COMMENTARY / *KOMENTAR*

REVIEWING AL QAEDA'S IDEOLOGY: THE POLITICAL ORGANISATION OF TERRORISM© Σ

MENILAI IDEOLOGI AL QAEDA: ORGANISASI POLITIK TERORISME

ARARAT KONSTANIAN*

Introduction

Radical Islamist ideology and the resulting violence have attracted great attention, not only among politicians and experts in the field but also the international arena in general. Rather than seeing manifestations of 'global radical Islamic movements' (Burke 2013) as acts of classical terrorism—in this article's case, those perpetrated by al Qaeda—they become more easily understood when the ideologies underpinning the violence is analysed. There are two distinct views forming the basis of such threats: (1) the first accepts al Qaeda as a classical terrorist group that inflicts violence upon innocent people in general while (2) the second stresses its ideological threat and how it has spread throughout not just the so-called Arab World, but the broader Muslim World and among Muslim populations living in the West (Burke 2007). Although al Qaeda is among the several terrorist groups espousing violence as part of its strategy, its threat is mostly directed toward Arab nations than to general global security. This threat is based on its ideology, where its actions in creating networks and spreading radicalism ostensibly aim to unite and control the Muslim World.

I will first remark on the classical understanding of terrorism and how it is relevant to al Qaeda, as well as the political philosopher Michael Walzer's explanation of radicalism as a method of fighting an enemy, i.e., where so long as a particular enemy is configured, victims of terror can be defined within this understanding. In other words, terror is not the exercise of violence per se, but rather, it is employed as a war tactic (Walzer 2004, 131–133). Moreover, I will refer to other Islamic radical organisations such as Hamas (whose actions are focused on local causes and directed against specific enemies: its radical views are not seen as a threat to the international system) and the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA, whose expressive terrorism has a core goal of gaining attention) (Kurz & Merari 1985). In the case of al Qaeda, its threat emerged not only from physical attacks and

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* **Author:** Ararat Konstanian, MA (*ANU*) is a Research Fellow, Oriental Studies Institute, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, Barbyus 30, Apart. 15/16, 0028, Yerevan Armenia. Email: konstanian@gmail.com

violence alone but also due to its position as an emerging rival of existing Muslim nations and the West. David Kilcullen (2009, 12) notes the seriousness of al Qaeda's rise from the local to the global level and the outcomes in terms of global terrorism and counterterrorism issues.

I will then focus on al Qaeda's rationale in announcing radical jihad (lit. Holy War) against proximal and distal enemies and its motivations for spreading radicalism in both domestic (i.e., the Arab peninsula) and foreign spheres (i.e., the West in general), to show how its essential threat is a political one due to its ideology, and not only through physical terrorist attacks directed against appointed targets. Following this, I will focus on ideological aspects (and hence will apply a spectrum of political science theories) based on existing research by experts in the field of terrorism, counterterrorism, war, and violence.

Violence or ideology?

The classical understanding of terrorism is that such acts are attacks by groups of people against innocent victims, thus stressing the exercise of violence. William Safire suggests that it involves the "persuasion by fear; the intimidation of society by a small group, using as its weapon that society's repugnance at the murder of innocents" (Safire 2008, 719). Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as the infliction of "life-threatening actions perpetrated by politically motivated self-appointed sub-state groups" (McLean and Alistair McMillan 2009; "Oxford Reference Online" n.d.). This explanation only draws attention to particular aspects of al Qaeda's actions, such as the 2001 World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks or the subsequent train bombings in Madrid ("Major Terrorist Acts" n.d.). However, such acts constitute more than just provocations against governments or groups of people because, based on Walzer's explanations, civilians are not seen as innocents but rather as legitimate enemy targets. Osama bin Laden's explanation for the generalisation of al Qaeda's targets (from the United States [US] government to its population at large) was as follows: because US citizens paid taxes, they, therefore, stood in for their government (Lawrence 2005, 165). In other words, al Qaeda could consider entire populations as enemies. Furthermore, as Mendelssohn argues:

> "Al Qaeda's ideology not only challenges the sovereignty of specific states but also brings under attack some of the principles and institutions of the IS [so-called Islamic State]. Al Qaeda rejects the authority of states to recognise other states, especially when it comes to a Muslim land." (Mendelsohn 2005, 45–68).

