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Strategic Counter-Terrorism: Getting Ahead of Terrorism Part II: The Ideological Response

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Introduction

Six years after 9/11, the U.S.-led “Global War on Terrorism” (GWOT) has been a disappointment. The class of terrorist groups the U.S. military and intelligence services planned to target and dismantle have not only survived—some have expanded and others have multiplied. Osama bin Laden, the leader of the group responsible for attacking America’s most iconic targets on 9/11, and his deputy and designated successor, Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, are still alive and active. They continue to target the U.S., its allies, and its friends.

Among jihadist groups, al Qaeda is leading the fight both operationally and ideologically. Despite being the world’s most hunted terrorist group, al Qaeda has successfully disseminated its pernicious ideology of global jihad, enlisting millions of followers and sharing its operational practice of suicide or “martyrdom” with like-minded groups. In addition to “al Qaeda classic,” counter-terrorist forces now face several al Qaedas from Iraq to Indonesia.

After Iraq, the U.S.-led GWOT has suffered a loss of both credibility and momentum. As a concept for working with partners, including Muslim nations, the GWOT is a spent force today. In at least some corners of the Muslim world, the U.S. is branded as anti-Islam and anti-Muslim. To prevent further escalation in threat, the U.S. must rethink its future counter-terrorism strategies—to include combating terrorism on an ideological basis.

The Context

Ideology is the center of gravity of the contemporary wave of extremism and terrorism. Ideology can be ethno-nationalist, politico-religious, or left- or right-wing. In the post-9/11 environment, the centrality of ideology in political violence, especially terrorism, has become increasingly evident both to analysts and to policy and decision makers.¹ Ideology is a powerful message that motivates and propels ordinary human beings into action. A dynamic and evolving belief system, it is created by the interpretation of events by ideologues. Ideology frames organizational structure, leadership, and membership and shapes the strategies and tactics adopted by a group. Jihadi ideologues and group leaders craft their ideology by interpreting, reinterpreting, or misinterpreting religion and politics. Ideology is used to attract and retain recruits as members, supporters, and sympathizers. An individual’s personal history and worldview may make him or her more or less susceptible to a particular terrorist or extremist ideology.

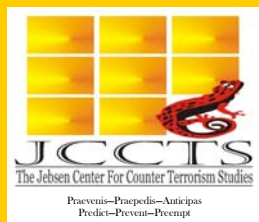
Using ideology, contemporary jihadist groups recruit followers from a cross-section of society—the rich, the poor, the well educated, and the less educated. To generate both recruits and support, they indoctrinate their potential and existing support base. Ideology is inculcated by dissemination in the form of information or propaganda using lectures, speeches, pronouncements, writings, and similar methods. To counter the threat posed by a group, its operational infrastructure must be dismantled and its conceptual infrastructure eroded.

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As terrorism is a vicious by-product of ideological extremism, government and society must develop an ideological response to make it difficult for terrorist groups to replenish their human losses and material wastage. To counter terrorist ideology and to provide an alternative ideology, it is necessary to know its key ideologues, organizational structures, evolving ideology, and target audience: the community.

Consisting of al Qaeda, associated groups, and homegrown cells, the global jihad movement presents a pernicious politico-religious ideology that must be relentless countered and fully discredited. Neither poverty nor lack of education,² but ideological indoctrination, spawns and sustains extremism and terrorism today. We can successfully counter the constructed beliefs of those advocating, supporting, and conducting acts of violence by drawing from values and traditions within the religion of Islam. This approach works only when those challenging a radical worldview are themselves deeply steeped in Muslim doctrines and can argue on the basis of the texts so frequently cited by the ideologues of hate and preachers of violence.

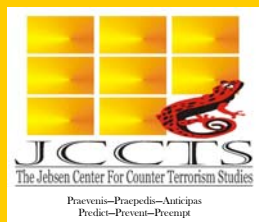
The Islamic belief system is built upon pillars of guidance (*hidayah*), not compulsion; moderateness (*wasta*), not extremism; peace (*amn*), not war; gentleness (*rifq*), not harshness; love (*mahabbah*), not hate; ease (*yusr*), not hardship; harmonious cooperation (*ta'awun*), not disassociation; and brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*), not enmity. These principles embody the legal maxims of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the faith ordinances of Islamic theology (*aqidah*), and moral virtues of Islamic ethics (*akhlaq*).³

The misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the Islamic belief system has become an important root cause of violence. A warped Islamist ideology drives and justifies acts of violence. Terrorism is committed when intention (motivation), capability (human expertise and material resources), and opportunity meet. Although ideology motivates and shapes intention, acts of terror are not born out of ideology alone; ideology is but one of the important elements that influence worldview and spur acts of terror. Undeniably, the role of ideology is significant for al Qaeda and its associated groups. Prevention of terrorism requires the elimination of at least one of the three elements mentioned above—one of which is intention to attack, which is mostly driven by ideology.

