Al-Qaeda: ideology and action


Abstract

Serious threats to global order are now said to emanate from various, often transnational, Islamic ‘fundamentalisms’, with 9/11 as a key example, followed by numerous further explosions and multiple deaths. These outrages raised the question about the ideological assumptions and goals of the bombers – most of whom are said to be linked to al-Qaeda – given that the majority of the dead were, not Jews or Christians, but Muslims. What were the bombers trying to achieve? What were their ideological assumptions and goals?

The paper starts from the premise that, initially, radical Islamic organisations, including al-Qaeda, emerged to challenge the incumbency and authority of their own domestic rulers. Their main ideological goal was to overthrow incumbent, yet unrepresentative, rulers, and substitute them with more plausibly Islamic leaders. How did this ideological goal – focused on domestic political goals – become transformed into the present situation: a global war utilising the weapons of terror to achieve what are increasingly unclear ideological goals?

The paper argues that over time the domestic ideological focus was augmented by a ‘globalised’ ideology extending to the regional and international environment. The focal point of the Islamic radicals’ attention shifted both to the USA and a nebulous ‘Americanisation’.

Al-Qaeda faces a difficult conundrum: bombs often alienate the very people who the bombers claim to represent. How can this unwelcome fact be dealt with in ideological terms? How can al-Qaeda successfully pursue an undoubtedly ideologically motivated global struggle when ability to gain support is clearly undermined by their choice of strategy?
Al-Qaeda: popular ideology, unpopular tactics

Muslim fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as communism once was. Please do not underestimate this risk … at the conclusion of this age it is a serious threat, because it represents terrorism, religious fanaticism and exploitation of social and economic justice (Willy Claes, Secretary General of NATO, 1995)

The US government responded to the 9/11 attacks with an assault on both the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan, a ‘failed state’ with a shattered social and political structure. Following more than two decades of constant warfare, the country was a nation in ruins, with numerous towns and cities reduced to rubble, and with its social and political structure destroyed. Failed states like that of Afghanistan, ‘are invariably the product of a collapse of the power structures providing political support for law and order, a process generally triggered and accompanied by anarchic forms of internal violence’ (Thürer 1999: 731). These circumstances allowed al-Qaeda to set up bases, with the explicit or implicit agreement of the Taliban. Having dealt with the Taliban, the US turned its focus to another ‘failed state’: the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Alleged links between Saddam’s regime and al-Qaeda was a stated reason for the US-led invasion in March 2003 and of Saddam’s subsequent arrest in December 2003. However, post-conflict in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there were inconclusive attempts to rebuild both countries as viable states.

How best to understand and account for the apparent spread of the radical Islamic ideology of al-Qaeda? It is important to note at the outset that there is much agreement among academics and foreign policy makers about what motivates al-Qaeda and its supporters: hatred of ‘America’, Jews, and (Christian) ‘Crusaders’. This stance is popular among many of the Muslim ‘have nots’ around the world; many such people reacted to the destruction of the World Trade Center towers with apparent satisfaction. In much of the Arab world, this was manifested as outright delight. Elsewhere in the South there was often more restrained approval, linked to the notion that ‘the Americans got what they deserved’, an opinion endorsed by some among the leftist intelligentsia in the West.

Many would agree that such reactions to the killing of nearly 3,000 innocent people – many of whom were not Americans – are contemptible. On the other hand, it seems clear that they also reflect both generic anti-Americanism and an element of schadenfreude (malicious satisfaction in the misfortunes of others) – rather than specific approval of either bin Laden’s tactics (terrorism) or aims. It seems unlikely that al-Qaeda’s Wahhabist brand of radical Islam can ever only appeal to a small minority of (Sunni) Muslims.

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1 In Arabic, al-Qaeda means ‘the base’.
2 Note that this implies another meaning of the term ‘failed state’: an aggressive, arbitrary, tyrannical or totalitarian state that consistently fails to meet common norms and standards of international law.
3 Tactics, however, are another matter. Al-Qaeda’s strategy to achieve its objectives – indiscriminate bombings – is not popular. A year after 9/11, majorities in eight of nine Muslim countries surveyed condemned the September 11 attacks. But most also considered the U.S. military response – invasion of Afghanistan – ‘morally unjustifiable’, including 80 percent of Pakistanis, 89 percent of Indonesians and 69 percent of Kuwaitis, according to Gallup. Majorities in five nations told Gallup researchers they don’t believe Arab groups were behind the 9/11 attacks (http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/terrorism/terror_pubopinion8.htm).
Al Qaeda, 9/11 and international terrorism

On September 11, 2001 Americans were confronted by an enigma similar to that presented to the Aztecs — an enigma so baffling that even elementary questions of nomenclature posed a problem: What words or phrase should we use merely to refer to the events of that day? Was it a disaster? Or perhaps a tragedy? Was it a criminal act, or was it an act of war? Indeed, one awkward TV anchorman, in groping for the proper handle, fecklessly called it an accident. But eventually the collective and unconscious wisdom that governs such matters prevailed. Words failed, then fell away completely, and all that was left behind was the bleak but monumentally poignant set of numbers, 9-11 (Harris 2002)

America’s new enemies seem to have no demands. They can’t be bought, bribed, or even blackmailed. They only want to strike a blow at any cost. And if a suicide hijacker or bomber really believes that by dying in his jihad (Muslim holy war) he’ll go straight to heaven and Allah’s loving embrace, what earthly reward could the US or anybody else possibly offer as a substitute? (Sacks 2001)

It is likely that without the 9/11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon this paper would have had quite a different focus. This is because both the attacks themselves, as well as those that followed in, inter alia, Bali, Casablanca, Istanbul, 4 Nairobi, and, probably, Madrid, 5 led to a significant change in perceptions of how we perceive international relations. No longer was it sufficient to understand states as the only actors with the capacity to inflict large-scale, seemingly random, internationally-orientated political violence. The 9/11 attacks and those that followed emphasised that what was now needed was: (1) a new focus on the many themes of conflict and violence traditionally covered in international relations, and (2) a new examination of links between failed states and international terrorism.

