispositive. For one thing, the Shaykh had gone back and forth on the matter, originally supporting the Initiative, then allegedly withdrawing support upon learning of the death of a number of Gamā’u’a members at the hands of Egyptian security forces.

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18See Zuhdī, Nahr al-dhikrāyīn, 7; Ahmad, op. cit. 77. In fact, Zuhdī et al. (Mubādaraat, 5) note that the very viciousness of this crime, “including the killing of women and children and the desecration of bodies” was not consistent with the Gamā’u’a’s manner of proceeding, implying that these murders expressed a certain contempt for Gamā’u’a leadership. Further indication of the “protest nature” of these killings might be reflected in the several public communiqués issued by various factions of the Gamā’u’a after the Initiative was announced, in which the commitment to violence is clearly expressed. See, e.g., ‘Ali, op. cit. 389–392. On the other hand, Ahmad (op. cit. 176) reports that a number of Gamā’u’a leaders suggested to him that the Luxor massacres were carried out by members who were hiding out in the mountains of upper Egypt and therefore did not receive word of the Initiative.

19‘Ali, op. cit. 401. Zayyāt, incidentally, rejects this notion that the Gamā’u’a was motivated by the lure of sentence reductions and the like: “...the imprisoned Gamā’u’a Islāmiyya leaders are not easily coerced into anything that is against their beliefs. They have always had great courage in expressing their opinions and bearing the consequences both in times of war and in times of peace... They have never bowed for a promise or a gift and they have learnt from the experiences of their predecessors that such promises are never kept” (op. cit. 80). Meanwhile, Ahmad reports that the Initiative was the unilateral creation of the Gamā’u’a and not the result of any deals or negotiations with the government (op. cit. 167–168).

20This is according to the testimony of Zuhdī (Ahmad, op. cit. 77). However, Zuhdī (Mubādaraat, 5–6) also explicitly gives 28 March 1999 as the date of full endorsement. Meanwhile, the group of scholars who authored Dalīl al-harakāt al-islāmiyya fi al-ʿālam (Catalogue of Islamic movements throughout the world) give October, 1998 as the date of full agreement (D. Rashwān et al. (eds.), Dalīl al-harakāt al-islāmiyya fi al-ʿālam (3rd edn 2006) vol. 1, 277).

21Ahmad, op. cit. 176.

22In fact, according to the indictment of New York attorney Lynn Stewart, US government sources discovered that on 9 March 1999, Shaykh ‘Umar sent word to Rif‘ā Tāhā instructing him to abide by the Initiative and not to do anything else without first informing him. Tāhā, however, as we have seen, had already defected. The Stewart indictment is available from Findlaw (http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs-terrorism/uslstwri111903sind.html).
forces. This was followed by two confirmations of withdrawal, in May and June of 2000, only to be followed again by a more neutral statement in which he advised the Consultative Council to do as it saw fit. This was a period of intense disagreement within the Gama‘a, certainly but still not exclusively among the rank and file. Indeed, Shaykh ‘Umar’s final statement had come on the heels of a message from his son, Muḥammad, in which the latter informed his father of the “ferocity of the debate”.

This was also the period, however, during which, in their effort to vindicate their position, the Gama‘a’s Historical Leadership completed a collection of four short books under the series title, Sīsilat taṣḥīḥ al-mafāhīm (Correcting Misunderstandings). These books are said to have taken two years to write, and the first published editions are dated January, 2002. The Series included the following tracts:

(1) Mubādarat waqf al-‘unf: ru’ya wāqi‘iyya wa-naqra shar‘iyya (Initiative to Stop the Violence: A Realistic Vision and a Shari‘a Perspective)
(2) Taṣlīt al-adwā‘: al-lā mā waq'a‘a fi al-jihād min al-akhṭā‘ (Shedding light on the mistakes that have befallen the understanding of jihad)
(3) Al-nūs ḥ wa-al-tabyīn fi taṣḥīḥ mafāhīm al-muḥtasibīn (Advice and clarification to correct misunderstandings among those who police public morals)
(4) Hurmat al-ghulūw fi al-dīn wa-takfīr al-muslibīn (The impermissibility of religious extremism and of declaring fellow Muslims to be infidels)

These tracts were all issued as joint publications. Two or three members—not always the same ones—would write a tract, and the remaining five or six would review and endorse it. The tracts were then sent to al-Azhar university, with no names attached, for additional, formal review and confirmation. Al-Azhar’s Council For Islamic Research (Majma‘ al-Buhūth al-Islāmiyya) issued written appraisals of all four tracts in which minor criticisms and suggestions were registered, but in which the main conclusion was that there was nothing in these booklets that contradicted the teachings of Islam. The leaders whose names appear on these booklets include the following.