A proactive strategy to counter radical ideology would prevent further radicalization of Muslim communities. It would immunize potential recruits—Muslim youth in particular—from being indoctrinated into a culture of violence. In the longer term, this would prevent new generations of extremists from being recruited as sympathizers, supporters, and members of terrorist groups. Countering the deviant ideology would provide an alternative to advocacy of violent extremism.

Given the alienated and uncompromising worldview of terrorist and extremist ideologues, it might be difficult to reduce their influence through the provision of political concessions, amnesties, or other personal incentives. The best chance for success is to engage mainstream Muslims in dialogue, show them how some Muslims are being or may be manipulated by perverted and corrupt interpretation of religious texts, and convince potential extremist sympathizers that there could be better alternatives to acts of violence.

To build an ideological counterweight, the first step is to develop correct understanding of concepts such as *jihad*, *fatwa*, *sharia*, and *ijtihad*; issues involving the basis of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims; and the establishment of an Islamic state. The second step in ideological response involves mapping the pernicious ideology of both extremist and terrorist groups. The third step is to engage religious scholars and clerics to provide counterpoints to virulent propaganda using the same texts which the extremists and terrorists misuse, and to disseminate these counterpoints among the wider community through appropriate channels.



Al Qaeda as the Vanguard of Jihadist Ideology

In the pantheon of jihadist groups, al Qaeda enjoys a vanguard status. The genesis, formation, and development of al Qaeda provide insight into the ideological framework of the global jihad movement. At its origins in 1988, al Qaeda aimed to preserve and consolidate the modest Arab force that fought against the Soviets, inheriting a global infrastructure from the anti-Soviet multinational Afghan mujahideen.⁴ During the last two decades, al Qaeda has emerged as the chief proponent and practitioner of global jihad. After establishing a worldwide network, its leaders sought to influence like-minded groups into adopting its vision of creating Islamic states wherever Muslims live. In addition to fighting the “near enemy” (local Muslim and other governments), al Qaeda leadership argued that the “far enemy” (the U.S. and its allies) must also be attacked. Some groups, emboldened by al Qaeda’s appeal and success after 9/11, even adopted the name al Qaeda for their own independent organizations.⁵

Al Qaeda was of the belief that a weakened U.S. would not support “false Muslim rulers” and “corrupt Muslim regimes” in foreign lands. As such, wherever it operated, al Qaeda and its affiliates placed a premium on striking the United States as its main enemy. Although al Qaeda in Iraq, a subsidiary organization, has mostly operated within Iraq, it has largely targeted the U.S. and its allies present in the country, as well as the Shi’a. Likewise, the al Qaeda organization of the Islamic Maghreb attacked targets in Algeria but also dispatched members to Iraq and elsewhere to fight the global jihad. Similarly, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is still a regional group within Southeast Asia, but its focus is identical to al Qaeda’s: attacking the “far enemy.” The transformation of local and regional jihad groups to emulate al Qaeda’s vision and mission of a global jihad is the most significant ideological development of the post-9/11 environment.

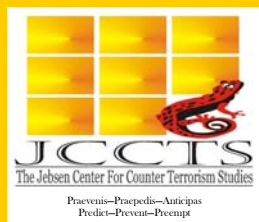
After al Qaeda’s attacks on America’s most iconic landmarks on 9/11, many jihadists increasingly view al Qaeda as a pathfinder, model for emulation, and the vanguard of the Islamic movement. Although al Qaeda’s operational capability has been severely weakened during the past four years, the ideology of global jihad articulated by Osama bin Laden and his group serves as an inspiration for more than thirty Asian, Middle Eastern, and African jihadist groups and for numerous “homegrown” cells in the West. Increasingly seen as the ideal model by existing and emerging local jihad groups, al Qaeda’s unchecked ideology poses a strategic threat.

Al Qaeda is a jihadist organization with a global reach. Its original mandate was to inspire and incite Islamic movements and the Muslim masses worldwide to attack those who threaten Islam and Muslims. Although al Qaeda does not enjoy widespread support among the Muslim masses worldwide, it seeks to exploit the anger, suffering, and resentment of Muslims against the United States. America’s lack of understanding of the Muslim world—for instance, its invasion of Iraq—has given terrorism and extremism a renewed appeal. Considering the support for the global jihad movement in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere, al Qaeda’s ideological campaign has been a partial success.

