

Al Qaeda Confusion: How to Think about Jihad

By Michael Radu, July 2007

[Michael Radu](#), Ph.D., is Co-Chair of FPRI's [Center on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, and Homeland Security](#). He is currently at work on a book on Islamism in Europe.

Al Qaeda is stronger now than at any time since 9/11, say some; it is less strong than it could have become, answers the administration. Congressional Democrats say that instead of catching Bin Laden, Bush took his eyes off the ball and got mired in an irrelevant war in Iraq; the White House replies that if we don't fight the jihadis in Iraq, we will have to do so in Manhattan. And so American politics argue in what seems to remain a cognitive vacuum, confusing the public and producing inane statements from our elected leaders. Had Al Qaeda consciously planned how to thoroughly confuse the infidels, this would have been the ideal result. It is all the persistent and inevitable outcome of executive delusions (jihadis are "a small minority") and Democratic flippancy ("the war on terrorism is a bumper sticker," Sen. John Edwards has charged) against a background of popular ignorance and an oversupply of lawyers and human rights activists. The result is that six years after 9/11 we (and the Europeans are generally worse) are still fighting a war in a conceptual fog—and not getting any close to winning it.

In reality, the nature and goals of the enemy, albeit complex, should be quite clear, as should the ways to defeat it. Until we understand a few key realities, we will continue to tread water and remain on the defensive.

What is Al Qaeda?

Al Qaeda ("the base") is at the same time an Islamist totalitarian terrorist organization and the particularly violent part of a global Muslim revivalist movement. As the name implies, it was established as a vanguard, elite organization, not dissimilar, conceptually, from the previous Marxist Leninist self-selected vanguards of the proletariat (Shining Path in Peru, Red Brigades in Italy, etc.), seeking to reestablish Islam's historic (and mostly mythical) supremacy and purity throughout the world via the unification of the *Ummah*, the Islamic community, under a single political and religious leadership and state—the Caliphate. The means to accomplish this is jihad, strictly defined by the followers of this ideology as warfare.

Al Qaeda was not originally intended to exist as a territorial base, but the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan unexpectedly offered that opportunity. Al Qaeda took advantage of that opportunity, but controlling those lands was neither intended nor absolutely necessary. The same applies now to the wild areas of Pakistan that Al Qaeda uses for refuge and training—they are important but not vital. That fact is still misunderstood and

explains the continuous surprise of some that after the Taliban's fall in 2001 and the heavy losses it incurred at the time, Al Qaeda did not die.

While it incessantly claims to be defending an Islamic Ummah under attack from all sides—the most theologically convenient way to justify jihad—Al Qaeda's ideology and strategy are aggressive and revisionist. Al Qaeda aggressively attacks the home base of the “Crusaders” (see 9/11 or the attacks in the UK) and revisionistically seeks to reintegrate into the Ummah the long-lost territories of Islam, such as Al-Andalus (the Iberian Peninsula).

Al Qaeda's ideology is rigorously anti-nationalist. That allows it to attract alienated and poorly integrated elements among Muslim communities in the West and explains in part the attraction it has among Muslim elites everywhere. As Iraq today suggests, however, it could also be a serious threat to the organization, since it also clashes with the interests of established postcolonial elites and regionalist or separatist groups (Kurds, Berbers, many Palestinians).

The enemies, and thus the targets, of jihad are a) all governing regimes in the Muslim world (the “apostates”); b) their outside manipulators, controllers and supporters (the “Crusaders” led by the United States but including all Western states and Israel; c) all other infidels “oppressing” Muslims (India for Kashmir, Russia for Chechnya, China for Turkistan); and d) for the most radical jihadis (the Takfiris), all Muslims who do not actively support the cause and, especially, the Shias. While these are all enemies, the priority given to each depends on circumstances, capabilities and opportunity.

