

Exploiting the Fears of Al-Qa`ida's Leadership

By James J.F. Forest

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL years, al-Qa`ida has been portrayed by the press, pundits and the former Bush administration as a fearsome monolithic entity, a dark demon waiting to strike the United States at a moment's notice. Limited attention has been given to the glaring vulnerabilities that al-Qa`ida's leaders worry about every day. In addition to the usual operational security challenges with which any clandestine organization grapples, al-Qa`ida desperately seeks to influence perceptions throughout the world of its legitimacy, organizational unity, relevance and competence. This article will briefly examine each of these goals to illustrate the larger point that al-Qa`ida's fears can be made real, producing a significant and lasting impact on the organization's future.

Legitimacy Lost

Al-Qa`ida fears *fatawa* (religious decrees) more than bullets or Hellfire missiles. A central component of al-Qa`ida's propaganda requires gaining and maintaining legitimacy within the Muslim world. Failure to gain legitimacy will undoubtedly doom their cause and the future of the movement. Thus, al-Qa`ida's leaders were greatly concerned when Saudi Arabia's top cleric, Grand Mufti Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Ashaykh, gave a speech in October 2007 warning Saudis not to join unauthorized jihadist activities,¹ a statement directed mainly at those considering going to Iraq to fight U.S.-led forces. Similarly, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a former top leader of the armed Egyptian movement Islamic Jihad and a longtime associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, recently published a book that renounces violent jihad on legal and religious grounds.² In Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, Mufti Zainul Abidin recently issued a *fatwa* that declares the Pakistani Taliban to be "out of Islam" as a result of their violence, failure to follow Islamic teachings, and the pursuance of *takfiri* ideology (the latter referring to the

Salafi-jihadi practice of declaring fellow Muslims "infidels" if they oppose jihadist dogma).³ These actions by authorities that some radical Islamists look to for guidance possibly weaken al-Qa`ida's ability to recruit and retain followers.

Al-Qa`ida's primary objective is to acquire political power. While they use the terms, images and symbols of religious piety, al-Qa`ida is similar to many groups throughout history that used political violence in pursuit of change. Within the Muslim world, there is little support for al-Qa`ida's agenda, tactics, strategy or vision of the future. Al-Qa`ida, therefore, invests heavily in a massive propaganda campaign to try and increase support among their target audiences, and acquire the resources that will allow them to survive. If they fail to effectively convince their target audiences to support their cause, they are doomed. This is a tall challenge. Al-Qa`ida is trying to build a populist movement, and yet their terrorist attacks kill or alienate potential supporters throughout the Muslim world.

Finally, it is also necessary to remember that many extreme Islamist groups—including Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood—have a deep animosity toward al-Qa`ida. Pundits and politicians too often lump all "radical Islamists" into a single category, implying that they are all of the same mindset. This is dangerously misleading. It is a fact that Hamas has consistently rejected even the suggestion that they align with Usama bin Ladin's group, and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in several countries have consistently condemned al-Qa`ida's actions and leaders. Indeed, attacks carried out by al-Qa`ida affiliates in Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and elsewhere have not mobilized a unified Muslim umma to the cause, but instead have driven wedges of ideological disagreement that only serve to benefit nations prosecuting the global war against them. Moreover, al-Qa`ida has failed to gain traction in Syria, Lebanon, or the Palestinian Territories, and it has lost its tenuous footholds in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In short, maintaining some sense of

legitimacy is a major challenge for al-Qa`ida, one that the United States and its allies could make far more difficult through a variety of information operations and other efforts.