The real strength of al Qaeda is not its membership per se but in its overarching, highly appealing ideology. Instead of building support for al Qaeda the group, its leadership reinvigorated the global jihad movement.⁶ In addition to training its own members—3,000- 4,000 according to an October 2001 estimate by the Western intelligence community—al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other groups trained several tens of thousands of members in its camps in Afghanistan from 1989 to 2001. Most of the mujahideen who fought against the Soviets disagree with the ideology of al Qaeda and its associated groups, but a small number today form the core of al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda Ideologues

The founding charter of al Qaeda, formulated by Abdullah Azzam, was published in *Al Jihad*, the principal journal of the Arab mujahideen, in April 1988.⁷ He envisaged al Qaeda as



an organization that would channel the energies of the mujahideen into fighting on behalf of oppressed Muslims worldwide—an Islamic “rapid reaction force” ready to spring to the defense of their fellow believers at short notice. Azzam described his original concept:

“Every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward and, while focusing its way into society, puts up with heavy task and enormous sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does not require such a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer, endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifests itself. This vanguard constitutes Al-Qa’idah al-Sulbah for the expected society.”⁸

These forceful words articulated to shape the organization did not include terrorism as a tactic. Azzam was a firm believer that “the end does not justify the means.” Jihad, as he saw it, was invoked as a religious obligation in defense of Islam and Muslims against a defined enemy, not a speculative one. This is best demonstrated in the Afghan-Soviet war, to which he dedicated his life immediately before his death. Azzam rejected a proposal by Egyptian jihadists—Abu Ubaidah al Banshiri, Abu Hafis alias Muhammed Atef, and subsequently al Zawahiri—to utilize jihadi funds to train mujahideen in terrorist techniques and tactics. He went so far as to issue a religious decree (*fatwa*) ruling this use of funds as a violation of Islamic law. Azzam was against the killing of non-combatants and would never endorse the organization’s current use of terrorist tactics.

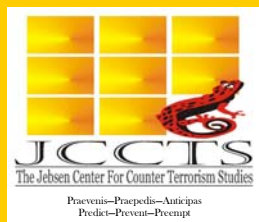
The same, however, cannot be said of al Zawahiri. He is the person largely responsible for the al Qaeda’s mutation into what it is today. He not only filled the vacuum left by Azzam, but transformed bin Laden from a guerrilla who killed soldiers to a terrorist who killed civilians. Before al Zawahiri joined al Qaeda, he was already a practicing terrorist—in fact, he was the mastermind of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, one of the most deadly organizations in the Middle East. Al Zawahiri’s experience against oppressive and repressive political regimes in Egypt made him “battle hardened,” compelled to continue the struggle at all costs.⁹ With the mobility of al Qaeda leaders confined to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Abu Musab al Zarkawi in Iraq has emerged as al Qaeda’s de facto operational commander.

Al Qaeda’s Worldview

Al Qaeda’s worldview has changed over time. It perceives the U.S. and Israel leading a global conspiracy against Islam and the Muslims, and perceives American hegemony as affecting the realization of a Muslim nation. Al Qaeda detests America’s presence in the Arabian Peninsula, especially in Saudi Arabia; derides U.S. support for the Israel state; condemns U.S. assistance to pro-Western dictatorships around the Middle East; and, since the first Intifada in 1987, highlights the neglected future of the Palestinians. Al Qaeda blames the U.S. for virtually everything and holds the U.S. government, American people, and U.S. foreign policy establishment responsible for bringing chaos to the Muslim world.

According to al Qaeda ideologues, the Muslim community must be united and work towards the establishment—by force if necessary—of an Islamic nation adhering to the rule of the Caliphs. Al Qaeda targets both non-Muslims and Muslims who do not share al Qaeda’s worldview. To bin Laden and al Qaeda, it is the religious duty of Muslims around the world to wage jihad on the American land, U.S. citizens, Israel, and Jews. After 9/11, al Qaeda’s targets include U.S. allies—namely Europe, Canada, and Australia—and friends, primarily Muslim countries that support the West. Those Muslims who do not heed this call are declared apostates—people who have forsaken their faith.

Al Qaeda’s main aim is to establish Islamic states wherever Muslims live. The methodology for achieving this is jihad. Al Qaeda’s ideology, often referred to as “jihadism,” is marked by a willingness to carry out armed struggle against those who in their view try to prevent the establishment of an Islamic state. “Jihadism” is at odds with nearly all Islamic religious



thought. “Jihadism” as practiced by al Qaeda has its origins in the Middle East. As a concept, it is often associated with the work of two modern Sunni Islamic thinkers: Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab and Syed Qutb.

Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab was an 18th century reformer who claimed that Islam had been corrupted a generation or so after the death of the Prophet Mohammad.¹⁰ He denounced any theology or customs developed after that as non-Islamic, and in doing so tried to reform 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. Syed Qutb is an Egyptian scholar of the mid-20th century. He declared Western civilization an enemy of Islam and denounced leaders of Muslim nations for not following Islam closely enough. He preached that jihad should be undertaken not just to defend Islam, but to purify Islam. Other contemporary ideologues—Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman alias Blind Sheikh, Abu Mohamed al Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al Filastini and Abu Hamza al Masri—also contributed significantly to al Qaeda’s worldview.

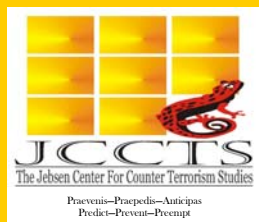
As an extension of these ideologies, al Qaeda often couches its grievances in “Third Worldist” terms familiar to any contemporary anti-globalization activist, often framing modern political concerns, including social justice, within a divine and religious narrative. Jihad in the form of armed struggle in the name of God then becomes the means to attain freedom and rid the *ummah*, or global Muslim community, of injustice. It is a way to punish those who have inflicted cruelty upon the *ummah*.¹¹ The jihad they wage is a “defensive jihad” in the face of perceived aggression by the enemies of Islam and the Muslims.

