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Seven Years Later: The Jihadist International

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Understanding al Qaeda's true character, structure, and strategy provides important clues about why the organization has not been able to ignite a global jihad. Still, the organization poses a grave threat to international stability and to the United States in particular. The next generation of al Qaeda leaders may be able to deliver more localized sporadic deadly attacks.

Seven years after the worst lethal attack against the U.S. mainland, the leadership of the group that claimed responsibility continues to survive with impunity. Since 2001, al Qaeda, a loosely defined organization, has had a volatile history. It has lost, then partially recovered, its main launch pad in the Afghan plateau; precariously secured, then been substantially beaten out of, a new base of operations in Iraq; claimed credit for a series of terrorist acts across the globe—shattering lives and confidence in security and state authority in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East; and initiated a failed insurgency in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of its principal, Osama bin Laden. But its hopes of igniting a global jihad have not materialized. Instead, its efforts have been effectively curtailed in many locales, it has suffered considerable setbacks in others, and it has had to confront ideological and dogmatic challenges.[1] Most significantly, al Qaeda has so far failed to deliver on its declared goal of inflicting on the United States another spectacular terrorist attack. Still, al Qaeda remains a threat to international stability in general and to the United States in particular. The nature of the danger it represents is best understood in the context of its character, structure, and strategy.

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Character and Structure

Al Qaeda is not a cohesive organization with centralized governance. Instead, it is a diffuse network of "franchises" bound primarily by a rigid reductionist ideology and broad strategic outlook. The franchises offer allegiance to a global nominal charismatic leadership that, through direct involvement or through the endorsement of local initiatives, has an arbitrage function, redirecting resources—human and financial—in order to optimize impact and effect. This function, however, tends to be ad hoc and opportunistic and not aligned with a consistent and detailed strategy. In the absence of a sophisticated strategy, al Qaeda adheres to a wholesale rejection of the world order: states, governments, and international organizations are deemed illegitimate.

The combination of ideology and loyalty allows al Qaeda to compensate for the general absence of conventional institutional structures worldwide. Local affiliates—notably in Iraq, where a bureaucracy of oppression was well anchored—have exhibited complex administrative structures. But the global organization has preserved the ephemeral and virtual aspects of the original database (the literal meaning of "al Qaeda" in Arabic) compiled by bin Laden for coordinating with like-minded "activists."

The true character of al Qaeda has often been lost amid alarmist portrayals that paint it as the

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harbinger of an inevitable totalitarian caliphate and dismissive assessments that reduce it to little more than a figment of the imagination of the uninformed or the politically motivated. The lack of institutional capacity for sustained action, inherent to the nature of the diffuse network, drastically limits the likelihood of al Qaeda translating its ultimate utopian (or dystopian) dream into reality, but the carnage and dislocation it has inflicted in recent years demonstrate amply that the problem cannot be reduced to one of law and order.

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Al Qaeda may be quixotic in its pursuits, but it is nonetheless waging a global war against the United States and the current world order. If war is defined as actions aimed at reducing the assets—physical, human, and financial—of one's enemy while limiting the loss of, preserving, or increasing one's own assets, al Qaeda's assault on the United States seven years ago may be ranked as one of the prime examples of asymmetrical warfare in modern history. With little expenditure and with the easy sacrifice of nineteen of its foot soldiers, al Qaeda forced the United States into a conflict with rules of engagement dramatically different from any previous battles in which the United States has taken part. While the United States is bound in its conduct of war by both international conventions and its own codes of ethics, al Qaeda displays no such limitations, targeting noncombatants and other conventionally protected categories solely on the basis of their vulnerability.[2] Al Qaeda uses the resulting imbalance to force the United States into an onerous, almost prohibitive, adherence to principles—or into the ultimately even more costly departure from these principles for the purpose of containing and eliminating the continuous threat.

Two Major Currents

Al Qaeda is not solely responsible for the degeneration in the interpretation of the Islamic corpus that gives religious sanction to acts of terrorism. Through omission and commission, Arab and Muslim intellectuals and religious leaders have condoned or endorsed statements and actions that served as building blocks for the extreme positions espoused by al Qaeda. If suicide bombing and the killing of civilians is justified in one context—as an "act of resistance" by Palestinians in Israel,[3] for example—the justification can easily be extended to acts directed at the global hegemon, local potentates, and "complicit" populations.