Most of the relevant academic literature contends that 9/11 was a watershed in the debate about political violence, not least because it focused attention squarely on the interaction between domestic and international levels. According to Dartnell (2001: 3), the intersection of domestic and global levels of analysis in this regard is the result of the ‘intensity and rapidity of contemporary globalization’, a phenomenon said to be linked to the growing numbers of ‘failed’ states. This is because failed states are also unstable states that invite external military involvement. Acting alone or through the auspices of regional bodies, the aim of external forces is always the same: to try to prevent their political violence spilling over to destabilise neighbouring countries.

4 More than 60 people were killed in bomb attacks in Istanbul in November 2003. Turkish authorities blamed those attacks on al-Qaeda, but after a string of arrests said they had crushed the local Turkish group of militants.
5 A London-based Arabic paper, al-Quds, announced it received a letter from a group purporting to be linked to al-Qaeda, the Abu Hafs al-Masri brigade, which claimed responsibility for the attack. It said: ‘The death squad [of the Abu Hafs al-Masri brigade] succeeded in penetrating the crusader European depths and striking one of the pillars of the crusader alliance - Spain - with a painful blow’ (Tremlett, MacAskill and Norton-Taylor 2004).
Failed states – including, Afghanistan, Iraq, former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Somalia – have also become safe havens for various terrorist groups, notably al-Qaeda (Gunaratna 2004). 6

Following 9/11, further factors associated with globalisation were also seen to proffer a dangerous threat of violence from nonstate actors – who might be physically located almost anywhere – against the national territories of states. Already anachronistic with respect to thermonuclear war, the 9/11 attacks emphatically underlined that geographical space was no longer a barrier to external attack on states. According to Smith (2002: 177), this suggested an important connotation for future chances of world order, as states were ‘no longer, if they ever were, the key actors in major international arenas’. Thus the kind of international terrorism exemplified by al-Qaeda does not ‘map onto state structures’, but ‘works in the spaces between them’. That is, the raison d’être of international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda is not defined by territory but by commitments and beliefs. This implies that al-Qaeda is a very different type of organisation compared to the state, in terms of ideology, identity and structure. Its structure is the reverse of the modern state characterised by a hierarchy of power and authority, while its identity is equally nebulous. Before turning to the specific issue of al-Qaeda’s ideology, I want to say a little more about the impact of 9/11 on international relations.

The impact of 9/11 both on the USA and internationally can be seen in four main ways. First, while political violence and terrorism issues were already important areas of concern prior to 9/11, that event provided a distinctive emphasis on international terrorism and its networks, of which al-Qaeda is the most significant, but not the sole, example (Gunaratna 2004). Second, the 9/11 attacks were widely regarded as a profound challenge both to the US government and political analysts who had shared a hitherto apparently unshakeable belief in fundamental foreign-policy assumptions noted above. Third, there was a profound impact on Americans’ sense of security, as the quotations above from Harris and Sacks – both Americans and journalists – make plain. In short, 9/11 shattered Americans’ sense of safety. As Huntington notes, the last time that the continental United States suffered anything at all comparable to the 9/11 attacks was nearly 200 years ago, in 1814. Then, the British burned down the White House. Since then, Americans have lived in an atmosphere of invulnerability from foreign attack. After September 11, that disappeared. 7

Fourth, the significance of 9/11 is also to be noted in relation to a wider issue: the unequal global distribution of power, a state of affairs that globalisation is often said to make worse. Hurrell (2002: 189) notes that globalisation is believed to create ‘many kinds of negative externalities, including the reaction of many marginalized groups, the creation of new channels for protest, and, in particular, the facilitation of new patterns of terrorist and other kinds’ of political violence. Keohane (2002: 30) contends that the ‘effective wielding of large-scale violence by nonstate actors reflects new patterns of asymmetrical interdependence and calls into question some of our assumptions about geographical space as a barrier’. The unequal global distribution of power is said to encourage international terrorism, not only from al-Qaeda but also by

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6 Al-Qaeda is estimated both to have cells in around 50 countries and to dispense money and logistical support and training to a wide variety of radical Sunni groups
other radical Islamic groups, such as, the Groupes Islamiques Armés and the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat/Dawa wa Jihad (Volpi 2003: 125-7). This does not suggest that there this is something inherent in Islam and its belief systems that encourage political violence, but only to note that there are extremist and violent elements among the Islamist groups, and that some exploit opportunities provided by globalisation.