Thus, al Qaeda should be regarded as a transnational organisation with an explicitly political goal—establishing an Islamic caliphate.

To suggest the ideological importance of this issue, and not to stress the religious trappings of al Qaeda, I will compare it with ASALA, whose goal is to gain global attention in favour of the Armenian question, hence directing its attacks against Turkish politicians and deniers of the twentieth-century Armenian Genocide ("Armenian Secret

Army" 2007). The difference is that ASALA has no intention of creating a governance structure over specific territory (as al Qaeda does), nor has it urged the Armenian diaspora to target Turkey's allies (see also Post 2007. Al Qaeda's ideological threat, in contrast, is derived from Sayyid Qutb and outlined in its call for armed jihad against the West, aiming to "awaken" Muslim populations to start worldwide insurgencies and thus shifting its operations to the international sphere (Burke 2007, 13). Thus, its strategy consists of several points, which include practising a pure Islam, overthrowing "un-Islamic" Arab regimes, evicting "crusaders" and non-believers from the Arab peninsula and establishing a worldwide Islamic caliphate through connections with other radical Islamic groups (Haynes 2010, 7). Again, a comparison with Hamas shows clear differences: rather than changing the established "world order", Hamas's focus is on Israel and Zionism, fighting under the banner of Islam to liberate its territory and establish an Islamic country (Post 2007, 176). Al Qaeda, in this sense, is not to be classified as a terrorist group fighting a war of resistance but as a radical Islamist organisation with a distinct ideology (see also Gregez 2011).

It is useful to note al Qaeda's roots: Burke (2004, 6) accepts that al Qaeda was "descended" from a group of fighters during the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan, and in this sense, it could be considered an ordinary resistance group fighting under the name of Islam, with no cells or networks to speak of yet. The real threat emerged when it adopted a radical form of Islam, with its core disputes with Arab Muslim nations revolving around issues such as the basis upon which the Islamic World should be constituted, and by extension, who had the credibility to lead it. As Rohan Gunaratna (2005) writes, 'Al Qaeda is a jihad organization with a global reach. In keeping its original mandate, its principal aim was to inspire and incite Islamic movements and the Muslim masses worldwide to attack those who threaten Islam and Muslims.' Note that bin Laden accused the Saudi regime of being un-Islamic due its collaboration with the US and other Western countries (Mendelsohn 2005, 45–68).[†] Haynes outlines the connections between al Qaeda and affiliates in Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia since the 1990s, and mentions how this network led to the creation of its radical Islamist understanding (Chenoweth _at al_. 2019). Thus, "Saudi Arabia's arrests of 113 al Qaeda-linked militants, including two suicide bomb teams, shows that the jihadi threat to the world's top oil exporter has not disappeared"—highlighting that its threat is political (Karam 2010).

Furthermore, al Qaeda's threats emerge more from the dissemination of its ideology using technology and the internet instead of its visible attacks: Abdel Bari Atwan (2007, 4–7) mentions the existence of 4,500 jihadi websites bringing ideological sympathisers together, advocating those believers join the jihad and free Muslim nations from unbelievers. Al Qaeda also functions very actively in particular regions, not in terms of the presence of its fighters per se, but the salience of its ideological threat. Gunaratna writes that:

  "[t]oday, al Qaeda's real power is the disparate groups it had trained,

> financed, armed and most importantly ideologized. The al Qaeda network
> (al Qaeda group + its associated groups) and ideologically affiliated cells
> comprise the al Qaeda movement." (Gunaratna 2005).

Thus, Kilcullen (2009) argues the important of counterinsurgency instead of counterterrorism, these being two distinct terms, because al Qaeda is well developed within society and its ideology is strongly entrenched, even if it is inefficient at actually dominating a region.