Ideology, against the backdrop of an acquiescing culture, is the main component in al Qaeda's operational model. Arab culture might have despaired about the promises of nationalists and leftists, but its acceptance of their diagnosis of societal and political ills as the ultimate responsibility of Zionism and U.S. imperialism has lingered. The al Qaeda brand of militancy is a phenomenon at the confluence of two major currents in modern Arab and Islamic cultural evolution: first, the gradual expansion of Salafism, an undeclared "reformation" within Sunni Islam seeking the return of Muslims to the original faith, traceable to the fourteenth century literalist scholar Ibn Taymiyyah and applied as a restrictive socio-religious regimentation by the clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia, and second, a paradigm shift cascading from the Arab *Nahdah* ("renaissance") of the nineteenth century, replacing piety with proselytism and quietism with political activism as normative values in Muslim life and positing Islam as a "total" system and solution for all political discontent, as promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood—a movement born in Egypt in the late 1920s—and other "Islamist" formations. Both currents have adopted a sociocultural, behavior-altering approach in their host societies, relegating economic necessities and developmental needs to a nebulous background.

In the 1980s, the Afghan jihad incubator enabled the fusion of the main elements of both currents, producing the ideological framework of the uncompromising totalitarian regimentation implemented by al Qaeda and sister organizations whenever and wherever possible. The parochial character of the concerns of most militants persisted even with the creation of a de facto "jihadist international." Whether in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or elsewhere, jihadists returning from Afghanistan were not able to articulate an attractive message for their respective societies. Instead, their brutal actions often resulted in further alienation from mainstream society. Only with the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001—an act that created visual parity with the Superpower—was the leadership of al Qaeda able to transcend parochialism, reinvigorate jihadists, and present itself as the flag-bearer of a capable, transnational, Ummah-wide movement.

Ideological Framework

The ideological underpinnings of this movement are its adherence to Salafist religious irredentism and Islamist vanguard activism—i.e., an activism cleansed of the populist dilutions introduced by the Muslim Brotherhood and restored to its elitist character. "Ideological purity" is a sine qua non for any group seeking affiliation. The commitment to an action-oriented, unequivocal rejection of any existing order is the other prerequisite. From North Africa to the Levant, and from Yemen to Iraq, the al Qaeda imprimatur is made available only to groups that satisfy these dual requirements. The Salafist concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (allegiance to true Muslims and repudiation of all others),[4] in belief and in practice, is presented as the foundation for a relationship with the al Qaeda leadership and the subsequent authorization of an al Qaeda franchise. And ideological purity serves as the common denominator, ensuring compatible views with limited coordination.

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But even rigid literalism is capable of yielding multiple interpretations, and the textual corpus (the Quran and the Sunnah) is frequently nuanced and has tolerant inclinations. To compensate for this potential pitfall, al Qaeda ideologues have instituted a "maximalist" approach that always errs on the side of severity and austerity. Applied to the political realm, maximalism depicts all political players as strategic enemies and identifies religious justifications, however tenuous, for all hostile actions taken against them. Through this "no holds barred" approach, maximalism creates the illusion of an al Qaeda that is centralized and strategically minded.

The career of Abu Musab al Zarqawi in Iraq is an illustration of both the power of the ideology-based model and its pitfalls—from an al Qaeda perspective. Zarqawi, a Jordanian veteran of the Afghan jihad, sought and ultimately received the endorsement of the al Qaeda leadership for his actions in post-Saddam Iraq. He nonetheless preserved operational autonomy, determined the local strategy, and engaged in an effective genocide against Shiite Iraqis. While phrasing his objections in utilitarian terms (and hence preserving the maximalist stance), Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's second-in-command, cautioned Zarqawi against the harshness of his methods.[5] Zarqawi did not heed the (half-hearted) message. The Islamic State of Iraq, an al Qaeda affiliate that emerged as a result of Zarqawi's efforts, later collapsed as a result, *mutatis mutandis*, of the widespread discontent of its "subjects" against the oppressive and arbitrary measures it implemented in the form of religious and social maximalism. The failure of al Qaeda in Iraq today seems irreversible; even the admission to mistakes and excesses on the part of the Islamic State of Iraq by bin Laden himself[6] could not mitigate the counterproductive effects of its maximalism. The Sunni insurgency in Iraq is not over; it is, however, no longer a tool in the al Qaeda global jihad.

