

THE THREAT OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

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There can be no doubt that the spectre of international, Islamic inspired terrorism will continue to haunt governments and societies worldwide for the foreseeable future. Although al-Qaida dominates the minds and budgets of many countries in the West, numerous other organizations, Islamic inspired and not, continue employing terrorist methods and wreaking havoc. In fact, over the past decade, al-Qaida has sought to transform itself from an organization into a global terrorist movement. In some cases, they have sought to infiltrate, co-opt, merge with, intimidate, buy off or siphon recruits from local organizations. In other cases, they have tried to inspire the development of 'home-grown' terrorist groups.

Al-Qaida's success in transforming itself into a global terrorism movement using the above tactics has been varied. In some ways, they have succeeded in replicating themselves worldwide. But in other cases, they have polarized the global Islamic inspired terrorist movement beyond repair. The most important point of my talk today is that al-Qaida's attempt to construct a global terrorist movement cannot work because they are trying to use an inherently exclusivist doctrine in order to create and sustain an inherently inclusivist movement.

More broadly, this talk will focus on two underexplored aspects of Islamic-inspired global terrorism. First, it will examine the interplay among international Islamic-inspired terrorist groups themselves. It will do so, not through a tactical lens, but through a strategic one. While most analysts and media commentators focus on better understanding terrorist organizations in order to

thwart their attacks and defeat them tactically, this talk will take a more strategic, long-term focus. Specifically, I will examine the processes occurring among terrorist organizations as opposed to focusing on the internal constitution, plotting or tactics used by any one organization in particular. My goal is to focus on the sources of cooperation and friction, both overtly and indirectly manifested, that may pose unique opportunities for frustrating a given group's agenda or unrecognized threats for long-term security interests.

The second dimension of my talk today will concentrate on the ideologies underlying international terrorism today. Specifically, I will argue that it is in the ideology that inspires and fuels groups like al-Qa`ida in which its own undoing is sewn. Violent Salafi extremism cannot endure as it is itself an aggregation of incoherent tenets. Its ideological inconsistencies will lead it to collapse upon itself in time.

1. INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

The Islamic inspired terrorist sphere is messy. The reason for this is that each group is motivated by a complex cocktail of reasons, most of which center on the quest for power and control over people and territory. The religion of Islam, for most of these groups, is the most useful tool in their arsenal for seizing this power. However, their various interpretations and applications of their version of Islam sets them at odds with one another more than is often understood.

Al-Qaida has historically had rocky relationships with other Islamic inspired terrorist organizations. Some of these groups have been highly problematic for al-Qa`ida, including HAMAS and Hizbollah. Others have, in some ways, salvaged al-Qa`ida, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the GSPC and the Taliban, among others. The fact is that today's international terrorist environment is colored by numerous complicated nuances.

The Taliban and other Islamic extremist syndicates, such as the *Tehrik-i-Taliban* (TTP) and the *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat- e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) have been continuously expanding reach in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province

(NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Hundreds of attacks have occurred in the Afghan-Pakistan tribal region in 2008 alone and territory continues to slip into the abyss.

Although al-Qa`ida's important operational-level commanders, the organization continues to regenerate young, brash and intelligent leaders. Al-Qa`ida's regional presence has been degraded in some ways and improved in others. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been virtually crushed in Saudi Arabia. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) has been significantly handicapped. Al-Qa`ida's presence in Yemen is on the rise, however. As it is in North Africa through the organization, Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Al-Qaida continues to prioritize the need for violent jihad in Somalia, although they have made few actual inroads there.

One of the fiercest rivalries at play today is that between al-Qaida and HAMAS. Curiously, the organizations are not that dissimilar, at least in terms of the genesis. Both organizations grow out of a similar intellectual, regional and religious movement, that of Egyptian Salafism. HAMAS is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood, or *Ikhwan*, which drew heavily on the writings of mid-20th century Egyptian thinkers, most notably Sayyid Qutb. Al-Qaida, therefore, cannot attack HAMAS for being bankrupt in its foundations or ancestry since it shares the same lineage as the *Ikhwani*.