(1) Karam Muḥammad Zuhdī27
(2) ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Sharīf28

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23 According to the Stewart indictment, this was on 20 September, 1999.
24 According to the Stewart indictment, this was on 20 June, 2000.
25 In the introduction to Mubādarat (Zuhdī, op. cit. 6), it is explicitly stated that four years had passed since the inauguration of the Initiative.
26 Ahmad, op. cit. 147.
27 The review of Mubādarat waqf al-‘unf was two-pages long; that of Taṣlīt al-adwā‘: al-lā mā waq'a‘a fi al-jihād min al-akhṭā‘ was seven-pages long; that of Al-nūs ḥ wa-al-tabyīn fi taṣḥīḥ mafāhīm al-muḥtasibīn was two-pages long; and that of Hurmat al-ghulūw fi al-dīn wa-takfīr al-muslibīn was four-pages long (see Ahmad, op. cit. 147–148). For reproductions of the reviews themselves, see ibid. 212–126.
28 Leader and one of the original founders of the Gama‘a. Born in 1953 in al-Minya, he received a bachelor’s degree from the Ma‘had al-Ta‘awun in Asyut and then a certificate in law, after which time he enrolled on the Masters program in law at Cairo University. He was a major recruiter on college campuses (Ahmad, op. cit. 28; cf. Junayna, op. cit. 157–162). Junayna includes personal accounts by all of these figures of their role in organizing the Gama‘a and Tarjim al-Jihād, as well as their activities leading up to their arrest.
29 Born in 1956 in Naj‘ Hammadi, he was a student in the school of business at Asyut University. He was responsible for Gama‘a operations in the Qina district and was shot during the Asyut operation (Ahmad, op. cit. 28; Junayna, op. cit. 170–172).
(3) Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Rahmān ‘Abd al-‘Azīm
(4) ‘Aṣīm ‘Abd al-Majīd Muḥammad
(5) Nājīh Ibrāhīm ‘Abd Allāh
(6) Usāma Ibrāhīm Hāfīz
(7) Fu’ūd Maḥmūd al-Dawālībī
(8) Muḥammad ‘Īsām al-Dīn Darbāla

To a man, these signatories were all members of the original Consultative Council, going back to the days of Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj and Tanẓīm al-Jihād. At the time they completed these books, all of them were well into their forties and, with one possible exception, Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Rahmān, all were still incarcerated. Their attempt here was clearly to parlay their collective prestige as the “Historical Leadership” of the Gamā‘a into support for the Initiative to Stop the Violence.

It is exceedingly important at this juncture to say a word about the actual aim of the Initiative, as well as the Series of books. This is often obscured by the fact that the Initiative itself is routinely referred to (where it is recognized at all) as a simple “cease-fire”. This gives the impression that it was merely a tactical move, in which case the point of the Series would be merely to vindicate an executive decision. As a simple cease-fire, there would be nothing essentially new about the Initiative, and it would tell us little about the “new” Gamā‘a. This may be why, both the Initiative and the Series have received such scant attention in the West, scholarly or other. In

30 Born in 1953 in al-Minya, he held a degree in engineering. In addition to being a member of the original Consultative Council, he was known as the faqīh al-Gamā‘a, the jurist of the movement (Ahmad, op. cit. 112; Junayna, op. cit. 176–177).
31 Born in 1958 in al-Minya, he held a bachelor’s in engineering from Asyut university. He was also shot during the Asyut operation (Ahmad, op. cit. 29; Junayna, op. cit. 172–176).
32 Born 1955 in Asyut, he held a bachelor’s degree in medicine and worked as a doctor in the Dayrut hospital. He was known as the “intellectual” (muḥakīr) of the Gamā‘a (Ahmad, op. cit. 28; Junayna, op. cit. 162–166).
33 Born 1954 in al-Minya, he held a bachelor’s degree in engineering and worked as an engineer in Asyut. His full sister was the wife of Khālid al-Islāmībī. He was responsible for Gamā‘a operations in Upper Egypt in general and was the amīr of the Gamā‘a in al-Minya (Ahmad, op. cit. 29; Junayna, op. cit. 178).
34 Born in 1953 in al-Minya, he held a certificate in business (Ahmad, op. cit. 29; Junayna, op. cit. 167–170) (under the name Fu‘ūd Maḥmūd Hanaft, his full name being Fu‘ūd Maḥmūd Hanaft al-Dawālībī).
35 Born 1957 in al-Minya, he held a humanities degree from al-Minya university. He was shot en route to the Asyut operation (Ahmad, op. cit. 29; Junayna, op. cit. 172).
36 Actually, ‘Abdūl al-Zumur, a military intelligence officer, and Tal‘at Fu‘ūd Qāsim were also members of the original Council, though, al-Zumur was a member of the Jihād and not of the Gamā‘a (Junayna, op. cit. 148).
37 Ḥamdī was released in April 2001. The Initiative, however, was clearly not a factor in his release, certainly not in terms of any reduction in his sentence, for he had already completed his formal sentence in 1996, i.e., before the Initiative was announced, but was held in administrative detention for an additional five years for ‘reasons of security’, the Luxor massacres probably contributing to the length of this extension (Ahmad, op. cit. 119).
38 Muntasīr al-Zayyāt, an attorney for the Gamā‘a, who served for a period as their spokesman for the Initiative outside of prison (though he himself was/is not a member of the Gamā‘a), gives the vague impression that the books may have been completed by the time of Ḥamdī’s release (Zayyat, op. cit. 47–76).
39 Indeed, cease-fires were not new. As early as 1996, Khālid Ibrāhīm, head of the Gamā‘a in Aswan, had called for a one-year cessation of operations (Zayyat, op. cit. 70). According to Ahmad (op. cit. 176), however, this cease-fire failed.
point of fact, however, the aim of this Series was not simply to garner support for an executive decision; it was to vindicate a change from the old to a new doctrinal position. These books constituted, in other words, a re-assessment (muruja’a) and a correction (taṣhīḥ) of Gamā’a doctrine and, by extension, the doctrinal presumptions and underpinnings of contemporary “jihadism” as a whole.