The presence of U.S. and other non-Muslim troops in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War was a turning point in the life of bin Laden. Although U.S. troops established a presence at the invitation of the Saudi royal family, bin Laden justified his fight by renewing his commitment to “defensive jihad.” He publicly criticized the Saudi royal family and alleged that their invitation of foreign troops to the Arabian Peninsula constituted an affront to the sanctity of the birthplace of Islam and a betrayal of the global Islamic community.¹² As the Saudi government rendered him stateless, bin Laden advocated violence against it and the U.S. As it was difficult to strike targets inside Saudi Arabia, bin Laden’s ire increasingly focused on the United States. Following a period of exile in Sudan and Afghanistan, his radical views sharpened. Jihad to al Qaeda followers was deemed justifiable in order to defend the dignity and pride of the nation, a noble duty which had been neglected by the Muslim leaders. Al Qaeda’s conviction to political ideology couched in religious terms is therefore not easily swayed by cheap promises and materialistic gains. So long as there is no sincere attempt to meet its demands, al Qaeda will have sufficient support for the continuity of the jihad.

In May 1996, after bin Laden moved from Sudan to Afghanistan, he became more violent. He issued a declaration of war against the United States in August 1996. By moving to Afghanistan, he became an internationally recognizable figure with the opportunity to openly present his views. As the leader of al Qaeda, he underlined its resentment towards the U.S., described as the “alliance of Jews, Christians, and their agents.”¹³ Even though he did not possess Islamic religious credentials or authority, bin Laden issued a fatwa in 1998. He claimed that the United States had made “a clear declaration of war on God, His messenger, and Muslims” through its policies in the Islamic world.¹⁴ This is another example of al Qaeda’s jihadist ideology, which set the organization in motion.

With jihad comes the belief in martyrdom. Al Qaeda’s operatives firmly believe that a higher power guides and rewards those who sacrifice themselves for a noble cause, and are ever willing to sacrifice themselves without hesitation. The notion of a noble and blessed death achieved through martyrdom has been firmly embedded in their collective psyche. They view their acts as a sacrifice which is needed in order to achieve the goal of establishing the religion of Allah on earth. Their struggle yields one of the two things: victory or martyrdom.

The *baiah*, or the pledge of allegiance, serves as an assurance that those affiliating themselves



to al Qaeda are committed to the organization's ideology. By instituting it, the organization is freed from conceptual problems arising from differences in opinion. Through the *baiah*, an acceptable level of uniformity is maintained, which contributes to the organization's stability and ease of management and administration.

Al Qaeda's ideology also posits that "true Islam" or "pure Islam" can only be established if the essence of Islamic society and its fundamentals are instituted. This requires the establishment of an Islamic state. Of course, to achieve this end, Muslim society needs an Islamic movement which will provide leadership and spiritual guidance.¹⁵ As a result, a pan-Islamic ideology developed. The jihadist ideology perceives a prevalent animosity and prejudice against Islam, and posits that Islamic governments can never be established through peaceful solutions and cooperative councils. The battle concept was total war, "by pen and gun, by word and bullet, by tongue and teeth."¹⁶ Re-creating the Caliphate, thereby uniting the whole Muslim world into a single entity, is al Qaeda's solution to help bring the Muslim communities out of this dilemma.¹⁷

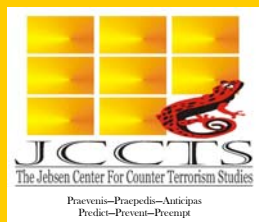
The Global Jihad Movement

After its loss of Afghanistan as a sanctuary, al Qaeda's real power lies in the disparate groups it had trained, financed, armed, and, most importantly, ideologized. The al Qaeda network ("al Qaeda central" plus its associated groups) and ideologically-affiliated homegrown cells comprise the al Qaeda movement. In recent years, the threat posed by al Qaeda has been surpassed by the emergence of a global jihad movement. An alliance of loosely connected, disparate groups, the global jihad movement is not monolithic. Rather, global jihadists present a multidimensional threat to the U.S., its allies, and its friends.