The "surge" of U.S. forces in Iraq enabled the transformation of the popular discontent in Sunni Iraqi society over the al Qaeda presence into an active force that inflicted on the global organization one of several setbacks that are ultimately the result of its dogmatic maximalism.[7] The most important such setback, for the symbolism associated with it, was the apparent failure of the al Qaeda insurgency in Saudi Arabia. A primary supplier of suicide bombers to Iraq, through underground jihadist networks, Saudi Arabia was the ultimate prize sought by al Qaeda, both for its symbolic value as host to the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, and for the ideological affiliation between its clerical establishment and the al Qaeda doctrine.

A Prize Denied

Saudi Arabia represents a unique example of a partnership between an absolute monarchy and a clerical establishment to which the monarchy has delegated control over religion, culture, and education. Through the abundance of oil wealth, the Salafist beliefs espoused by the Wahhabi establishment found a means of propagation to the rest of the Muslim world. While Saudi society has largely adjusted to Salafist dogma, the relocation of Salafism to other Muslim societies is often a generator of tension and confrontation. Al Qaeda has productively used the resulting polarization for recruitment. In Saudi Arabia, al Qaeda regarded the disapproval displayed by the clerical establishment vis-à-vis the behavior and positions of the Saudi monarchy as a green light for action toward regime change. Its incremental efforts in

this direction were preempted by government security operations forcing al Qaeda supporters in Saudi Arabia to premature action. This insurgency set off two important reactions. First, the clerical establishment refused to endorse the purity and maximalism openly espoused by the insurgency and commanded instead allegiance and loyalty to the monarchy, even if its adherence to Islamic precepts were less than total. Second, the Saudi public, which seemed to support, or at least condone, the brutality displayed by the al Qaeda insurgency in Iraq—often at the hands of Saudi jihadists—was appalled by its repatriation. Grievances and contradictions in Saudi society may provide new points of entry for al Qaeda. Irredentism and maximalism, however, did not yield the immediate results al Qaeda expected.

Al Qaeda's assessment of the effect of authoritarianism and dictatorship elsewhere in the Arab world was more accurate. It has thus benefited considerably from the accommodation of Islamism undertaken by Arab rulers—ostensibly to control its rise—both in gaining new recruits and channeling activists from one locale to another. Saddam Hussein sought to contain the growing Islamist threat by embracing a faith campaign that served as an actual program of initiation for Iraqi Sunni society into Salafism and Islamist activism and ensured compliance, at least for a while, with the harsh rule of Zarqawi and the Islamic State of Iraq. Similarly, Muammar al Qaddafi ravaged Libya through erratic social and educational policies, enabling grassroots Salafism and, through political repression, forcing activists out of the country to join the jihadist international. Libyans today are distinctly overrepresented in the new generation of al Qaeda—in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and beyond.[8]

Network Failure

The worldwide arbitrage of jihad resources is implemented largely through Internet communications. It is, however, subject to abuse and can even be used against al Qaeda's designs or interests. The battle of Nahr al-Barid in Northern Lebanon in 2007 as detailed below provides a distinct illustration.

The quasifictional world map adopted by al Qaeda consists of only three recognized (virtual) political entities: the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (straddling the internationally recognized Afghanistan and Pakistan), the Islamic State of Iraq, and the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus. Elsewhere, as a function of the maturity of the local conditions, it is either *ard jihad* (territory of jihad, including all non-Muslim lands); *ard ribat* (territory in which jihadists gather in anticipation of jihad); or *ard nusrah* (Muslim societies not ripe for jihad but ones in which jihadists can be recruited). Fath al-Islam, a self-declared Salafist jihadist formation, sought affiliation with al Qaeda, but leaked reports indicate that the al Qaeda vetting emissary advised against granting the affiliation on the grounds of the group's nonadherence to al Qaeda ideology and the unsuitability of Lebanon as *ard jihad*.[9] Ignoring the cold shoulder from al Qaeda leadership, Fath al-Islam, which appears to have links with Syrian intelligence, sought al Qaeda supporters directly over the Internet, ensuring a continuous flux of jihad volunteers to swell its ranks. By the end of its battle with the Lebanese armed forces, hundreds of jihadists that al Qaeda could have mobilized to its advantage had died, and a local Sunni population stood alienated from jihadism.