The beginning of 2002 witnessed another (perhaps crowning) feature of the Initiative. In Ramadan (November–December) 2001, shortly after and almost certainly under the influence of 9/11, the Egyptian government agreed to allow members of the Historical Leadership to undertake a peripatetic campaign to various prisons around the country to discuss and debate the Initiative with incarcerated rank and file. This tour, which lasted about ten months, is described in a later book, Nahr al-dhikrayāt (Memory Lane), written by the Historical Leadership (Karam Zuhdi et al.) and published in 2003. This book includes some rather moving descriptions of tearful reunions of Gamā’a members who had been separated by prison walls for more than twenty years; it also includes sad portraits of younger men, some barely in their twenties, decked out in red jump suits that marked them as “dead men walking”. Much of the information in this book is corroborated (and supplemented) by Makram Muhammad Ahmad, editor and chief of the chic and patently secular Al-Musawwar magazine, who attended some of these sessions, interviewed Gamā’a leaders and described all of this in his book, Mu’tamara aw murajja’at (Conspiracy or re-assessment). The result of these efforts to vindicate the Initiative was, according to the Historical Leadership, an overwhelming endorsement of their new ideological stance.

How did the Historical Leadership vindicate this new position? The mainstay of their argument would be the quite classical principle of maslaha, or “broader aims and objectives of the law”, coupled with an emphasis on what has come to be known as fiqh al-waqi‘, i.e., “understanding reality” or “pragmatic jurisprudence”. The two tracts that deal most directly with political violence are Mubadarat waqf al-unf and Tasli‘ al-adwā‘ al-a‘r mū waqf a‘f al-jihād min al-akhātā. Mubadarat begins with a discussion of “benefits and liabilities” (al-maslaha wa-al-mafsada) and insists that Islamic law is inextricably bound to a balancing exercise that seeks to maximize benefits and minimize harms. Rather than assume, however, the existence of pure benefits and pure harms, the religious law simply seeks to accentuate relative benefits and minimize relative harms. Several proofs from the Qur’an and Sunna are adduced to support and demonstrate this point. A typical example of this is the verse, “They ask you about wine-drinking and games of chance. Say, in them is harm as well as benefits for people; but their harm is greater than their benefit.” (2:219) Wine-drinking and gambling, as is well known, are both outlawed by the religious law, despite the Qur’an’s explicit admission of their marginal benefits.

This sets the stage for the major premise of the Gamā’a leadership’s argument, namely, that whenever the application of a rule threatens to subvert the benefit it was intended to promote, or to accentuate a harm it was intended to avert, it becomes unlawful to apply that rule. Moreover, in assessing the impact of a rule’s application, the avoidance of harm is to be given precedence over the procurement of benefit.

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40 According to Zuhdi (Ahmad, op. cit. 77).
41 According to the testimony of Muhammad Yāsīn, a second tier leader who was released in 2001 (Ahmad, op. cit. 116).
42 Op. cit. Incidentally, Makram was himself the victim of an assassination attempt by another radical Islamist group, al-Najīb min al-Nār (the Averters of Hell) (Ahmad, op. cit. 13).
43 See the summary statement (Zuhdi et al. Mubadarat, 25).
This is placed in tandem with what the Gamāʿa insists is the necessity of factoring real-life circumstances into any decision regarding the application of the religious law. The result of this filiation is the following dictum:

It is clear error to take any position, establish any rule or issue any fatwā without looking at reality, inferring its implications and considering this a chief pillar of any fatwā. For every fatwā and every ruling must recline upon two fundamental constituents: 1) reality and its implications; and 2) legal proof from the Qur'an, Sunna or other recognized sources of law.⁴¹

What Gamāʿa leaders are going to argue is that their bloody confrontations with the Egyptian government did not realize any religiously recognized benefits. On the contrary, this brought nothing but harm, not simply to the Gamāʿa, but to all Islamic movements, not to mention the Egyptian government and society. Indeed, they insist, not only was the cumulative result of their violent actions (along with those of other jihādīs) to mar the image of Islam and marginalize, if not undermine, Islamic discourse, it strengthened the hand of anti-religious forces and heightened the latter’s ability to scare and incite people against Islam via the specter of terrorism and anti-terrorism rhetoric.⁴² This is ultimately the main premise of the leadership’s argument; wanton violence undermines daʿwā, or propagation of Islam. This in turn leads to their ultimate conclusion: Jihad against the Egyptian state is, therefore, not Islamically sanctioned.