Ideological Battles

Here, I argue *against* the notion that al Qaeda's actions are merely directed against the foreign influence in the Arab peninsula or that it does not aim for political and social change in the Muslim World (Hegghammer 2006, 41). Even if clashes between radicals and existing governments are not evident, the real threat is to existing political and religious structures, which al Qaeda regards as obstacles to uniting the ummah (Kilcullen 2009, 16). Al Qaeda has targeted regional US and Western interests and explained its opposition to Western influence and the US reliance on Saudi Arabia, for instance. Wiktorowicz and Kalnter (2003, 4) note that "the jihadis charged the Saudis and other regimes in the Muslim world with un-Islamic behavior and thus apostasy and called for a jihad to remove them". Al Qaeda also demanded that the Saudi government relinquish its control (Chaliand and Blin 2007, 274). Its radicals disagreed with the Saudi regime due to differing ideologies in terms of governing the Islamic World, and al Qaeda displayed not only its opposition but its willingness to effect such change within the Arab peninsula (Post 2007, 197). Bin Laden also accused the Saudi regime of reproducing US foreign policy on Islamic issues and highlighted its inability to protect Muslim rights in Palestine and Iraq (Lawrence 2005, 36).[‡] Its war against the regime was also fought on the internet, where the ideological battlefield was dominated by propaganda (Boucek 2008) , thus leading Syrian President Basher al Assad to argue how "Al Qaeda's extremist ideology is now attracting increased support, expanding its networks among a new generation of supporters … in the Sunni Muslim world (Haynes 2010, 16). Thus the ideas and statements mentioned above signify a "Cold War" among Muslims emerging from al Qaeda's ideology.

It is worth mentioning the steps taken against this radical threat, whether explicit or implied, thus demonstrating the concerns of scholars and experts. For example, King Abdullah II of Jordan arranged a meeting with Muslim scholars, inviting them to condemn the ideologies imposed by such radical movements (Kilcullen 2009, 15). Saudi authorities started anti-radicalisation campaigns aimed at educating the public and protecting its population from this ideology (Boucek 2008). Thus, scholars and experts argue that defeating al Qaeda means understanding the emergence of both its ideological threat and physical violence (Ilardi 2009).

Moving forward, Gunaratna (2005) indicates that although al Qaeda was only

partially effective after the US invasion of Afghanistan, the threat of "Global Jihad" remained active and maintained its connections with regional and global affiliates. For instance, its strong links with the Southeast Asian radical terrorist movement Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) are based on a shared ideology of core Islamic unity and faithful relationships between their respective leaders (Gunaratna 2005, 20). As a result, their convergent mutual worldviews have led to engagement in terrorist operations, such as hijacking attempts in Bangkok (23), thus attesting to threats to the international system, particularly in terms of uniting organisations from different regions.

The West and Radical Ideology

The West has primarily paid attention to the open violence of al Qaeda, which was meant as a message to withdraw from Afghanistan and other Muslim countries ("Threat video" 2005; "Al-Qaeda 2005). However, further research shows that al Qaeda's intentions can be sketched along two axes: (1) to awaken and unify the Muslim diaspora within its "caliphate" and anti-crusader movement and (2) to show its hatred of Western civilisation, sending a message that al Qaeda is capable of defeating even the most powerful nations. Hence the threat also lies in the attempts to radicalise Europe's Muslim population (Farmer 2007, 185). In this vein, al Qaeda's ideology has buttressed Huntington's claim that radical Islam is the next threat to the international order (Haynes 2010, 185), given the nature of Sayyid Qutb's claims about the apparent impossibility of Islam and the West adapting to each other and living in peace (Farmer 2007, 86).