Al Qaeda in Iraq

This latter fact is another cause of confusion in the West, as demonstrated by the case of Iraq. While an Al Qaeda associate group did have a small presence in Iraqi Kurdistan prior to the spring of 2003, at least on a large scale Iraq is a target of opportunity. Al Qaeda's growth (or present decline) there depends on the chaos and confusion that followed the 2003 invasion and the vacuum created by the fall of Saddam. The scale of and media attention on its presence in Iraq aside, Al Qaeda's role there follows the same pattern as in Afghanistan and Chechnya in the late 1990s, or Somalia more recently - it tries to implant itself wherever a political vacuum or persistent instability develop in the midst of military conflict. Lebanon, Gaza, the Sahel, southern Thailand and Philippines are, or should be expected to become, such areas of implantation. In all such cases Al Qaeda interferes in an evolving conflict, exacerbates it, and tries to channel the outcome towards its own goals and translate local motivations into a coherent ideological and global cause.

It is precisely this Al Qaeda piggybacking on existing conflicts that makes the often heard distinctions between our fighting sectarian conflict or Al Qaeda in Iraq nonsensical. Al Zarqawi stirred up the Sunni-Shia conflict but did not invent it, and separating the two in practical terms is not a serious proposition, any more than trying to do so in Afghanistan between Taliban, Pakistani Islamist spillover, and Al Qaeda. For Al Qaeda such parasitic

behavior serves to magnify its influence, and it will try to repeat it in every possible circumstance. This fits perfectly in the organization's elite, vanguardist ideology. It sees itself and behaves as the spearhead of global jihad, not as its rank and file.

Ultimately, what seems to escape so many commentators, especially among politicians, is that Al Qaeda is two things simultaneously: (1) a violent Islamist organization with worldwide tentacles and a small core leadership of ideologues and strategists, and (2) part and parcel of a large and growing political-religious movement of Islamist revival. The organization tries to channel and recruits from the movement, and the latter looks to it for strategic direction and, often, tactical purpose.

Islamic Revivalist Movement

The Islamic revivalist movement that is by now dominant in most of the Muslim world from Malaysia to Morocco, including huge segments of the Muslim communities in the West, shares some of Al Qaeda's basic ideological tenets: that Islam is in crisis and under attack, from inside and outside by alien, Western, mostly American influence and domination. Roughly put, Islamic countries and Muslims generically are victims of the West. The only solution is a return to the "original" principles of the faith, those that gave it world importance and power centuries ago, and to Ummah unity and solidarity.

These basic perceptions are shared by a majority of Muslims and Islamic organizations everywhere, from the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest, to individuals and smaller groups, whether in Muslim-majority countries or in the West. While refuge in religious revivalism as an answer to civilizational, political and military decline is far from unique to Islam, its contemporary manifestation is largely Islamic.

The interface between the general perception of Islam as victim of the West—a perception often encouraged by Western elites themselves—and Al Qaeda's (or the Salafi) view that the victimization is largely due to naked aggression is thin. This is demonstrated by a seldom noticed aspect of the reaction of nonviolent, even anti-Al Qaeda groups and personalities, including those in the West, to Islamist terrorism. Those groups have steadfastly opposed not just the conflict in Iraq, where the arguments used in favor of the U.S.-led intervention could always be debated, but also the 2001 U.S.-led attack on the Taliban. Indeed, almost always in Islamic critiques of American and British policies, whether they come from London or Riyadh, the Muslim Brothers or others, Afghanistan is mentioned in the same breath as Baghdad. Since the removal of the Taliban and its Al Qaeda protégés was a clear-cut case of self-defense, Muslim condemnations of the Afghan operations could only mean that Ummah solidarity is more important to them than the Taliban's crimes. Precisely the kind of attitude Al Qaeda needs to thrive.