On the face of it, this would appear to be a rather facile, post-facto argument grounded almost entirely in simple pragmatism: in other words, we know that jihad against the Egyptian state is not sanctioned because we tried it and it didn’t work! While there is clearly a pragmatic element in the Gamāʿa’s reasoning, it would be an exaggeration to cast it as sheer, post-facto pragmatism. For what the Gamāʿa is really saying is that they should have known that Islam did not sanction their political violence, and they would have known this had they understood Islam itself to require them to anticipate the likely consequences of their actions. In other words, on a proper understanding of Islam, properly assessing the real or likely implications of human actions would be recognized as a religious obligation. And in this context, factual assessment might prove to be just as probative in determining the proper course of action as is one’s understanding of the relevant scriptural texts. Failure to appreciate this is the “misunderstanding” that the Gamāʿa leadership is now trying to correct. Indeed, in an interview in 2001, Hamdi ʿAbd al-Rahmān, who co-authored Tasfiʿ al-adwāʾ ‘alā mā waqqaʿa fi al-jihād min al-akhtā’, summarized the matter as follows:

The mistake we made in the past was that we used to privilege (individual) texts over the broader aims and objectives of the law, allowing the texts to run rough-shod over these aims and objectives. We used to engage in jihad without taking any account of the benefits or harms that would accrue to our action. Now, however, our understanding has changed: it is the broader aims and objectives that determine the application of the text. So if the text says, e.g., wage jihad against the Jews, I must first determine the benefit to

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⁴¹Ibid. 39.
derive from this jihad, i.e., will my interests be realized by fighting or by not fighting. This is the sound approach (wa-hādhā huwa al-sahīh).

Of course, implied in all of this is the idea that jihad is not an end in itself but a means to some broader objective. This is precisely the Gamā‘a’s point. Throughout both these tracts, they repeatedly insist that jihad is but a means to an end. That end is explicitly identified, at least primarily, as “guiding humanity to God” (hidāyat al-khalq ilā al-ḥaqq). This, they affirm, is the apex mission of the Muslim community, which it inherited from the Prophet himself. The job of those who undertake this mission is “to endear people to their Lord and Creator and direct them to the straight path of God, via the least burdensome means and the easiest path”. Violence, for its part, is only prescribed as a means of serving and protecting this mission. It is neither a pure benefit nor a pure harm, but includes a combination of both. Taking life, for example, including non-Muslim life, they note, is a harm (mafsada). And, as we have seen, Islam, according to the Gamā‘a, will not countenance pure harm and will only tolerate relative harm to the extent that it is offset by a greater benefit or the avoidance of a greater harm. But, they note,

When jihad itself becomes a source of religious strife and an impediment to getting people to worship their Lord, blocking the path to the call to truth and scaring the youth away from the fruit of a clean call to the Faith, jihad does not realize its noble aim.

In such a case, the Gamā‘a concludes, jihad would be flatly forbidden, according to the religious law itself! Indeed, they insist,

Whenever the probability preponderates that jihad will not realize the aims for which it was legislated, its legality is nullified and it ceases to be a desideratum of the religious law. That is to say, the law ceases to address legally responsible Muslims (mukāllafūn) with (the duty of undertaking) jihad.

To continue or insist on waging jihad under such circumstances would amount to jihad for the sake of jihad. But, according to the Gamā‘a, “Jihad that does not stand to realize its (religiously sanctioned) purpose constitutes extremism and zealotry

47Ahmad, op. cit. 118. In other words, the assumption here is that the text will only say, “Fight the Jews”, in order to bring about the realization of some benefit or to avert some harm. Thus, fighting them can only be carried out on the assumption that this benefit or harm will be realized or avoided, respectively. This, however, requires the assessment of the socio-political circumstances on the ground.

48We say “primarily”, because the Gamā‘a would obviously not rule out jihad as a means of repelling aggression, even in instances where this is unrelated to the propagation of the faith or “guiding humanity to God”.

49Tasāli‘, 3.

50Zuhdī et al., Mubādarat, 61, 62.

51Tasāli‘, 3.

52Ibid. 18.

53Interestingly, among their sources for this view is none other than Ibn Taymiyya, whose role in spawning violence among modern jihadist movements has been greatly exaggerated by the fact that ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj cited him extensively in Al-farīḍa al-ghā’iba (op. cit; see Zuhdī et al. Mubādarat, 58).

54Tasāli‘, 3-4.

55Zuhdī et al., Mubādarat, 58.
(ghulūm wa-tushaddud), which the religious law flatly condemns. This, again, was precisely the insight that their earlier understanding of jihad and its place in Islam had not included. And it would be precisely this insight that would now separate them from many of their contemporary jihadist movements.

Having said this much, we should not mistakenly think that the Gamāʿa leadership was relaxing its commitment to the sacred law, including the duty of jihad, or to defending the Sharʿa against unwarranted compromise. They simply reject the notion that they must apply the law in some presumably ideal form, with no regard for concrete social circumstances and no responsibility for practical consequences. Of course, taken seriously, this sensitivity to societal consequences could be taken, at least by some, as an indirect path to secularization. For if the application of the law can be legitimately relaxed on the basis of likely outcome, modernity as a whole might be pointed to as a context in which the application of Islamic law will always entail negative liabilities. This is keenly captured in an exchange between Makram Muhammad Ahmad and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ʿAmīdī, who, while conceding that much of Egyptian law was consistent with Shariʿa, noted that much of it was not, pointing specifically to such criminal sanctions as those governing adultery, theft and fornication. Makram retorts that society has changed and, given the Gamāʿa’s insistence on the importance of social reality, asks if such change should not warrant a change in these rules.