The global jihad movement has four overlapping components:

1. **Al Qaeda:** Also known as "al Qaeda core," "al Qaeda central," or "al Qaeda classic," post-9/11 al Qaeda is operationally weak but ideologically potent. The group's global jihad ideology has great appeal to both associated groups waging the local jihad in conflict zones and radicalized Muslim cells in the migrant and diaspora communities of the West.
2. **Operationally associated groups:** Also known as the "al Qaeda network," this group includes thirty to forty Asian, African, and Middle Eastern organizations. Al Qaeda has provided these groups with training, weapons, finance, and ideology in Pakistan, Sudan, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Minadano (the Philippines), as well as through the Internet. They hold declared or undeclared membership of the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders, formed in February 1998.
3. **Ideologically-affiliated homegrown cells:** These cells are operationally unconnected to al Qaeda but are driven by an ideology of global jihad articulated by it. For example, both "The Supporters al Qaeda" (the cell responsible for the bombing of the trains in Madrid on March 11, 2001) and the disrupted British cell led by Omar Khayam were self-financed and independent of al Qaeda's operational control.¹⁸ Nonetheless, al Qaeda influenced and instigated them with its messages and, in some cases, provided limited training assistance. The post-Iraq robust Islamist milieu in North America, Europe, and Australasia has spawned more violent forms of these groups.
4. **Operationally unconnected Sunni groups:** This category of organizations that are operationally unconnected to al Qaeda could be violent or non-violent; for instance, it includes extremist groups such as Hezb-ut-Tehrir and al Mahajaron in the UK and violent groups like Laskar Jihad and Front Pembela Islam in Indonesia. Some of these groups have publicly criticized bin Laden and al Qaeda, but they believe in global jihad.

Today's global jihad movement is increasingly robust. Although al Qaeda central as led by bin Laden has severely weakened, the jihad movement has grown after the high-impact 9/11 attack. The U.S.-led coalition intervention in Afghanistan, the U.S. invasion and occupation



of Iraq, and the media's coverage of incidents at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay have all strengthened support for associated groups and cells as well as Islamist groups unconnected to al Qaeda. Exploiting the suffering, resentment, and anger of Muslims, terrorist and extremist groups are now able to replenish their human losses and material wastage and continue the fight. Al Qaeda has morphed from a group of 3,000 to 4,000 members in October 2001 to a movement of several tens of thousands today, with untold numbers involved with other groups in the global jihad movement. The dynamic threat is both kinetic and ideological.

The Impact of Ideology: The Driving Force

What actually motivates al Qaeda is not power, wealth, or fame, but an ideological belief in its struggles.¹⁹ The trap that must be avoided by Western scholars is the common assumption that al Qaeda and other jihad groups are driven by publicity in pursuit of their broader goal.²⁰ These groups fight existing governments they perceive as hostile to Islam and governments that have departed from the course of God and refused to apply Shari'ah law. They feel that their mission is legitimate and embark on actions which reflect the bitter historical and practical experience of those involved in the struggle.

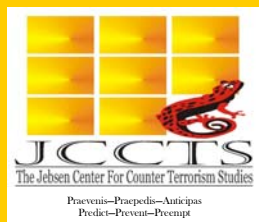
Drawing lessons from the worldwide Muslim response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda ideologues now seek to unite the Muslims in a jihad against the West. In the last century, many mujahideen factions allied together to face the Soviets, a common enemy. They put aside their differences; Muslims could, regardless of nationality, fight side by side and attain victory for all. During this war, the individuals that filled the ranks of the mujahideen came from all strata of society, proving that greater achievements could be attained through unity based on common objectives. Momentous events such as the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the defeat of the Soviet army in Afghanistan, the collapse of communism, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War precipitated the creation of contemporary Islamist movements in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Many governments imprisoned the Afghan veterans, and others were denied entry, expelled, and made stateless.²¹ They formed the core of these groups.

Although demonized in the Western media, bin Laden is seen by his followers and those who fought with him in the Afghan war in a radically different light:

“He not only gave us his money, but he also gave himself. He came down from his palace to live with the Afghan peasants and the Arab fighters. He cooked with them, ate with them, dug trenches with them. This is bin Laden's way. His credentials include fighting in the famous battles of the whole Afghan war. In these battles the mujahidin came out victorious convincing them how the Soviet's huge military machine could be defeated by unconventional methods.”²²

The victory is often interpreted by al Qaeda ideologues as the will of men being single-handedly defeated by the will of God. The internalization of the victory brought about a feeling of power derived from the belief that their effort had received divine legitimacy and a clear indication that the path they had taken was guided. Bin Laden's followers believe that the actions of the mujahideen as primarily supported by the Muslim world directly led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. They also believe that the U.S. had achieved its goal of becoming the sole global superpower through what bin Laden and his fellow mujahideen had achieved in Afghanistan. Bin Laden later justified his actions by stating that the mujahideen were being persecuted by “an ungrateful U.S.” which had also taken credit for the defeat of the Soviets.²³

The presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s during the height of the Gulf War and the U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq were perceived by al Qaeda as acts of aggression.²⁴ Such perceptions generated widespread support and propelled al Qaeda forward, and helped it transform into its present state. The U.S.-led coalition intervention in



Afghanistan has been instrumental in decentralizing al Qaeda's members, dispersing them across the globe. The resulting fragmentation and difficulty in communication with the central command forced al Qaeda members to reorganize into small, manageable, and fluid groups that focused on retaliatory attacks against American interests worldwide.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq has widened the theatre of conflict. Today, there is unprecedented support for jihadist groups, including al Qaeda. The deteriorating situation in Iraq is producing greater unity among disparate groups and galvanizing greater support for extremism and terrorism.²⁵ Working with local jihadist groups worldwide, al Qaeda has convinced them that the enemy is not only domestic governments but also Western interests—particularly U.S. interests.