Both HAMAS and al-Qaida also compete for many of the same hearts, minds and pocketbooks. It is the youth that keep both of these movements alive and driving forward. Without new blood, new leadership and new ideas, both would grow static and die.

Another key dimension of this competition is that both organizations compete for the title of the real defender of Palestine. Al-Qaida has come under serious criticism in recent years for being more rhetorically focused on Palestine than operationally. Without a serious influx of manpower, expertise and cash, many in the global Jihadist movement are beginning to think that al-Qaida is either paying lip-service to the plight of the Palestinian people or organizationally

weakened to the point where they cannot afford to provide real support. Either way, al-Qaida looks weak in the eyes of its own followers on this point.

HAMAS has its own recruiting challenges. Increasingly, young Palestinian Muslims seem to be growing disaffected with HAMAS's decision to participate in the political system. Indeed, the decision by HAMAS leadership to run candidates for office, be willing to legislate and work with other Arab regimes distracted the group from what some believed was its central mission: facilitate the destruction of Israel is a source of bitterness. Al-Qaida offered, at least in name, that commitment to violence and revolution.

The organizations have traded numerous rhetorical blows in recent months. For al-Qa`ida, the HAMAS leadership's consistent embrace of nationalism, democracy, and its legacy in the Muslim Brotherhood—arguably the three things al-Qa`ida hates most—delegitimizes the group. Although al-Qaida has been critical of its leadership, they have been careful to appeal to the foot-soldiers. In an open question and answer session for his followers, al-Qa`ida's Ayman al-Zawahiri, for instance, explained that although was critical of HAMAS' political leadership for abandoning purely violent Jihad he always supported HAMAS' militant operators—the Izz al-din al-Qassam Brigades. Part of this strategy may have also included the 14 February 2008 call by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, the supposed emir of al-Qa`ida's Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), for the Qassam Brigades to rebel against HAMAS' leadership and attack Israel. The Qassam Brigades quickly rejected the idea, explaining derisively to al-Baghdadi that “your intelligence has betrayed you.”

Zawahiri last discussed Lebanon in his public rhetoric in January and February 2007, when he twice condemned the presence of United Nations Peacekeeping forces in Southern Lebanon.¹⁴ (The calls seemed to generate a response in the form of a roadside bomb that killed three Spanish peacekeepers. Southern Lebanon is home to *Asbat al-Ansar* and *Jund al-Sham*, two Lebanese Jihadist groups that notably avoided helping *Fatah al-Islam* during its fight against the Lebanese Army.

Southern Lebanon is also home to *Hizballah*, a Shia organization with strong links to Iran. Al-Qa'ida's followers, in particular the late Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, strongly condemn *Hizballah*. They accuse the group of not confronting Israel directly enough and accepting international troops in Lebanon.¹⁶ Such polemics reflect a broad struggle between terrorist groups in the Middle East over who can claim to be the most prominent opponent of Israel. By supporting *Fatah al-Islam*, Zawahiri hopes to improve al-Qa'ida's leverage inside Lebanon, as well as hint that al-Qa'ida has an operational presence near Israel's northern border.

2. IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The global al-Qaida movement rests on an idea of liberation from the persecution and occupation of foreign influence. Extremist groups following in this ideological vein are, in many ways, their own worst enemies, however. Their self-inflicted wounds usually result from a degradation in organizational capability (often through government-led counterterrorism crack-downs), or waning organizational morale in response to a decrease in public support for the group's actions. When a target population begins to see a disconnect between a terrorist group's rhetoric and action, they begin to grow less amenable to having that group operate (and continue attacks) in their midst.

These trends are precisely what is occurring for al-Qaida today. Over recent years, it has grown increasingly apparent that the issues causing al-Qaida the most problems is, ironically, their application of their core principles. The Salafi movement's core principles of: Tawhid (Oneness of God), al-Wala wal-Bara (Loyalty and Disavowal), Jihad (Fighting or preparing to fight) and Takfir (Excommunication) are the dividing lines that have engendered high levels of animosity and resentment among Islamic populations. But these principles were developed and formulated in the context of highly structured groups and a tightly geographic area. Today, al-Qaida has begun to transform itself into a global movement, one that relies on inclusivity but that is fundamentally guided by exclusivist principles.