Ḥamdī’s response is essentially that while social reality may affect the application of a particular rule, e.g., by affecting whether the broader aims and objectives of the law are likely to be served, this does not necessarily affect the overall validity of the specific rule itself, any more than the authority of traffic lights would be invalidated by the need to ignore them in certain emergency situations. In addition, Ḥamdī intimates, there may be a difference between the broader aims and objectives of the law, on the one hand, and the quotidian wants and desires of society, on the other. Society should be careful not to conflate its every want and desire with the broader aims and objectives of the law, lest it effectively undermine the law, by rejecting rules that impede the realization of its wants, even as they clearly serve the aims and objectives identified by Shariʿa. For Ḥamdī, Muslim society cannot arrogate to itself the right to say that a religious rule should not be applied simply because society does not like it. It may only set a rule aside where its application threatens to undermine the law’s own self-determined objectives. Having said this much, however, Ḥamdī is willing to leave the question of whether and how much harm will likely result from a rule’s application to the authorities and, ceteris paribus, not to second-guess the latter in this regard. Thus, he explains the relationship between the Egyptian state and the rules governing theft, adultery and fornication in the following terms:

These are rules that have been legislated by God, and they remain valid until the coming of The Hour. We cannot change them and we cannot expunge the verses that prescribe the punishment for adultery, fornication or theft. However, where the government refuses to apply these rules for particular reasons, such as the fact that we are not

55Tasliḥ, 49.
56For an interesting comparison between the Egyptian and Islamic laws on adultery and fornication, see ʿUmar ʿAfīfī, Ašāh mā tinnābbūb ʿalā ʾafūk: ḥaqiqa muʿā al-šurta (That you may avoid being abused: your rights with the police) (2nd edn Muktatbat Maḏbūlī, Cairo 2008) 190–202.
alone in the world, or that there are other powers lying in wait for us, or out of fear that this will cause civil strife between Muslims and Christians — under such circumstances, we accept the government’s excuse and we say that the ruler is a Muslim, that he neither rejects shari’ah nor attacks it but finds himself in circumstances that prevent him from applying it. And it is absolutely not permissible to brand such a ruler an Unbeliever.58

Of course, going all the way back to the days of Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salām Faraj and the Tanẓīm al-Jihād organization, a cardinal principle of fundamentalist teaching had been that Muslim governments that refused to apply Islamic law were infidel regimes that deserved no recognition from believing Muslims and were to be overthrown as a religious duty. This, in fact, had been a major contribution to the decision to assassinate Sadat. Now, however, based on its commitment to what it recognizes as “fiqh al-wāqi‘,” or reality-based jurisprudence, the Gamā‘a concedes that the government may be justified in setting this or that particular rule aside. Moreover, based on an apparent recognition of the difference between law, on the one hand, and government, on the other, i.e., between the interpretation of texts and the determination of public interest, the Gamā‘a is willing to place the government’s assessment in this regard over its own. It is the government’s assessment, in other words, not the Gamā‘a’s, of the likely consequences of applying the law that is to be recognized, with few qualifications, as probative.59

To be sure, placing jihad in this kind of context carries the prima facie advantage of casting it in a more benign light. But there are also disjunctive implications here that could have serious boomerang effects. This is essentially the point of a critique leveled by ‘Abd al-Raḥīm ‘Alī, a leftist detractor of the Gamā‘a, who questioned the value of the initiative to Stop the Violence overall, noting that, on the Gamā‘a’s logic, if their brand of jihad had promoted the faith, this type of political violence

58Ahmad, op. cit. 129–130. Hamdī continues: “It is the ruler’s right to determine whether or not circumstances allow for the application of the rules of Shari‘a. And it is the duty of everyone to leave this determination to him (at least) regarding some matters, such as whether the country is vulnerable to outside attack, or whether the presence of Christians in society, or the presence of human rights organizations, or the presence of the state of Israel next to us, militates against the application of Shari‘a. Still, as a Muslim, I cannot negate nor prorogue (the authority of) these rules, even as it is not my right to declare the ruler an Unbeliever simply because he sees broader aims and objectives that prevent him from applying them in certain areas...” (Ahmad, op. cit. 130. We should note, on the other hand, that the Gamā‘a also recognizes the validity of this logic in reverse, i.e., that a ruler may institute rules that appear outwardly to be permissible but whose social implications clearly imply a violation of the religious law. As a case in point, Usama Hāfiz (one of the signatories of the Series) cites Kemal Atatürk’s ban on traditional turbans and imposing the wearing of Western-style hats. Clearly, Hāfiz notes, the wearing of traditional turbans is not religiously required, nor is the wearing of a Western hat prima facie forbidden. In the context of Atatürk’s action, however, this was clearly an attempt to undermine indigenous cultural authority and open an Eastern Muslim society to the cultural hegemony of the secularizing West. Thus, it was proper at that time to condemn Atatürk’s action. Inasmuch, however, as the social circumstances have now changed to the point that wearing hats no longer has this connotation, it would be improper to hold to the fatwās of those jurists who rightly condemned Atatürk’s action as a violation of the religious law (Ahmad, op. cit. 36).