Societies around the world responded to 9/11 in broadly cultural terms. Most western governments, including those of Britain, Italy, Japan, and Spain, strongly supported the American people and their government, both in relation to 9/11 and to subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some ordinary Muslims, on the other hand, are said to have seen 9/11 differently: it represented an attempt by Islam to ‘fight back’ against the USA (in particular) and the West (in general) (Hammond 2003: 83). It seems obvious that 9/11 was calculated not simply to wreak terrible destruction but also to create a global media spectacle. For some among the mass of ‘downtrodden ordinary Muslims’, bin Laden was already a hero prior to 9/11. This constituency was an important target audience for the highly visual spectacle of the destruction of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon. Thus for al-Qaeda a key goal of 9/11 was to grab the attention of ordinary (Sunni) Muslims, and to encourage them to make connections between the attacks and the multiple resentments felt against the US in many parts of the Islamic world. Manifestations of such resentments include support for unrepresentative rulers in the Arab world, the US-led invasions of Iraq in 1990-1 and 2003, and Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. Together, these issues reflect a depth of hatred in many parts of the Muslim world, a level of concern that is not restricted to small numbers of religious or political radicals. Exacerbated by years of US refusal to censure Israeli actions in relation to the Palestinians, Muslim resentment is also a result of failure to deal with the privations and humiliations inflicted on Iraq following the downfall of Saddam Hussein in March 2003 and his subsequent arrest nine months later. On the other hand, it is plausible to suggest that the resentment of at least some Muslims actually goes wider than these specific issues. If this is the case, then even if solutions for both the Iraq and Palestine issues are found, then this might not in reality undercut the potential for terrorist attacks on the US and the allies. It ‘seems plausible’, suggests Hurrell (2002: 197), ‘that much resentment has to do with the far-reaching and corrosive encroachments of modernization, westernization and globalization’.

Given that both 9/11 and many subsequent terrorist outrages appear to have been perpetrated by Muslims against western targets, the question can be asked whether these events mark the beginning of Samuel Huntington’s mooted ‘civilisational’ conflict between Islam and the West. Some have alleged that the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US response served to make Huntingtonian prophecies about clashing civilizations appear far less abstract and far more plausible than they had been when first made a decade ago.

Huntington first presented his ‘clash of civilisations’ in an article published in 1993, followed by a book in 1996. His main argument was that, following the end of the Cold War, a new, global clash was under way that, replacing the four decades long conflict between liberal democracy/capitalism and communism, was a new fight between the (Christian) ‘West’ and the (mostly Muslim, mostly Arab) ‘East’. The core of Huntington’s argument was that after the Cold War the ‘Christian’,
Democratic West found itself in conflict with radical Islam, a key threat to international stability. Christianity, on the other hand, was said by Huntington to be conducive to the spread of liberal democracy. In evidence, he noted the collapse of dictatorships in southern Europe and Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the development of liberal democratic political norms (rule of law, free elections, civic rights). These events were regarded by Huntington as conclusive proof of the synergy between Christianity and liberal democracy, both key foundations of a normatively desirable global order built on liberal values. Others have also agreed that Islam is inherently undemocratic, anti-democratic. Fukuyama (1992: 236), for example, has suggested that Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ has a ‘more than superficial resemblance to European fascism’.

Critics of Huntington’s argument have noted that it is one thing to argue that various brands of political Islam have qualitatively different perspectives on liberal democracy that some forms of Christianity, but quite another to claim that Muslims en masse are poised to enter into a period of conflict with the West. That is, there are actually many ‘Islams’ and only the malevolent or misinformed would associate the terrorist attacks with an apparently representative quality of a single idea of Islam.

Second, the September 11 atrocities and subsequent bomb outrages, do not appear to have been carried out by a state or group of states or at their behest, but by al-Qaeda, an international terrorist organisation. Despite energetic US attempts, no definitive proof was found to link the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq with either Osama bin Laden or al-Qaeda.

Third, the idea of religious or civilisational conflict is problematic because it is actually very difficult to identify clear territorial boundaries to civilisations, and even more difficult to perceive them as acting as coherent units. It has been suggested that Huntington’s image of ‘clashing civilisations’ focuses too closely on an essentially undifferentiated category – ‘a civilisation’ – and as a result places insufficient emphasis on various trends, conflicts and disagreement that take place within all cultural traditions, whether Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. The wider point is that cultures are not usefully seen as closed systems of essentialist values, while it is implausible to understand the world to comprise a strictly limited number of cultures, each with their own unique core sets of beliefs. The influence of globalisation in this regard is to be noted as it leads to an expansion of channels, pressures and agents via which various norms are diffused and interact.

Finally, the image of ‘clashing civilisations’ ignores the very important sense in which both radical Islamist revolt and al-Qaeda terrorism are aimed primarily at unrepresentative, corrupt and illegitimate – in short, ‘un-Islamic’ – governments within the Islamic world. Since the 1970s, the general rise of Islamist groups across much of the world can be seen as more a consequence of the failure of such governments, often supported by successive US administrations, than the result of bin Laden’s influence per se. That is, the contemporary Islamist resurgence – of which al-Qaeda is undeniably a component – carries within it both popular disillusionment at slow developmental progress as well as disgust with corrupt and unrepresentative governments in the Muslim world. Confronted by state power that seeks to destroy or control its communitarian structures and replace them with an idea of a national citizenry based on the link between state and individual, many Islamist groups – such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip – are vehicles of popular political aspirations.
While it is difficult to be sure about the level of support for bin Laden and al-Qaeda in the Muslim world, it is clear that there is a high degree of anti-US resentment and widespread belief that the west is opposed to Islam. Such a perception is fuelled by the President Bush’s move back towards rather uncritical support for Israel’s Sharon government, including the assassination of the Hamas leader, Sheikh Yassin in March 2004, and the invasion of Iraq and subsequent inability to rebuild a viable administration in the country. There are also influential voices in the USA that appear to play up the notion of civilisational conflict. For example, Democratic Congressman Tom Lantos stated in November, 2001, that

unfortunately we have no option but to take on barbarism which is hell bent on destroying civilization . . . You don’t compromise with these people. This is not a bridge game. International terrorists have put themselves outside the bonds of protocols.