Where most of the Islamic revivalist movement and its supporters depart from Al Qaeda's ideology is the method whereby Islam is to be renewed. In that sense, Western leaders' claim that "most Muslims" reject jihadism is correct, but far from encouraging. Despite attempts, such as those sponsored by Jordan's Crown prince Hassan to have

respected imams condemn Jihadi terrorism (the method not the ideas leading to it), not only has no important Sunni scholar declared Bin Laden a non-Muslim (the most influential, Al-Qaradawi, would rather let Allah decide), but many large Islamist organizations, such as Hizb ut Tahrir (an international Party of Liberation) or the Tablighis (Muslims missionary movement), could and do claim to be seeking the Caliphate by nonviolent means while their recruits often “graduate” to jihadism—again, same beliefs, different methods, and all unhelpful. Thus, even when revivalist Islamists sincerely claim to oppose jihadism, they are voluntarily tying their own hands. Hence the eternal and annoying “we condemn terrorism... but” that so confuses Western politicians, media and publics.

Why, in this context, anyone in the West would expect such Muslims, as a whole or organized ones, to condemn anything other than acts of terrorism is a mystery.

Al Qaeda/Movement Relationships

The relationships between the different Al Qaeda parts of the movement are dynamic, both centripetal and centrifugal at the same time. *Centripetal*. The centripetal expansion of the movement follows general, indeed universal terrorist patterns of recruitment and indoctrination. In the specific case of Al Qaeda this means two distinct, but related methods.

The first is centered on the thousands of trainees who graduated from the Afghan camps prior to the end of 2001, who returned to their countries of origin—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and countries in North Africa, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe. Once back, they either established cells or founded or radicalized existing organizations (the cases of Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon). These people know and share Al Qaeda core’s ideology and many retain ties, including personal ones, with it and with each other.

A typical case is that of Saad Houssaini, a.k.a. Moustapha, one of Al Qaeda’s most prominent cadres in Spain and North Africa. Born in Meknes, Morocco, from a middle-class family (his father was a professor)—an almost universal pattern among Al Qaeda cadres, Houssaini obtained a government scholarship to study chemistry and physics at the University of Valencia in Spain. It was there that he was attracted, or recruited, to Islamism under the influence of Sheikh Rachid Ghannouchi, the London-based ideologue and leader of Al-Nahdah (the Revival), Tunisia’s major Islamist organization. Already under Spanish surveillance, in 1997 he fled to Taliban’s Afghanistan where he underwent further training in explosives in Al Qaeda camps, met other Moroccans, Bin Laden, Al Zarqawi and Al Zawahiri—the latter was a witness at his marriage. Following the U.S. attack in the fall of 2001, he returned to Morocco in April 2002, became a founder of GICM (Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, now part of the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—AQIM) and trainer of its bomb makers. By September 2006 he was running a network of Moroccan volunteers to Iraq, until his arrest in March 2007.[\[1\]](#) It was under the influence of one of the many “nonviolent” Islamist ideologues in Spain harbored by “Londonistan” that he was radicalized, shifted to jihadism, established personal ties to the

Al Qaeda core, and later served as a force multiplier for the organization thousands of miles away.

Second, Al Qaeda's central core (Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, etc.) have sometimes accepted and given their "brand copyright" to organizations formed independently, such as the Algerian Salafi Group for Combat and Preaching, which last year became the AQIM, or autonomously, like Al Zarqawi's group, now Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia.

Like metastasized cancerous tumors, members and trainees of these formal Al Qaeda franchises, and some informal ones, like Southeast Asia's Jemaah Islamiah, spread the ideology and expand the committed membership of the movement.

Centrifugal. There is, however, another dynamic within the movement, a centrifugal one. This consists of thousands of individual Muslims, many from the West and including a disproportionate number of converts to Islam, who have no personal ties to the Al Qaeda core or its main franchises, but feel attracted to its ideology and the methods it uses. With each spectacular Jihadi attack or campaign, their numbers grow and they flock to the latest battlefield, as defined by Al Zawahiri in his Al Jazeera statements or by the innumerable Jihadi Internet sites and their do-it-yourself jihad recipes. There is not always a clearly defined line between the two dynamics—Al Qaeda recruiting for its cause and would be, self-recruited jihadis seeking a battle under its flag, or at least its cause.