59In fact, in a newspaper interview in 2004, Zuhdī noted that the international scene has changed and that many Muslim governments face global pressures that prevent them from applying Islamic law. In this light, especially given the agenda of “global hegemonic forces”, it is incumbent upon Muslim activists to review their understanding of their relationship with Muslim governments (Al-Muttaqā al-Dawli (17 March, 2004) 7.
would still be a religious obligation. \textsuperscript{60} Ironically, ‘Alī would be confirmed in this line of argument by the likes of Ayman al-Zawahiri, who argued precisely that the whole point of the 9-11 attacks was to serve the broader aims and objectives of the faith, by galvanizing fence-sitting Muslims via a show of enough Muslim might to debunk the myth of American invincibility. \textsuperscript{61} In other words, if the linchpin of the 
Gamā‘a’s thesis is its critical assessment of the negative consequences of jihad, anyone who rejected that factual assessment could easily justify the most radical expressions of jihad. To be sure, the 
Gamā‘a leadership is aware of this liability. Rather than over-react, however, via circular restatements of dogma, their response is simply to insist that, in their view, romantic notions of the panaccan power of jihad presuppose the existence of a world that is fundamentally different from the one we now inhabit.

It is in this context that the 
Gamā‘a leaders extend their analysis beyond Egypt to the modern world as a whole. This brings them to a critique of contemporary “jihadism” in general and of al-Qa‘ida in particular. This is exhaustively laid out in a book they published in January 2004. \textsuperscript{62} Here they explicitly contrast what they refer to as the “vision of the Initiative” with the “vision of al-Qa‘ida”. Again, their basic critique is that al-Qa‘ida misunderstands the rules and purposes of jihad and ignores or misapprehends contemporary reality. This leads al-Qa‘ida to a misapplication of jihad as an institution and to consequences that actually undermine rather than promote its prescribed objective. To be sure, 
Gamā‘a leaders are careful to note that they mean no disrespect to “Shaykh” Osama Bin Laden, nor to impugn al-Qa‘ida’s intentions, nor to downplay America’s negative role in the Muslim world. Their aim is simply to clarify the mistakes that have befallen al-Qa‘ida’s understanding of jihad, along with the harm that has accompanied this, in light of Shari‘a principles that they themselves have now come to recognize and espouse. \textsuperscript{63}

According to the 
Gamā‘a, al-Qa‘ida basically misunderstands jihad on at least three levels. First, they tend to see it as an end in itself rather than a means to the end of promoting the efficacy of the faith. While violence might play a role in this enterprise, this is a secondary, supportive rather than a primary, leading role; for, ultimately, violence cannot replace persuasion. This, the 
Gamā‘a insists, is an oversight committed by many Muslims. In fact, in a revisionist depiction of the Ottomans, they claim: “They placed jihad over persuasion (da‘wā) and guiding the people.” And this is why, they insinuate, Islam never put down deep roots in Ottoman Europe. \textsuperscript{64}

Second, in addition to its over-estimation of jihad, al-Qa‘ida has an over-inclusive understanding of its scope, by virtue of which they condone the killing of non-combatants, including innocent “civilians”. Here the 
Gamā‘a begins with the claim that, with the exception of al-Imām al-Shāfi‘i, all of the schools of Islamic law hold non-Muslims ‘fighting against the Muslims, rather than their unbelief, to be the reason why they can be fought. This is why the classical schools make exceptions for women, children, the elderly, monks, farmers, the blind, etc., none of whom, in contradistinction to the generality of fighting-age men, could be assumed to be combatants. The majority of these exceptions, moreover, even al-Imām al-Shāfi‘i

\textsuperscript{60}Ali, op. cit. 15.
\textsuperscript{61}See Kepel, op. cit. 1.
\textsuperscript{62}Iskāriyya wa-ta‘fi‘rāt al-qā‘ida: al-akḥār wa-al-akhfār (Strategy and al-Qa‘ida’s bombings; mistakes and dangers (Maktabat al-turūth al-Islām, Cairo 2004).
\textsuperscript{63}Ibid. 8.
\textsuperscript{64}Taslīf, 7.
accepts. Now, as far as the Gamā‘a is concerned, these exempted categories are the functional equivalent of modern-day “civilians”, who, like their medieval analogues, are not to be fought, precisely because they play no direct role and pose no direct threat in any actual fighting. Beyond this, the Gamā‘a Leaders draw a subtle but important distinction between categories of persons that can be fought and individual members of these categories who can be killed. They point out, for example, that while a Muslim ruler can fight rebels as a group, and of course kill them in the course of this fighting, he cannot, at least according to most jurists, kill individual rebels once they have been subdued and cease to pose a physical threat. Aggression, in other words, may be a legitimate basis for identifying a group in general as an enemy and taking measures to beat back their aggression. This is not the same, however, as identifying every individual member of that group as an enemy to be killed or attacked, unless the latter actually engages in or contributes to his or her group’s aggression. Thus, the Gamā‘a insists,

even if al-Qa‘ida deems it a religious duty to fight against America, this does not mean that it is permissible to kill any and all American civilians anywhere in the world. For, as al-Imām al-Shāhī’si himself points out, “It may be permissible to fight a man, while it is not permissible to kill him.”