Homegrown Jihadism

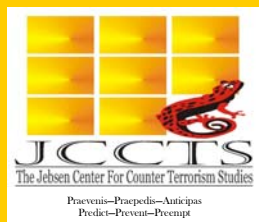
Al Qaeda's ideology seeks to move, incite, and mobilize the Muslim "nation" until it reaches a revolutionary ignition point. Although even 9/11 failed to effectively mobilize Muslim support, there exists a significant dissatisfaction with the United States and its foreign policy among the many Muslim societies in the Middle East and Islamic world. The trend is rising and will be used to further the cause.

Al Qaeda's ideology has created multiple networks of autonomous cells both in the territorial and diaspora and migrant communities. To circumvent technical means of intelligence-gathering, they cleverly reverted to one-to-one contact, primarily via couriers. This explains why the coordinated actions of al Qaeda's German, British, Spanish, Dutch, and Belgian cells were discovered only during post-facto investigations into the background of Muhammad Atta and the other 9/11 conspirators. Even after 7/7, there remain unknown independent cells in the UK.

Al Qaeda has a unique structure, combining highly centralized ideological indoctrination and coordination on one hand with highly decentralized and self-sustaining practical activity on the other. In addition to mounting its own operations, al Qaeda operates as a franchise by providing financial and logistical support, as well as name recognition, to terrorist groups operating in such diverse places as the Philippines, Algeria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Tajikistan, Somalia, Yemen, Kashmir, and Iraq. Local groups may act in the name of al Qaeda in order to bolster their own reputations—even if they are not receiving overt support from the organization. Cooperation among groups has been known to exist.

Today, the physical al Qaeda infrastructure that existed in Afghanistan has been destroyed. Nonetheless, its conceptual infrastructure is intact. Though bin Laden and his associates are scattered or have been arrested and killed in great numbers, the organization has survived as the ideology is intact.²⁶ Al Qaeda's concept of global jihad to gain support from politicized and radicalized Muslims has worked to an extent sufficient to sustain a terrorist campaign. This radical internationalist ideology—sustained by anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric—appeals to many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his percepts, models, and methods. They act in style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense.

With the diffusion of al Qaeda ideology, especially after 9/11, the threat has moved beyond the group and the individual. Israeli intelligence services now prefer the term "jihadi international" instead of "al Qaeda," and the British Special Branch refers to al Qaeda and its associated groups as "international terrorism."²⁷ Although al Qaeda and its associated groups have been virtually destroyed in Europe and North America, an al Qaeda movement of networked individuals has survived. These individuals, when mobilized by committed and experienced individuals, ensure periodic attacks.



The Response

Al Qaeda's ideology poses an unprecedented threat—more so than that of the group itself. Thus far, Western counter-terrorism strategy has entailed targeting al Qaeda leadership, crippling its command and control, and disrupting its current and future support bases—mainly kinetic responses. Six years after 9/11, however, the West has had very limited success. Al Qaeda must be tackled in an unconventional way—through a blend of hard and soft power. Only by using military force coupled with ideological appeal can a wedge be driven between the terrorists and the potential followers. It is essential for the counter-terrorism community understand that without marrying hard power with soft power, the al Qaeda-led jihad movement cannot be defeated.

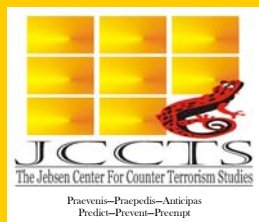
America's war against terrorism—especially following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq—is perceived by Muslims all over the world as unprecedented assault on Islam. The American military response has failed to account for historical, ideological, and social dimensions. There is no doubt America has the material resources to extend its influence everywhere, but it lacks the ideological and moral grounds to sustain this kind of domination. Therefore, it is not surprising that al Qaeda almost always challenges Western secularism and capitalism (represented by America) with Islam's basic body of literature: the Quran and the Sunnah. For Muslims worldwide, these are both extremely rich and powerful texts. In the ongoing battle against Islamist terrorism, there is a pressing need to appreciate the full strategic significance of the Islamic worldview and spirituality.

In a campaign against global jihad, U.S.-led Western governments should think strategically. Most jihadist organizations have modest resources, and it is often the over-reaction of states that has empowered them to evolve into formidable foes. The invasion of Iraq, though entirely justifiable from a humanitarian perspective, has made this task more difficult. Several new groups have spawned and existing groups have strengthened themselves. The unintended consequences of U.S. actions, such as the mistakes in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay,²⁸ have increased the ideological power of the violent Islamists. If countries are to win the war on terror, the U.S.-led coalition must eradicate existing enemies without creating new adversaries. While counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency campaigns must be conducted with the end objective of victory, retaining public support at all times is central.