Such remarks appear to reflect a deep-rooted tradition in western international thought that believes it is appropriate to set aside normal rules of international relations in certain circumstances, for example, ‘certain kinds of conflict or in struggles with certain kinds of states or groups’ (Hurrell 2002: 195). During the centuries of western imperialism, there were frequent debates about what rights non-Christian and non-European peoples should enjoy. In the centuries of competition and sometimes conflict between Christianity and Islam, the notion of ‘holy war’ emerged – that is, a special kind of conflict undertaken effectively outside any framework of shared rules and norms – and ‘just war’, carried out for the vindication of rights within a shared framework of values. There is also a further strand of conservative western thought that ‘asserts that certain kinds of states and systems cannot be dealt with on normal terms, that the normal rules that govern international relations have to be set aside’. For example, during 1980s the Reagan government in the USA averred that there was a basic lack of give-and-take available when dealing with communist governments, which meant that it was appropriate that some basic notions of international law could be set aside in such contexts. This conservative tradition is also manifested in the remarks of Congressman Lantos noted above. It not only suggests that available options are restricted to the choice of ‘to contain or to crusade’, but also indicates that ‘such positions clearly continue to resonate within and around the current US administration’ (Hurrell 2002: 193-5).

Al-Qaeda: history and development

8 After 9/11, support for the USA has generally dropped in much of the Muslim world. For example, in Morocco, public opinion surveys indicated support for the US fell from 77 percent in 2000 to 27 percent in the spring of 2003. In Jordan, it fell from 25 percent in 2002 to 1 percent in May 2003. In Saudi Arabia, it fell from 63 percent in May of 2000 to 11 percent in October 2003 (http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0226/p03s02-usfp.html).


10 Such remarks did not seem to affect Congressman Lantos’ electoral popularity. In the march 2004 democratic primary in California’s 12th Congressional District he gained 71.6% of the votes case. His nearest challenger acquired less than 20% (19.8%) (http://www.lantos.org/).
Al-Qaeda was established by Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi Arabian, in 1988. During the 1980s, he helped finance, recruit, transport, and train Sunni Islamic recruits for the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance. After that conflict, his intention was to bring together Arab mujahedin (Islamic guerrillas encouraged by the US to come to Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Soviet army) to fight a new jihad. In February 1998, bin Laden issued a statement under the banner of ‘The World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders’. It called on Muslims to kill Americans – including civilians – as well as ‘those who are allied with them from among the helpers of Satan’ (http://cfrterrorism.org/groups/alqaeda2.html). 11 Apart from killing Americans al-Qaeda also wants to:

- establish a pan-Islamic Caliphate throughout the world by working with allied Islamic extremist groups;
- overthrow regimes it deems ‘non-Islamic’; and
- expel Westerners and non-Muslims from Muslim countries – particularly the holy land of Saudi Arabia.

In pursuit of these goals, al-Qaeda expanded its capacity and network via building links with other Islamist groups, including Egypt’s Islamic Jihad. Its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, became bin Laden’s deputy in 1998. Other Islamist groups believed to be affiliated to al-Qaeda include: the Islamic Jihad Movement (Eritrea), al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (Somalia), al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya (Egypt), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Harakat ul-Mujahidin (Pakistan).

From Afghanistan, bin Laden relocated to Sudan in 1991. There, he gave financial backing both to the regime of Hassan Turabi, as well as to various Islamic causes from Algeria to Afghanistan. According to US intelligence, the first terrorist attack – a bombing – involving Osama bin Laden and his associates took place in Aden, Yemen, in December 1992. The target was a hotel where US troops had been staying en route to Somalia, where they were involved in putative peace-keeping duties. Although the US soldiers had already left, two Austrian tourists were killed. A US black hawk helicopter was later shot down over Mogadishu, the Somali capital. In the battle that followed, around 1,000 Somalis and 18 US rangers were killed. This was the most violent episode in the failed US peacekeeping mission during 1992-4 that overall involved the deaths of 25 American soldiers. Around this time, bin Laden told a London-based newspaper, al-Quds, that his previously Pakistan-based ‘Afghan Arabs’ were now fighting the US. Later it was established that a Mombasa-based al-Qaeda cell had travelled to Mogadishu to foment trouble during the time that US troops were in the country.

11 In an al-Qaeda house in Afghanistan, New York Times reporters found a brief statement of the ‘Goals and Objectives of Jihad’: (1) Establishing the rule of God on earth (2) Attaining martyrdom in the cause of God (3) Purification of the ranks of Islam from the elements of depravity (http://cfrterrorism.org/groups/alqaeda2.html)
Perhaps encouraged by its activities in Somalia, al-Qaeda embarked on an extensive bombing programme. On February 26, 1993, a bomb exploded in the underground car park at the World Trade Centre, New York City, killing seven people and injuring more than 1,000 others. It later emerged that the perpetrator, Ramzi Youssef, had direct contact with bin Laden and received funds from al-Qaeda. Two-and-a-half years later, in November 1995, five Americans and two Indians were killed in a truck bombing of a US-operated Saudi National Guard training centre in Riyadh. During 1997-8, further bombings were carried out by al-Qaeda. The first in June 1997 killed 19 US servicemen in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The second, in August 1998, targeted US embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, killing 224 people and injuring 5,000. In addition, in October 2000, al-Qaeda carried out a suicide attack in the Yemeni port of Aden, killing 17 US servicemen.

A year later, on September 11, 2001, 2,976 people were killed when 19 al-Qaeda suicide attackers hijacked and crashed four US commercial jets, two into the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon near Washington, DC, and a fourth into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. This was followed two-and-half-years later by ‘Europe’s 9/11’: the Madrid railway stations bombings of March 3, 2004 (‘3/11’). Two hundred and one people were killed and 1,463 were injured. Investigators believe that a multinational cell of al-Qaeda loyalists was responsible.