All of this is set against the backdrop of the Gamā‘a’s third main critique of al-Qa‘ida, namely its obliviousness to or faulty assessment of contemporary reality, most particularly regarding the role, agenda and influence of the United States. Specifically, the Gamā‘a sees al-Qa‘ida as being driven by ideological commitments that blind it to important historical facts, and prevent it from seeing the connection, or the lack thereof, between these facts, its actions and its purported goals. For example – and this list is not exhaustive – al-Qa‘ida sees America as leading an international conspiracy to wipe out Islam; it deems US and Muslim interests to be mutually and permanently contradictory; and it holds any kind of truce, negotiation or alliance with America to be tantamount to Islamic treason.

The Gamā‘a’s response to this is, first of all, to argue that any such international conspiracy against Islam as might exist only came about after September 11, 2001. Al-Qa‘ida itself must therefore take much of the responsibility for this. Second, and this is also related to the first point, while US–Muslim world interests may clash some of the time and in some places, history clearly testifies that this is not the case in all times and all places. As an example, the Gamā‘a holds up US support for the Mujāhidīn against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, support that was channeled through such Muslim nations as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. Finally, the Gamā‘a notes, the notion that jihad is the only acceptable response to modern geopolitical reality and that contracting truces, treaties and alliances with America is an act of treason or selling out, simply contradicts well-known practices

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66 Iṣṭiḥāliwah, 235, but see the entire discussion, pp. 235–248.


68 Iṣṭiḥāliwah, 247. Incidentally, on page 244, they point out that there are Muslims among “the Americans” and Zuhdi himself has a sister who lives in the United States (Ahmad, op. cit. 49).
of the Prophet himself, who, for example, made peace-treaties with pagan Quraysh and entered into an alliance with the pagans and Jews of Medina in order to defend the city from outside attack and preserve its internal peace and security.69

Again, none of this should be taken to indicate Gamā‘a’s approval of America’s role in the region. They repeatedly point to America’s bias vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict, its hypocritical, self-serving promotion of democracy, human rights, and the protection of religious minorities and women, not to mention U.S. economic exploits and ambitions in the region. In the face of all of this, the Gamā‘a’s message is emphatically not one of “grin and bear it.” It is simply to question the effectiveness, from the standpoint of reality, and the validity, from the standpoint of shari‘ah, of the kind of wanton violence and bellicosity advocated by al-Qa‘ida. For, if the overall aim of this “jihadism” is – as it must be from the standpoint of the religious law – to promote the interests of Islam, not only has it not done this, it has gone so far as to turn the entire world not only against al-Qa‘ida but against Islam as a whole.70

Of course, even in the United States there are those who openly express the view that America has squandered her good name across the globe and come to be viewed more as a self-serving imperial power than a liberator or bearer of good. It is in this context that Gamā‘a leaders cite a rhetorical question from would-be Islamists who ask why Muslims should not unleash a religious war against America and the West, in order to awaken the Ummah from its slumber and humiliation, to raise its spirit and stop these Western conspiracies in their tracks. The Gamā‘a’s leadership responds:

We disagree with this logic, not only because the Ummah is ill-prepared to make such a choice but also because we think that awakening the Ummah from its slumber and helping it resume its role as a contributor to human civilization requires that we not fall into the trap of a clash of civilizations (ṣaddām al-sulh). Rather, this requires a policy of civilizational dialogue (tawṣī’a al-sulh) while preserving our Islamic identity and defending ourselves and waging jihad against any aggression against our religion’s fundamental constitution or our fundamental religious, national or international interests.71

In the Gamā‘a’s view, al-Qa‘ida (like this would-be questioner) tends to see jihad as the singular response to the challenge of America and the West. Moreover, it seems confident that success in this regard will be sufficient to promote and preserve the interests of Islam. The Gamā‘a, by contrast, neither sees jihad as the only response to this challenge nor military victory as a panacea. For it understands the interests of Islam to go beyond the mere accumulation and exercise of power. And in this context, it is unwilling to allow the ostensible duty to engage in jihad to outstrip or undermine the broader aims and objectives of the religious law, chief among these, according to them, being to connect people to their Lord. This is the context within which to understand the response of Ḥamīd ‘Abd al-Rahmān, when he was asked about the difference between the Gamā‘a and al-Qa‘ida: “It is the difference between

70See, e.g., Zuhdi et al., op. cit., 231–234.
71Iṣrā‘īliyyah, 63.
us today and us in the past. Al-Qa‘ida still privileges (individual) texts over the broader aims and objectives of Islam”...72

Conclusion

The point of this article has been to provide a preliminary glimpse into the ideological evolution of the al-Gamā‘a al-Islāmiyya from an organization whose understanding of and commitment to Islam rendered it fundamentally committed to violence as a primary instrument of change to an organization that sees violence as ultimately a secondary or tertiary option of limited utility and, potentially, significant liabilities. In conclusion, we shall say a word about a few possible implications of all of this for the future.