The Threats from Within

There is a considerable amount of infighting, conflict and disorganization within al-Qa`ida. Analysis of al-Qa`ida documents captured in several countries (and now stored in the Department of Defense's Harmony database) have brought to light a number of ideological and strategic debates among al-Qa`ida's top leaders.⁴ In one letter, the author, 'Abd al-Halim al-Adl, expressed concern that al-Qa`ida is "experiencing one setback after another," and placed the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Usama bin Ladin. Other letters revealed corruption and malfeasance within al-Qa`ida's rank-and-file. Captured documents have illuminated several cases of embezzlement, counterproductive violence, insubordination, criminal activity (including drug running) and other activities that undermine the desperately promoted perception of al-Qa`ida members being devout Muslim "holy warriors." Indeed, Khalid Shaykh Muhammad—the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks—was a flamboyant, globe-trotting womanizer and drinker who spent lavishly and stayed in plush hotels until his 2003 capture in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.⁵

Finally, al-Qa`ida members are human, and as such are not invulnerable to fear. The organization's leaders are aware of this, and are concerned about cowardice (or the appearance thereof) within the ranks. Although they may not entirely fear the U.S. legal system, CIA secret prisons, the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, or being killed by a U.S. airstrike, they do fear the middle ground between death and a humane Western legal system: their repatriation to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey or any number of countries where the respect for human

1 Michael Jacobson, "Top Cleric Issues Warning," Counterterrorism Blog, October 10, 2007.

2 Jarret Brachman, "Leading Egyptian Jihadist Sayyid Imam Renounces Violence," *CTC Sentinel* 1:1 (2008).

3 "Fatwa in Tribal Pakistan Declares Taliban 'Out of Islam,'" *Terrorism Focus* 5:12 (2008).

4 *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting Al Qaeda's Organizational Vulnerabilities* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006).

5 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 235; Rohan Gunaratna, "Womanizer, Joker, Scuba Diver: The Other Face of al-Qaida's No. 3," *Guardian*, March 3, 2003.

rights is often lacking. As demonstrated by postings on jihadist web forums (and by recent “recantations” by Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Saudi cleric Nasir bin Hamd al-Fadl and others), there is significant concern among al-Qa`ida’s rank-and-file about the potential pain and suffering at the hands of interrogators in those countries. This, in turn, impacts their courage and commitment to actions that support al-Qa`ida’s ideology.

Ignorance and Ineptitude

Al-Qa`ida’s leaders do not understand the United States as well as they claim. The occasional propaganda blunder by Ayman al-Zawahiri and others have illustrated their ignorance about American society and values.⁶ Few of al-Qa`ida’s senior members have lived or spent considerable time in a Western country, and thus their knowledge of culture, social and political trends is drawn mainly from open sources via the media, the Internet, and books.

This lack of knowledge was reflected in a 2006 study by Muhammed Khalil al-Hakaymah on how the U.S. intelligence system works, and what the intelligence community can and cannot do legally under U.S. law.⁷ His ambitious 152-page report was circulated widely on Salafi-jihadist websites, but cites a number of conspiracy websites and other dubious sources to support his assertions. As a result, he provides bogus information, such as details of how South Korean intelligence influences U.S. national security agencies through the *Washington Times*, a newspaper controlled by the Unification Church.⁸

The limits of al-Qa`ida’s knowledge impact the quality of intelligence available to make strategic decisions. Just as in any other organization, the fear of taking action based on faulty intelligence is unavoidable in al-

Qa`ida, where leaders constantly worry about the unknown when planning their operations. As Gaetano Joe Ilardi recently observed, “by satisfying the organization’s need for operational certainty and providing a basis upon which detailed plans can be constructed, intelligence is the fulcrum on which al-Qa`ida exists.”⁹ Thus, one finds a consistent drumbeat of appeals for intelligence from al-Qa`ida’s leaders throughout the online discussion forums frequented by jihadist supporters and sympathizers.

Finally, there are fears about potential ineptitude (or perceptions thereof) among al-Qa`ida’s rank-and-file. Some online jihadists have expressed considerable disappointment at the failure of al-Qa`ida’s leaders to conduct an attack during the U.S. election period, portraying this as a major opportunity squandered.¹⁰ Impatience is a common attribute throughout the terrorist world. A more important concern among al-Qa`ida’s members and supporters, however, revolves around questions of organizational capabilities. While the Arab mujahidin had little to do with Soviet troops leaving Afghanistan in 1989, they did acquire useful skills in conducting irregular warfare against a superior enemy. Many of these seasoned veterans formed the core of al-Qa`ida at the turn of the century and have been the focus of various post-9/11 intelligence and military actions. Presently, most new recruits to al-Qa`ida bring nothing of value: no military training, specialized skills or knowledge. All they share is a “desire to do something.” Some can avail themselves of opportunities to learn in rudimentary training camps in Pakistan, but more often it appears that Iraq has provided much-needed “on the job training” for these new recruits. Therefore, a key challenge for al-Qa`ida is trying to advance their organization’s objectives with a restricted knowledge base among their personnel resources.