Prior to the Madrid bombs, an earlier tape, broadcast on al-Jazeera in February 2003 and purporting to be bin Laden, had specifically called for ‘martyrdom operations’ in, among other places, Morocco and Saudi Arabia. Perhaps in response, bombs thought to be placed by al-Qaeda operatives or sympathisers exploded in Casablanca (45 killed, 60 injured) and Riyadh (34 killed). Further explosions followed in Kabul (four killed, 31 injured), Jakarta (10 killed, 150 injured), UN headquarters, Baghdad (22 killed), and two simultaneous bombings in Istanbul (the first killed 25 people, the second 32, including the British consul, Roger Short). In February 2004, a suspected al-Qaeda bomb killed 171 Shia Muslims marking the holy day of Ashurain in Baghdad and Kerbala, followed nine days later by the Madrid railway stations bombings.

Despite the arrest of numerous suspected al-Qaeda members, including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, suspected mastermind of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Western counter terrorism experts speculated in 2003-4 that lower-level al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda-linked operatives had managed to regroup. This was despite the claim by the

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13 Al-Qaeda was also linked to various plans that, for one reason or another, were not carried out: (1) assassinate Pope John Paul II during his visit to Manila in late 1994 (2) kill President Clinton during a visit to the Philippines in early 1995 (3) bomb in midair a dozen US trans-Pacific flights in 1995, and (4) set off a bomb at Los Angeles International Airport in 1999. The organisation also plotted to carry out terror attacks against US and Israeli tourists visiting Jordan for millennial celebrations in late 1999. (Jordanian authorities thwarted the planned attacks and put 28 suspects on trial.) In December 2001, suspected al-Qaeda associate Richard Colvin Reid attempted to ignite a shoe bomb on a transatlantic flight from Paris to Miami. Al-Qaeda also attempted to shoot down an Israeli chartered plane with a surface-to-air missile as it departed Mombasa airport in November 2002.
US government that ‘half of all top al-Qaida operatives ... [were] either jailed or dead’ (http://www.guardian.co.uk/alqaida/page/0,12643,852377,00.html). According to Peter Bergen (2004),

The attacks in Madrid, Spain, ... suggest that the al-Qaeda network remains very much in business. Despite the fact that two wars have been fought in the name of winning the ‘war on terrorism’ and untold billions of dollars have been spent in an effort to break the back of al-Qaeda, the attacks came as a total surprise, killing more than 200 people.

It was estimated in early 2004, that al-Qaeda has thousands of members and associates, with cells in up to 50 countries, reinforced by its ties to Sunni extremist networks. Following its expulsion from Afghanistan in late 2001, al-Qaeda dispersed in small groups across South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. This enabled the organisation to become a focal point or umbrella organisation for a worldwide network of Sunni Islamic extremist. Currently, al-Qaeda maintains moneymaking front businesses, solicits donations from like-minded supporters, and illicitly siphons funds from donations to Muslim charitable organisations (Conetta 2002).

**Al-Qaeda: ideology and organisation**

What links al-Qaeda’s members and sympathisers is a belief in the correctness of jihad. Al-Qaeda’s ideology is sometimes referred to as ‘jihadism’, characterised by a willingness to kill ‘apostate’ Muslims and an emphasis on jihad (holy war). Although it is clearly at odds with nearly all Islamic religious thought, it has its roots in the work of two modern Sunni Islamic thinkers: Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb.

Al-Wahhab was an 18th-century reformer who claimed that Islam had been corrupted a generation or so after the death of the prophet, Mohammed. He denounced any theology or customs developed after that as non-Islamic, including more than 1,000 years of religious scholarship. He and his supporters took over what is now Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism remains the dominant school of religious thought. Wahhabism emerged from the Arabian peninsula 200 years ago and over time took root in many parts of the Middle East, including Iraq. Wahhabism preaches against worship of ‘false idols’ that for its followers, include: Sufism (Islamic mystics noted for saint worship), and the Shia, who revere the descendants of Ali, the prophet Mohammed’s son-in-law.

Sayyid Qutb, a radical Egyptian scholar of the mid-20th century, declared Western civilisation the enemy of Islam, denounced leaders of Muslim nations for not following Islam closely enough, and taught that jihad should be undertaken not just to defend Islam, but to purify it.

Beyond the influences of Wahhabism and that of Qutb, the theology/ideology that bin Laden and fellow al-Qaeda ideologues advance is quite complicated. It contains a number of additions that do not have any basis in the Quran or in the Sunnah (teachings of the Prophet Mohammed). In addition, it is often described as a variation of the official version of Islam found in Saudi Arabia (which is in itself a puritanical version) and one that most (Sunni) Muslims would probably not choose to follow.
Finally, it is important to remember that the al-Qaeda version of Islam is a Sunni interpretation, with no appeal to Shi’a Muslims.

Three sets of beliefs are pivotal for the followers of al-Qaeda:

- The West has subjugated the lands of Islam; and Western values have corrupted Islam internally.
- Only return to pure and authentic Islam as practised by the Prophet and his companions in seventh century Medina will bring back glory and prominence to Muslims.
- These goals require the defeat of the West through various – including violent – means.