The case of Shaker Al-Abssi, the leader of Fatah Al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr Al-Bared, near Tripoli, Lebanon, lately under assault by that country's army, is revealing. A Palestinian born in a camp near Jericho, his family migrated to Jordan after 1967, and he joined Yaser Arafat's Fatah as a teenager. The organization sent him to study medicine, but he dropped out in favor of becoming a pilot, receiving training in Libya and later serving as an instructor in South Yemen. Later he participated in combat, on the winning Sandinista side in Nicaragua and on the losing Libyan side in that country's conflict with Chad. Disappointed with Arafat's corruption, he joined dissident, pro-Syrian factions and moved to Damascus, where he discovered religion and became a fervent believer. Afterward he became associated with Al Zarqawi's group in Iraq and Jordan, and was sentenced to death in absentia for his role in murdering an American diplomat in Amman in 2002. Why? Because, says his brother Abdel Razaq, a doctor, "The Palestinians have tried Marxism and Arab nationalism. All failed. I believe that for Shaker Islamism was the ultimate solution." Now, claims his family, "we wait for him to become a martyr, hoping that his death will be the fuel that will set on fire the Palestinian cause."[\[2\]](#)

This, then, is a case of a rebel in search of a global ideological and strategic anchor to articulate and justify his fight for a particular cause. Associating with Al Qaeda satisfied both needs. The fact that Fatah Al-Islam is seen as both an Al Qaeda spin-off and a Syrian tool should not be confusing, not in light of the organization's pattern of tactically piggybacking other causes.

Another good example is a new jihadist group, Ansar al Islam fi Sahara al Bilad al Mulazamin (The followers of Islam in Sahara, the land of those lifting the veil). Made up of Moroccans, Algerians, and Mauritians, dissident elements of AQIM, it first surfaced in June 2007. Ansar refuses to obey direct orders from Al Qaeda's core, all the while telling the latter that "You should know that we are in the same trench." Indeed, it shares Al Qaeda's well-known obsession with the "recovery" of Al-Andalus and hatred for all North African governments and France.[3] This is a perfect example of what French analysts call the "Al Qaeda nebula"—a multiplying system of Jihadi groups ideologically, but not always hierarchically, tied to the core group. We are once again confronted with the interface of movement and terrorist group.

Conclusion

German-Turkish author Nacla Kelek was right when he pointed out that "Politicians and religious scholars of all faiths are right in pointing out that there are many varieties of Islam, that Islamism and Islam should not be confused, that there is no line in the Koran that would justify murder. But the assertion that radical Islamic fundamentalism and Islam have nothing to do with each other is like asserting that there was no link between Stalinism and Communism." [4]

But just as Stalinism (and Pol Pot or Mao) was made possible by the mass of usually peaceful and naive believers in the Marxist Utopia, Al Qaeda and its nebula are permanently feeding up from the growing Islamic revivalist movement. To separate the two should be the goal of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, since they are all targets of jihadism. To deny the intimate link between the two is to deny reality. By making artificial distinctions between the two, one only postpones and avoids the real struggle.

Notes

1. For his career, see "Adil Boukhima, Portrait: Le Marocain d'Al Qaida," *TelQuel* (Casablanca), May 17, 2007; Craig Whitlock, "In Morocco's 'Chemist,' A Glimpse of Al-Qaeda Bombmaker Typified Resilient Network," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2007; Driss Bennani, Abdellatif El Azizi, Ismail Bellaouali and Lahcen Aouad, "Enquete. Au-dela de la panique," *Tel Quel*, July 5, 2007. [back]
2. Cecile Hennion, "De la colere au djihad, le chef du Fatah Al-Islam raconte par son frere," *Le Monde*, June 5, 2007. [back]
3. Antonio Baquero and Jordi Corachán, "Actividad Extremista En El Desierto. Un nuevo grupo terrorista magrebí amenaza a España," *El Periodico* (Barcelona), July 12, 2007. [back]
4. Quoted by Peter Schneider, "The New Berlin Wall," *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 2005.

<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200707.radu.alqaedajihad.html>