Each of these core principles backfire when al-Qaida tries to apply them in the physical world. This is largely due to the fact that al-Qaida offers nothing positive or useful for societies other than proscriptions and bloodshed. As populations continue turning away from the message of “global jihad” al-Qa`ida commanders need to increasingly defend themselves. They, therefore, appeal to Islamic scholars for support, legitimization and cover. It is also for this reason that the global Salafi movement is panicking about the need to avoid unnecessary civilian casualties.

Consider the application of Tawhid, or the notion of unifying God in all facets of human existence. It is al-Qaida’s reading of tawhid that forms the basis of rejecting democratic government and legislative practice and indicting HAMAS and the Muslims Brotherhood. It is al-Qaida’s interpretation of tawhid that allows them to attack Arab states on the grounds for failing to fully implement *sharia*. It is this extreme dedication to tawhid that has alienated the global al-Qaida movement from its target constituency: Middle Eastern Muslims.

Or take the idea of al-Wala wal-Bara, the concept of being loyal to all those who facilitate the implementation of sharia and disavowing anyone who rejects the immediate implementation of sharia on earth. It is this concept that forms the basis of al-Qaida’s attacks on ‘moderate’ Islamic scholars, or any of the Arab regimes. It is al-Wala wal-Bara that draws the line in the sand for al-Qa`ida between them as ‘good Muslims’ and others as ‘bad Muslims.’

The fact is that none of these core principles are inclusive. Each one serves to divide, separate, alienate, distance, attack and judge. When al-Qaida actually tries to extend an inclusivist olive branch to a certain community, it does so with so many shades of grey and qualifications that it becomes virtually useless.

Consider al-Qaida’s appeals to the people of Pakistan, for instance. Over the past two years, al-Qaida’s senior leadership has vacillated from attacking them, to begging for their help to praising them to analytically parsing them into distinct categories.

Al-Qaida did the same thing with regard to African-Americans. Beginning in May 2007, al-Qa`ida's Ayman al-Zawahiri made a desperate appeal to blacks in the United States with the hope of enlivening a countercultural revolution based on race. With the election of Barack Obama, Zawahiri raced to qualify his call to Black Americans to only include authentic ones, not those who serve in the American government.

CONCLUSION

The fact is that the closest thing we have to a magic bullet for defeating al-Qaida is, strangely enough, al-Qaida itself. As it struggles to transcend itself as an organization and morph into a global movement, it runs directly into a contradiction: although it must prioritize inclusivity, its leadership, doctrine and focus is inherently exclusivist.

Useful opportunities exist for exploiting this reality on a global scale. A coherent counter-ideological strategy would have several key components. First, it is necessary to identify the dissonance that occurs between the doctrine and the reality in as local context as possible. It would attempt to demonstrate that not only does al-Qaida demand exclusivity, but that its presentation of an inclusive face is itself disingenuous. The most effective way to delegitimize the global movement is to facilitate its own self-inflicted demise. Allow al-Qaida to show how its global movement is little more than a charade, a tool designed to stabilize and protect a core set of Egyptian, Libyan and Saudi commanders.

An effective counterterrorism strategy would also harness the existing fractures pervading al-Qaida's relationship with other Islamic inspired terrorist groups. The tension that al-Qaida maintains with groups like HAMAS and Hizbillah is easy. Identifying and playing on slightly more tenuous relationships, like al-Qaida's support for Fatah al-Islam, or its finding ways to strain their cooperation with the Taliban groups.

By letting global Islamic inspired terrorists direct us to their vulnerabilities, priorities and internal struggles, counterterrorism strategies are much more likely to inflict the kind of damage necessary to frustrate them in the short-run and collapse them in the long-term.

Zaragoza, 24th of november 2008