One way to comprehend the appeal of al-Qaeda for some Muslims is to focus upon what it rejects, including pluralism, relativism and radical individualism. Differences among groups affiliated or attracted to al-Qaeda are however influenced by political conditioning in different national contexts. That is, to analyse reasons for the appeal of al-Qaeda and its ideology in Islamic countries is problematic because there are specific causes within each country. However, it is possible to make several generalisations. First, their brand of ‘fundamentalism’ is one of the responses to Western cultural, political and economic domination, the dangers of which were articulated most famously by the late Edward Said in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*. Said (1978: 2) defined orientalism as a ‘style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) the “Occident”’. Said claimed that many politicians and academics in the West had ‘essentialised’ Muslims and Islam into unchanging categories, and many of these assumptions were little more than generalisations with little foundation. He cited Lord Cromer, the British governor of Egypt between 1882 and 1907, who argued that ‘the Oriental generally acts, speaks and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European’. While Cromer claimed that ‘the European’ is a ‘close reasoner’ and a ‘natural logician’, he believed ‘the Oriental’ to be ‘singularly deficient in the logical faculty’ (Said 1978: 39). Although Cromer was no doubt a product of his times, there is on obvious reason to believe that his prejudiced views are entirely extinct.

Second, al-Qaeda’s militancy can be seen as a form of resistance to ‘Western-style’ modernisation that is seen to bring often traumatic social and economic dislocation, while embedded cultures can be significantly affected. As a result, some Muslims have sought comfort from such modernisation in traditional patterns of behaviour found in their Islamic heritage. This heritage was downplayed by the secular – either military or nationalist – regimes of the Middle East that existed after Word War II. These countries were considered weak vis-à-vis the West with few exceptions, and almost uniformly did not appear to meet the expectations of their citizens.

Third, many of the regimes in the Middle East have long suffered the effects of unequal development. That is, economic development was not matched by corresponding advancement in political participation, resulting in an educated class with no means to express their political sentiments, except through marginalised religious groups. Moreover, occasional economic downturns provided societal and political opportunities, exploited by various Islamists, for a ‘return to Islam’.
We can see such ideas reflected in the worldview of al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s second in command. Al-Zawahiri is thought to: (1) be largely responsible for turning al-Qaeda into an international network, and (2) have provided much of the ideology driving al-Qaeda since his Egyptian Islamic Jihad merged with al-Qaeda in 1998. According to Montasser el-Zayat, a prominent Egyptian attorney who defends Islamic radicals and spent three years in prison with al-Zawahri, ‘he is bin Laden’s brain … the planner, the organiser and the thinker who laid the ground for the idea of an Islamic front’ (http://www.news24.com/News24/World/News/0,6119,2-10-1462_1500844.00.html). Al-Zawahiri developed his ideas in several books, including *The Bitter Harvest*, a critical assessment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and *Knight Under the Prophet’s Banner*, a reflection on life after the September 11 attacks, which he wrote in a cave in Afghanistan.

Al-Zawahri was born in June, 1951, and grew up in a family of doctors and scholars. He began his militant career in 1966, when he was arrested for belonging to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood – the Arab world’s oldest Islamist group, which advocates creation of an Islamic state in Egypt. He was later freed and graduated from Cairo University’s medical school, earning a master’s degree in surgery. Later, he was one of the founders of Islamic Jihad that sought to overthrow the Egyptian government and replace it with an Islamic government. By the late 1980s he was regarded as the organisation’s leader, a position bolstered by the status he acquired through spending part of the 1980s in Afghanistan, involved with the anti-Soviet mujahedin. He later described the Afghan war against the USSR ‘as a training ground of the utmost importance to prepare the Muslim mujahedin to wage their awaited battle against the superpower that now has sole dominance of the globe, namely, the United States’ (Whitaker 2004). After the war, he is thought to have travelled to Denmark and Switzerland, sometimes using a false passport. He also reportedly spent six months in Russian custody for alleged extremist activities in Dagestan.

Some believe that it was Zawahiri who persuaded bin Laden to focus his attention on the US rather than trying to revolutionise the Muslim world. In 1998, Zawahiri was the second of five signatories – bin Laden was the first – to the fatwa declaring ‘jihad against Jews and Crusaders’ which ‘authorised’ the killing of American civilians. Al-Zawahri was indicted in the US for his alleged role in the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, simultaneous attacks that killed more than 200 people and wounded over 5,000. The US government has a $25m reward on his head.

He was also a key figure in promoting the use of suicide attacks. ‘It is the love of death in the path of Allah, that is the weapon that will annihilate this evil empire of America’, Zawahiri said in an interview in 2002 (Whitaker 2004). His most recent tape was issued in February 2004, in which he threatened more attacks on the US and also criticised the French government’s decision to ban Islamic headscarves in schools. In short, we can see that Zawahiri combined his experience leading militant movements with bin Laden’s money and charisma, a recipe that gave al-Qaeda its international prominence in the Islamic world. However, it is thought that al-Qaeda would survive even if al-Zawahiri was captured or killed, although either of these outcomes would be a significant boost to the United States campaign against al-

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14 El-Zayat was jailed with al-Zawahri in 1981 for conspiracy to assassinate the late Egyptian president Anwar Sadat
Quaeda. However, deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz, speaking on PBS’s *News Hour With Jim Lehrer* on 18 March 2004, admitted that al-Qaeda now has ‘very decentralised operations... so, you’ve got to go after them [the leaders] one by one’. On the same programme, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice averred that, even if al-Zawahiri was captured, it would not mean the end of al-Qaeda: ‘obviously, if you can take out one of the most-important leaders in al-Qaeda, that’s an important step, a really important step. …But, as we’ve said, al-Qaeda is a network and you have to break up the network’ ([http://differentnewsblog.blogspot.com/](http://differentnewsblog.blogspot.com/)).