It helps to remember that bin Laden, al Qaeda's protagonist and the overseer of 9/11, is still alive and is directing his efforts at attracting those Muslims who have thus far shunned his extremist message. As a master propagandist, he attempts to take the moral high ground. He knows that mass participation is essential to his success. Mistakes made in the "war on terror" could very well contribute to increased support for bin Laden worldwide—more so than when he campaigned for his cause on his own. If those directly responsible for conducting the campaign are hasty in their decisions, actions, and reactions, bin Laden will continue to achieve his goals of further politicizing and radicalizing Muslims. Jihadi ideologues and bin Laden believe that time is in their favor. Although the threat has moved beyond bin Laden, the fact that he is still alive and pontificating is a reminder that the Western strategy to fight al Qaeda is flawed.

The success of the war on Islamist terrorism depends heavily on how the threat is perceived and the campaign is managed at the policy, strategic, operational, and tactical levels. As a start, the West in general and the U.S. specifically must reflect upon their current and past policies towards the Muslim world, in particular the Middle East. More equitable policies and treatment will preserve collective well-being and interests instead of pursuing selfish gains at the expense of others. In effect, the U.S. should seek to change the reality in the Middle East and beyond. It is the only country that has the military, diplomatic, political, and economic power to do so.

Mainstream Muslims should be encouraged to fight the Muslim leaders who use and misuse religion for their political ends. The Islamic world must be allowed to decide whether or not to emulate successful Western secular models, but they will never (nor should they) do so



lock, stock, and barrel. Rather, these models must be adopted in a conscious manner, making adjustments where necessary in an attempt to apply them to local conditions. Mutual respect must always be present, and a gradual change must be insisted upon. Learning to respect and safeguard each other's dignity applies in this case. Outward differentiation in the form of moral preferences must not diminish the global mutual desire to create a better world for all. Without a better understanding of the threat, the West cannot effectively sustain the campaign against the multiple jihad and Islamist movements.

Most government leaders think that military force is the answer to extremism and terrorism. Instead of building numerically large military or law enforcement capabilities, what is needed is well-integrated combined force structures that think and act strategically and, most importantly, work together with locals. More than catching or killing terrorists, combating terrorism is about fighting re-generation. While targeting terrorist operational cells is essential to reduce the immediate threat, fighting terrorism is more about fighting extremism that provides the recruits, funds, and justification.

Because of this focus on military force, most Western nations unfortunately neglect the ideological dimension of countering terrorism. They turn a blind eye to the political grievances and aspirations—both actual and perceived—that drive the terrorist. With technological superiority, Western nations are naturally oriented toward kinetic and lethal operations. In the targeted strategy of “find, fix, and finish,” they have developed mastery. Nonetheless, tactical success will not guarantee strategic victory. It is the ultimate loss of public support for terrorism that will make terrorist groups perish.

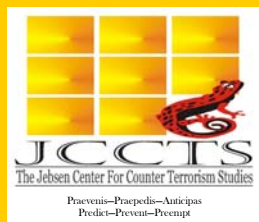
Conclusion

There are many pathways out of violence; however, understanding the mindset of an ideologically motivated adversary is essential before developing a strategy of approach. In fact, success and failure of ending violence very much depends on whether a government has or has not understood the adversary. Prior to his resignation, the final words of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld were that the U.S. had failed to understand the adversary. He was right. Though a courageous Cold War warrior, Rumsfeld himself had failed to understand the post-Cold War adversary. The common thinking globally is that terrorists are criminals; but to think that they are devoid of political and ideological content is wrong.

Terrorist ideologies and motivations are markedly different from criminals. Terrorists use criminal means but their goals are—just like those of politicians—related to power and political gain. The fundamental distinction is that terrorists are ideologically driven (politico-religious, ethno-nationalist, and left/ right wing) and criminals are economically driven (by need and greed). For their beliefs, terrorists are willing to break contact with their loved ones. After sacrificing their families and friends, they eventually sacrifice themselves. Unlike criminals, who chase wealth and personal gain, terrorists are ready to sacrifice everything earthly and die for their beliefs.

Instead of fighting terrorists and extremists through kinetic military action, the U.S. should build capacity in the Muslim countries. To fight the threat both operationally and ideologically, the U.S. must develop multiple small footprints rather than large footprints, as it has in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. can deliver a strategic blow to terrorism and extremism by building capacity in the Muslim world to engage in ideological response.

There must be greater international and domestic cooperation within and between government and agencies engaged in fighting terrorism and extremism. If ideological extremism is not targeted, terrorism will continue. The link between ideological extremism and terrorist action should be understood. It is a cycle: extremism breeds violence. Without controlling extremism, the threat of terrorism cannot be managed. Extremism fuels terrorism, and in turn, terrorism fuels extremism. Each attack, successful or not, breeds support among the extremists for greater violence. To combat extremism, a robust ideological response must be developed.