The Next Generation

While the efforts of its affiliates across the Middle East were in jeopardy, the al Qaeda leadership itself was under assault in Afghanistan. With savvy acquired over decades of local presence, it has so far been able to navigate the contradictions of the region to ensure survival and even to develop adjusted plans of action.

In Iraq, past dogmatism is tempered by a reluctant desire for accommodation, with the Islamic State of Iraq courting other Sunni insurgency factions. If the Iraqi government adheres to cautious and productive measures, this courtship may prove to be too little too late. In the Levant, a renewed focus on the Palestinian cause, the perennial motivator of Arab societies, seems to be contemplated by al Qaeda leadership in Iraq and in Afghanistan.[10] A trustworthy local affiliate, however, does not yet exist. In North Africa, as in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa and well into Africa and Southeast Asia, al Qaeda seems to be devising approaches that might amount to serious departures from the previous strategic outlook and, if not countered, might herald a new phase for al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda continues to struggle through the paradox that the same ideology that serves to cement its authority hampers its ability to become truly powerful. The next generation of al Qaeda, steeped in ideology and trained in tactical maneuvers, may deliver more sporadic operations, but it is unlikely to succeed where its predecessor has failed in igniting a meaningful global jihad.

Notes

1. For an example of the ongoing challenges and al Qaeda's attempt at addressing them, see the brief document "Tarshid al-'Amal al-Jihadi" [Toward the Maturity of Jihadist Actions] by Sayyid Imam Sharif, former leader of the Egyptian al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyyah, and Ayman al Zawahiri's January 2008 polemical 216-page refutation, "al-Tabri'ah."

2. The rooting in jurisprudence of the license to accept high levels of civilian casualties has gravitated to expanding the concept of *tatarrus* (noncombatants used as human shields by the enemy) to include the virtual totality of the enemy population. See, for example, the 2005 treatise by Abu Yahya al-Libi, "al-Tatarrus fi-l-Jihad al-Mu'asir" [Human Shields in Contemporary Jihad].

3. Notable in this respect is the "groundbreaking" opinion of Yusuf Qaradawi, one of the most prominent mainline religious scholars of Islam today, in "Shar'iyyat al-'Amaliyyat al-Istishhadiyyah fi Filistin al-Muhtallah" [On the Religious Legitimacy of the Martyrdom Seeking Operations in Occupied Palestine], which justifies civilian casualties by stressing that Israeli society is militarized in its totality.

4. On the basis of the maximalist understanding of this notion, any dialogue with non-Muslims is condemned. See, for example, the denunciation of the response of Saudi intellectuals to their U.S. counterparts in 2002 by Yusuf al-'Ayiri, "al-Raja' Inbatihu Sirran" [Please Prostrate in Private].

5. Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi was released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on October 11, 2005. It was originally contested as a fabrication, but later references to its content in Islamist circles confirmed its authenticity.

6. "Risalah li-Ahl al-'Iraq, Ahl al-'Ilm wa-l-Fadl al-Sadiqin" [A Letter to the People of Iraq, the Truthful Holders of Knowledge and Virtue], Al Jazeera, October 22, 2007.

7. For an example of debates, even within Salafism, on the excesses of jihadism in Iraq, see "Dahr al-Muthallib 'ala Jawaz Tawliyat al-Muslim 'ala Muslim min Kafir Mutaghallib" [The Refutation of the Denunciation of the Permissibility of the Appointment of Muslims to Govern Muslims by a non-Muslim Prevailing Force], circulated in Iraq in 2005.

8. "Libyans Advance in al Qaeda Network," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2008.

9. The incisive reporting on Fath al-Islam by the Lebanese journalist Fida' Itani has been recently integrated into a detailed study of jihadism in Lebanon: *al-Jihadiyyun fi Lubnan: Min Quwwat al-Fajr ila Fath al-Islam* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2008).

10. Statements stressing the centrality of the Palestinian question were made by both leaderships. See, for example, Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, "Al-Din al-Nasihah" [Religion Is Advice], placed on jihadist websites on February 23, 2008; and Osama bin Ladin, "Asbab al-Sira' fi al-Dhikra al-Sittin li-Qiyam Dawlat al-Ihtilal" [The Causes of the Conflict, in the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Creation of the State of Occupation], Al Jazeera, May 17, 2008.