In early March, 2003, an audio tape was handed to the Associated Press purporting to be from bin Laden. It called on citizens of Arab and Muslim governments that supported the US-led invasion of Iraq to rise up against them. It is now clear that since March 2003, the war in Iraq has offered a significant opportunity for al-Qaeda or its allies to exploit the circumstances to foment dissatisfaction and to seek to exploit the hitherto contained political and religious competition between Sunnis and Shias in post-Saddam Iraq. It was hoped that the US/UK invasion to depose Saddam and his regime would be welcomed by most, if not all, Iraqis, and this was largely the case. However, the end of the war also led to an increasingly volatile situation, exploited by pro-Wahhabi/al-Qaeda ideologues and activists. Many Iraqi Sunnis are said to be increasingly drawn to Wahhabi ideas. For example, the adult Sunni male population of a mixed Sunni-Shia town of Aby Ghaib, 10 km from Baghdad, amounts to around 20,000. It is estimated that about one-fifth of them, some 4,000 people – now worship at Wahhabi mosques in the town (Pelham 2004).

The spread of Wahhabist – and by extension al-Qaeda’s – ideas, can be traced to the aftermath of the Afghan resistance against the Soviet invaders. Hundreds of victorious mojahiden redirected their holy war from Central Asia to the Arab world’s tyrants. Consequently, even before the war to depose Saddam, some Sunni preachers issued outspoken anti-Shia denunciations. Such people were said to fear that a successful US invasion would result in Sunni submission to the Rafida or rejectionists, the Wahhabi term for Shias. Some Sunnis have used the circumstances of the invasion to attack Shias, with some Sunni mosques said to act as local urban bases for jihadis hiding in the hills across the Iraq-Syria border. Foreigners – including Yemenis, Syrians, and Iranians – were caught in early 2004 in several of Iraq’s cities while trying to launch attacks. It is important, however, to note that only a small number of non-Iraqis have been captured by US forces, suggesting that foreigners are not the main instigators of or participants in terrorist attacks, either against Shias or Americans. Of 9,000 prisoners, only 30 are non-Iraqis, suggesting that the Sunni Islamist movement in Iraq largely comprises indigenes (Pelham 2004).

More generally, following Saddam’s capture in December 2003, Iraq’s resistance is said to have acquired an increasingly religious hue, issuing communiqués and daubing

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15 Rice claimed in March 2004 that two-thirds of al-Qaeda’s leadership had been captured or killed.

16 Iraq’s population is divided along both racial and religious lines: about 75% are Arabs, 18% Kurds and the remainder (7%) divided among Assyrians, Turcomans, Armenians and ‘Persians’. Around 90% of the population is Muslim, and most of the remainder are Christians. Most Kurds are Sunnis, while the Arab Muslims belong to both Sunni and Shii sects. Overall, Shii account for about half the population, while the Sunni Arabs, the traditional rulers of both Ottoman Iraq and of the modern state since its inception in 1920, account for around a quarter of Iraqis.

17 Recent opinion polls indicate that around 60% of Iraqis believe that their lives are better because of the downfall of Saddam and his regime.
walls with graffiti under the name of ‘Mohammed’s army’. This ‘army’ actually appears to be a loose coalition of cells, sporting various religious names, such as, Jihadi Earthquake Brigades, Saladin Brigades and al-Mutawakkilin (‘those who rely on God’). Their collective aim is said to be to free the ‘capital of the caliphate’, Baghdad, from foreign, non-Muslim occupation (Ventzke 2004).

In the north of Iraq, a radical Sunni group called Ansar al Sunna (‘the members of the Sunna’) used the internet to claim responsibility for two suicide bombings that killed more than 100 people in the Kurdish capital, Arbil, in February 2004. Ansar has distributed videos of what it claims are attacks on British, Spanish and Canadian intelligence officers, shown with passports and identity cards. Ansar suicide bombers’ wills – related on its videos – warned ‘the brokers of the West’ that jihad would continue ‘until we get back [the Jerusalem mosque of] al-Aqsa and Andalucia’ [Spain]. The videos also appear to offer some support to the idea that the ideology of al-Qaeda is motivating, if not directing, the attacks. In March 2004, a London-based and Saudi-financed magazine, al Majalla, ran an email interview with ‘an al-Qaeda leader’, Abu-Muhammad al-Ablaj, who said that he had received instructions from bin Laden to direct ‘the Mujahideen yearning for martyrdom’ to go to Iraq. The Qatar-based Al-Jazeera satellite station, which has frequently aired al-Qaeda videos, also broadcast an appeal around the same time – entitled ‘Join the Convoy’ and supposedly featuring Abu Musab Zarkawi, a Jordanian veteran of the Afghan war, who is accused by the US government of coordinating the Iraqi jihad. In the broadcast, Zarkawi is alleged to have said: ‘here is America among us. So, come take revenge on it and extinguish your thirst with its blood’ (Ventzke 2004; Pelham 2004).

In conclusion, recent strikes by Islamist radicals in Iraq have as their short-term aim a tactical objective: to impede, for example, the formation of an Iraqi police force. But they also make a wider statement about the vulnerability of the West and America’s inability to protect its allies, while also demonstrating the faith of the bombers themselves. The latter is important both to frighten ‘unbelievers’ and to shame those Muslims who live their lives by values far removed from those of the fanatics into greater religious observance.

**Conclusion**

We blame everything on Al-Qaeda, but what happened is more dangerous than bin Laden or Al-Qaeda. . . . The issue is ideology, it’s not an issue of organizations. … Regardless if Osama is killed or survives the awakening has started (Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, quoted in Pipes 2003).