First, it is clear from their writings that the Gamā‘a leaders received substantial training in the traditional religious sciences while in prison. This alone, however, was not the key to their “success”. As far back as 1993, there had been unsuccessful efforts by such luminaries as the grand Mufti of Egypt, the late Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, the late Shaykh Muḥammad Muṭawallī al-Sha‘rāwī and others, e.g., Fāhim Huwayḍī, to broker a cease-fire between the Gamā‘a and the government.73 We have seen, however, that, in putting forth its Initiative the Gamā‘a drew on a conspicuously traditional set of arguments on which these religious figures would seem to have had much greater purchase. Yet the Gamā‘a appears to have succeeded with these arguments where these religious figures could not. This suggests two things: 1) that the sole source of religious authority in contemporary Islam is not located exclusively in the tradition handed down from the past; rather, in addition to traditional learning, association with what we might call some contemporary “heroic stance” might be equally if not more determinative; 2) while some forms of religious authority might be effective with some audiences, other audiences might require a different configuration. The Gamā‘a, in this context, may be far more effective in reaching and redirecting real or potential “fundamentalists” than either the Egyptian (or other Muslim) government(s) or the traditional religious establishment.

Second, returning to the suggestion made by Ezioni referred to at the outset, it is clear that the vision of the new Gamā‘a, even as it sustains its commitment to Islam and the establishment of a dignified Islamic order, goes a long way in undermining the

72Ahmad, op. cit. 133–134. Hamdi continues: “When Shaykh Osama Bin Laden wants to wage jihad, he does so with no consideration of the interests and harms that will accrue to his action. Thus, his action on September 11 struck down some six thousand Americans. But the result of this was the disappearance from the face of the earth of the (Islamic) nation of Afghanistan and the Taliban government, to the point that Mulla ‘Umar, the head of that government, had to flee on a motorcycle. And I believe that had Osama Bin Laden heard the voice of reason and the religious law (ṣawt al-‘adl wa-al-shar‘), he would not have undertaken any of these actions, all of which have caused so much harm to the Muslims” (ibid. 134). It should be noted that the Gamā‘a support for the Taliban régime was merely as an Islamic state in general and did not extend to a blanket support for all of the Taliban’s actions or policies. In fact, in an interview with ‘Īsām Darbala (one of the signatories of the Series), in June 2002, the latter states explicitly that the Gamā‘a disagreed with any number of the Taliban’s “jurist choices” (Iṣrā‘i‘iyah, 347).

73See, e.g., ibid. 17. See also Ahmad, op. cit. 168, where he notes that, while the Minister of Interior, ‘Abd al-Halim Mūsā, convened meetings between radicals and moderates, the government in general, and specifically president Mubārak, opposed the notion of mediation because it implied parity between radicals, such as the Gamā‘a, and the government.
notion that greater commitment to Islam can only imply a greater commitment to violence or that the more “Islamic” or Shari'a-minded Muslim communities or countries become, the greater the threat they are likely to pose to America and or the West.

Finally, it may be time for America, and the West in general, to update its understanding of what is going on in “fundamentalist” Islam and in this light adjust its policies and attitudes towards Islamists in the Middle East and beyond. Christopher Henzel, a foreign-service officer and graduate of the National War College, makes a step in this direction when he notes,

the United States, the existing Arab regimes, and the traditional Sunni clerical establishments all share an interest in avoiding instability and revolution. This shared interest makes the establishments in the Sunni world America’s natural partners in the struggle against al Qaeda and similar movements. If American strategists fail to understand and exploit the divide between the establishments and the revolutionaries within Sunni Islam, the United States will play into the radicals’ hands, and turn fence-sitting Sunnis into enemies. 74

Based on what we have seen in this article, however, it would seem that even Henzel may not have gone far enough. For, given their unimpeachable “street credibility” and their principled, Islamically validated critique of the kind of wanton confrontationalism advocated by the likes of al-Qa’ida, the Gamā‘a should clearly be recognized for what it can contribute to the marginalization of the ideology of wanton violence in the name of Islam. Indeed, given the boldness of the Gamā‘a’s approach, the straightforwardness of its commitment and its real and potential influence among radical Islamists, 75 it may be time for America to shed the secular fundamentalism that often informs her policy toward much of the Muslim world and, instead of lumping all Muslim activists together as “extremists”, come to terms with the fact that there is a real and functional difference between Islamists with whom America might establish, sustain and enjoy fruitful communication—and even shared interests—and Islamists with whom it may not.


75Zayyāt, for example, cites other “fundamentalists” who were drawn to the example of the Gamā‘as Initiative. See Road, 76. Zuhdi, meanwhile, recalls how, during his visits to prisons, members of other movements, e.g., Jamā‘at al-Jihād, would appeal to the Gamā‘a to help them find ways of starting their own initiatives. See Mu‘āmarah, 49.