Irrelevance

As Brian Jenkins recently observed, “these virtual jihadists are locked into

a closed-loop discourse on the Internet that is increasingly irrelevant...That’s the biggest fear of the terrorists: One day Osama bin Laden will issue his 450th proclamation, and no one will really be listening.”¹¹ A catalyst for the attacks on 9/11 was that al-Qa`ida’s leaders felt a need to prove to the Muslim world that they could support their words with deeds. Having captured center stage, they reaped the whirlwind of military-led responses and intelligence gathering that has seriously degraded their operational capabilities. Since then, Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri have tried mightily to keep a spotlight on themselves and their self-appointed vanguard group of “knights” by issuing periodic audio and video statements and encouraging a viral marketing campaign to support the global spread of their ideology. They clearly recognize the risk that, having been unable to orchestrate a follow-on attack equivalent (or greater) in scope and scale as 9/11, perceptions of their prominence and capabilities within the Muslim world are likely to diminish. Combined with the concerns described earlier about organizational ineptitude and opportunities squandered, this impatience among its followers may pressure al-Qa`ida’s leaders into hasty, desperate and sloppy decision-making, or even to a rapid downward spiral toward atrophy and disintegration.

Conclusion

Although al-Qa`ida must not be underestimated, it is important to recognize the terrorist group’s organizational vulnerabilities. Al-Qa`ida operatives work hard to shape a global perception that they are a powerful movement with tentacles and cells everywhere. This perception aids them by generating fear and causing governments to overextend and overspend on homeland security and counterterrorism efforts. An occasional terrorist attack in some corner of the world—whether it kills dozens, hundreds or thousands—feeds this perception. For al-Qa`ida to remain temporarily viable, the group is not required to conduct a steady drumbeat of attacks on U.S. soil; it only needs

6 For example, when Ayman al-Zawahiri called President-elect Barack Obama a “house Negro,” it likely did more to unite Americans in Obama’s defense.

7 Muhammed Khalil al-Hakaymah, *Myth of Delusion: Exposing the American Intelligence*, published online on October 8, 2006; Steve Schippert, “Al-Qaeda’s Guide to US Intelligence,” RapidRecon.com, October 16, 2006.

8 Bill Roggio, “The Myth of Delusion,” *The Long War Journal*, October 16, 2006; Eli Lake, “How Qaeda Warned Its Operatives on Using Cell Phones,” *New York Sun*, October 18, 2006.

9 Gaetano Joe Ilardi, “Al-Qaeda’s Operational Intelligence – A Key Prerequisite to Action,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31:12 (2008).

10 Such comments can be viewed on various Islamist web forums.

11 James Kitfield, “How I Learned Not To Fear The Bomb: The Rand Corp.’s Brian Michael Jenkins on Facing the Threat of Nuclear Terrorism,” *The National Journal*, October 18, 2008.

to conduct¹² a terrorist attack at some location in the world, albeit preferably a media-rich Western target.

Al-Qa`ida is in danger, however, of being stalemated by counterterrorism successes, opposition by prominent clerics and Muslim groups, and problems within their own organization. They fear the decline in legitimacy that comes from a perception of inaction. Eventually, members and sympathizers will abandon all hope of achieving al-Qa`ida's goals, and the overwhelming loss of money, recruits, safe havens and other necessary enablers will lead to its demise. This has been the trajectory of many terrorist groups throughout history, and al-Qa`ida's leaders surely recognize this reality. Understanding al-Qa`ida's fears will better help identify opportunities in which information operations and strategic communications efforts can lead to an acceleration of al-Qa`ida's eventual decline and self-destruction.

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¹² Or influence another group that shares its ideology to conduct a terrorist attack.