It is ironic that al-Qaeda (‘the base’) no longer appears to have a physical base, following its expulsion from Afghanistan. Since 2001-2, the scattering of al-Qaeda has led to claims that it has been weakened, perhaps fatally. However, these assertions appear out to be unfounded. Instead, al-Qaeda has transformed itself into a collection of regional terror groups that may not only operate more autonomously than before but also be even more dangerous.

There is a further irony in that the war in Iraq – presented as an opportunity to do away with a brutal, obnoxious regime and engage further with terrorism – actually offered al-Qaeda a good chance to exploit the resulting circumstances. The US
government’s claim was that Saddam’s Iraq was a place where terrorists gathered; it appears that it wasn’t then, but it certainly is now. George Tenet, director of the CIA, recently stated that, ‘as we continue the battle against Al Qaeda, we must overcome a movement – a global movement infected by Al Qaeda’s radical agenda’ (http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0226/p03s02-usfp.html). The inference is that al-Qaeda’s extremist ideology is now attracting expanding networks and a new generation of supporters not only in Iraq but elsewhere in the Muslim world. Often, such people are young idealists who believe in the concept of global jihad to liberate Islam from foreign control. Al-Qaeda strategists may not have hoped to defeat or even to weaken ‘America’ militarily, but to gain publicity, to reach out to further recruits; and this has been forthcoming. This amounts to a psychological victory, useful progress towards the achievement of al-Qaeda’s three goals: to provoke a jihad against ‘Christians’ and ‘Jews’; to get the Americans out of bin Laden’s home country, Saudi Arabia; and to establish the puritanical rule of Wahhabism throughout the Sunni Muslim world.

Several of these objectives have already been achieved. Some of President Bush’s responses to 9/11, especially the swift war in Afghanistan, were unavoidable given the state of public opinion after the attacks. However, the unfortunate crudeness and depth of response against what many Muslims now believe is an assault not only on al-Qaeda but also on Islam itself, has done nothing either to defeat al-Qaeda or stop the spread of its ideology. President Bush quickly declared a ‘crusade’ both against the specific threat of bin Laden and al-Qaeda and terrorism in general. He sent the US fleet back to the Middle East, undermined the Saudi royal family, and removed US troops from the country. This led to two counterproductive outcomes: much free publicity for bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and the antagonism of many ordinary Muslims around the world because of various policies, including: ‘racial profiling’, draconian legislation, mass arrests, and detentions at Guantanamo Bay prison camp.

Our discussion has suggested that al-Qaeda is now as much an ideology or a set of values as a single organisation led by a single leader. It has evolved into a brand name or a franchise, ineluctably linked with the various and complex manifestations of modern Islamic militancy. It may be that this is reflected in changing patterns of al-Qaeda terrorism. For example, the bombers in Madrid – assuming that is, that they were connected to al-Qaeda – did not blow themselves up, like most of their earlier counterparts: people who saw their deaths as an essential aspect of their message (‘We love death as much as you love life’). Unusually, the Madrid bombings seem to have had a short-term, instrumental purpose: withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq.

Al-Qaeda terrorism also has universal themes. When we ask: ‘What do they want?’, we seek to apply a Western concept implying that the aim is achievement of certain finite goals. The question however can be posed differently: ‘Why do al-Qaeda bombers believe that they must act in the ways they do?’. It may well be that they literally believe they have no other choice. Such a presumption is underpinned by the timbre of militant statements from captured al-Qaeda personnel. They tend to emphasise both the general and the specific. For example, Imam Samudra, the Bali bomber, perceived Bali’s nightclubs as an aspect of a general Western-directed cultural assault against Muslims. Such a conviction is a wider component of Islamic militant beliefs, wherever ‘Muslim terrorism’ is carried out or threatened, from Kashmir, to Chechnya, and France. Recently, a previously unknown group threatened
violence in France. It listed the banning of the veil from schools alongside continuing American support for Israel, the war in Iraq and the killing of civilians in Afghanistan as evidence that the West never abandoned the Crusades.

In short, a deeply held belief that an aggressive West seeks to humble, divide and ultimately take over the Islamic world lies at the core of Muslim violence. Cadres of al-Qaeda may well believe that they are front-line troops engaged in a battle for the survival of their society, culture, religion and way of life, all undermined and attacked by the aggressive West. Thus, they believe they are fighting in self-defence in a last-ditch stand; under such circumstances it is rational for them to justify the use of tactics that they believe are acceptable during conditions of ‘holy war’.

The militants’ perception of Western belligerence is underpinned by specific factors, especially the existentialist conditions for many ordinary Muslims both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Al-Qaeda militants seek explanations for the economic, military, and political failures of many Muslim countries. As they work from the presumption that Islam is the perfect social system then, they would work from a belief that something else must be to blame for the problems of their countries. Why are many Muslim countries ruled by self-serving, corrupt and unrepresentative governments? The answer must be because both Western governments – especially that of the USA – allow them to, as do ordinary Muslims who fail to practise their religion with sufficient diligence. Consequently, bombs are a way of: (1) seeking to restore Muslim pride (2) weakening the ‘Crusaders’ and their allies, and (3) facilitating the eventual return to the golden age of a thousand years ago when the lands of Islam were the world’s leading power.

What can be done to counter the ideological appeal of al-Qaeda? While the scale of the militants’ aims make them very difficult to counter, there are practical policies that might help, such as, peace in Israel-Palestine, although even this unlikely event would almost certainly not end Islamic terrorism quickly; but it would deny radical Islamists a key piece of ‘evidence’. Pressuring repressive governments of Muslim countries to reform politically might also help. However, the ultimate worry is not necessarily al-Qaeda but rather a diffuse, global militant Islamic ideology that predates al-Qaeda’s creation, is locally organised and constantly recruits new volunteers.
Bibliography