The strategies of radical Islamists in targeting Muslim populations include extraordinary methods such as weaponizing mosques, the internet, associations, and scholars to spread their core ideas of extremism and enmity (Kilcullen 2009, 245; Silber and Bhatt 2007). There have been several effects of al Qaeda's incitement to battle against "infidels" and their allies (Kilcullen 2009, 246). See, for example, the Islamic Cultural Centre (the so-called Mosque 30, which spread radical thoughts and was capable of uniting the perpetrators of the Madrid bombings); Beeston's Mosque in London (which discussed the subject of jihad amongst the community); and radical non-governmental organisations in the US (which disseminated the works of radical thinkers, organised gatherings and youth classes, among others) (Silber and Bhatt 2007).

Hence, whether successful or not, it is evident that the real threat is ideology, as propagated by its advocates and practitioners, which has led to segments of Western Muslim populations becoming more active in demanding what they see as their rights to practise Islam under "proper" conditions (including but not limited to separate schools for girls, ritually slaughtered meat, wearing headscarves) from their respective governments (Farmer 2007, 186). This has resulted in increased radicalisation in Europe: al Qaeda's most important tactic in challenging international counterterrorism efforts. Thus, the core threat, in my analysis, comes from radicals attempting to create a separate, radical Islamic identity worldwide to challenge international counterterrorism efforts rather than engage in targeted attacks (Richardson 2007). Hence European anti-

radicalisation efforts, e.g., seen where Dutch officials saw threats not only in conventional security terms but in attempts to isolate the Muslim population from its environs (Vision 2008). Indeed, counterterrorism's inefficient management of al Qaeda is also related to how its ideology allows for a foothold in the tribes among which it operates. Thus, al Qaeda is not a classical terrorist group or separatist movement but a globalised radical organisation with ideological supporters in different regions. The key lesson is the need to challenge such ideology through public education efforts (Kilcullen 2009, 265).

Returning to al Qaeda's enmity with the US specifically, this is related not just to the US's pre-eminence as an occupying force within the Muslim World per se but also because radical Islamist politics finds itself ideologically incompatible with Western culture (Farmer 2007, 86). Burke argues that this battle is political but not primarily due to foreign influence in the Arab peninsula, but because the US is the pre-eminent Western power (Burke 2004, 21–23). Al Qaeda's battle with the US is not territorial but ideological in nature (Huntington 1996, 212; Haynes 2010, 6). Another example from bin Laden is as follows: "the battle isn't between the al-Qaeda organisation and the global Crusaders. Rather, the battle is between Muslims—the people of Islam—and the global Crusaders" (Lawrence 2005, 108). Moreover, the George W. Bush administration's policy of generalising the issue (i.e., framing it as a broad conflict with Islam instead of al Qaeda specifically) and its inability to establish good relations with the Muslim and Arab Worlds (Kellner 2003, 21–24) further polarised the situation, leading to the discourse of an apparent "clash of civilisations."

Conclusion

I argue that violence is not the only threat from al Qaeda, but rather, its willingness to pursue its ideology constitutes another. In short, it aims to provoke a new understanding of Islam, one that is antagonistic towards the West in general and existing Muslim governments in particular. Again, comparisons with liberation movements (i.e., Hamas) or activist ones (i.e., ASALA) are inappropriate here. Where the former may have shared similarities (being also rooted in Islam), its target is specifically Zionism and Israel, while the former focuses on attacking Turkish diplomats to attract international attention in favour of focussing on the Armenian Genocide (Hoffman 2019). Furthermore, I emphasise the digital nature of al Qaeda's ideological threat (as spread through online networks and technology) and directed by radical scholars toward susceptible youths. These networks and their influence are less emphasised in comparison with al Qaeda's more publicised focus on physically fighting foreign forces (Schmid 2011). However, these have been successful at radicalising Muslim minorities in the West, as seen most dramatically in the attacks mentioned above (Slike 2019). I also stress how the emergence of radical Islam on the international scene has specifically threatened Saudi Arabia's ruling family, accusing it of not practising an ideal Islam while collaborating with the US—hence, it has effectively designated multiple opponents. In this regard, al Qaeda's confrontation with the West is intended to provoke a clash between the Muslim World and Western values, hence challenging international security.

Acknowledgement and Declaration

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