Until now, the ideological or intellectual battle has been overlooked. There has been no effort to ideologically target al Qaeda, JI, or other comparable groups that apply religious justification to legitimize and authenticate their terrorist activities. No effort can be spared in bridging the gaps arising from different worldviews and their implementation. Programs exploring and encouraging efforts to diminish the sources of mistrust and misunderstanding that harm relations between Muslims and non-Muslims must be carried out.

Empowering mainstream progressive Muslim leaders and moderate intellectuals will be a crucial way of countering the growing influence of extremists and negating the appeal of a misinterpreted version of Islam. At present, moderate and mainstream Muslims are unwilling to proactively confront extremists and terrorists. They are wary about the consequences of challenging these deviants. It is therefore necessary to create an international network of moderate scholars and mainstream clerics and to provide platforms to amplify their message. Moderate Muslims who advocate cooperation and non-violent solutions to conflict must also be empowered. The aim is to marginalize the militants and extremists who advocate intolerance. The stress must always be on the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict in the form of a conversation—not a monologue—where clear and truthful messages can be exchanged and examined with sincerity.

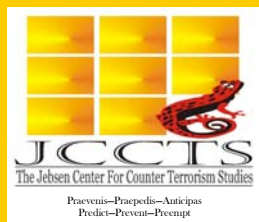
Importantly, the renewed vigor shown by the Muslim community in seeking to deepen its understanding and practice of Islam must not be equated with extremism. This internal effort is an attempt to find answers, within Islam, to the many challenges of the rapidly changing world. Muslims need to update their understanding of Islam within today's context, while preserving the five essential values of religion, lives, intellect, progeny, and property.

Educating the public on the ideologies, organizations, and tactics of terrorism without blaming Islam and Muslims must be done both formally and informally, so that all are prepared to be a part of a collective force against terror. The public, and the majority of Muslims in particular, are strategic partners in counter-terrorism efforts and recognize that they have more to lose than gain if the political and economic stability is upset.

While law enforcement and intelligence services can help, only communities can defeat terrorism. As such, governments must facilitate, support, or develop robust community engagement programs. To prevent the politicization and radicalization of communities exposed to extremist and terrorist propaganda, the communities need to be "inoculated." Such a program should focus on informing the public that:

- (a) al Qaeda and its family of groups are not Koranic, but merely act under the guise of defending Islam and the Muslim community to advance a narrow political agenda;
- (b) bin Laden and al Zawahiri are neither Islamic clerics nor Islamic scholars, and their issuance of religious opinions (*fatawa*) bears no legal authority; and
- (c) concepts of Islam such as *jihad* (to strive), *bai'ah* (allegiance), *al wala wal bara* (loyalty), and *takfir* (excommunication) are being misinterpreted to spread hatred.

Individuals are swayed by ideology because of peripheral factors, not necessarily due to the inherent appeal of the ideology itself. As such, political violence, including terrorism, is often a product of prolonged social, economic, and political conflict. In the case of al Qaeda, its terrorist inclination can be attributed not only to its ideology, but also to the global political context. Al Qaeda strives to position itself as the champion of Muslim grievances. Its narrative speaks of Kashmir under the rule of the predominantly Hindu India, the long oppression of Muslims in Chechnya by the atheist Russians, the suffering of the Palestinians at the hands of the Jews, the civilian Iraqi deaths due to the international community's economic blockade, and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. This global political context is presented through a religious framework, which contributes to motivating Muslims to embrace the ideology. Therefore, a comprehensive approach, one that encompasses



ideological response, is necessary to combat terrorism.

At a global level, counter-ideology initiatives will only be effective if they are supported with parallel efforts that address global Muslim grievances and aspirations. These grievances result from uneven exertion of foreign policy by major powers in the Middle East, especially U.S. policy vis-à-vis Israel and Palestine, the presence of foreign forces in Muslim countries, and the continued support for undemocratic regimes in Muslim countries.

People who join terrorist organizations may adopt its belief system for a variety of reasons. Some do so only after careful study and analysis, while a few adopt it as a powerful tool for organizing and manipulating other people. But some are filled with so much anger and frustration that they jump on the first bandwagon that comes along. The problem lies in: (a) the opportunity; (b) the misinterpretation of religious texts; and (c) the political context.

As such, a far-reaching counter terrorism strategy should seek to address all three. First, create international awareness to build the political will needed to address the genuine political grievances and aspirations. Second, deny public contact with terrorist ideologues, operatives, and supporters by persecuting them. Third, expose how terrorist groups seize recruits, raise funds, and kill in the name of avenging Islam and Muslim blood.

The author wishes to thank Brigadier General Russ Howard, Director of the Jebesen Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University for creating a knowledge bridge from the Global South to the Global North to transfer the concept of ideological response to terrorism and extremism; Stacy Reiter Neal at the Jebesen Center for editing this paper; and Ustaz Mahfuh Halimi, Ustaz Mohamed bin Ali, and Ustaz Muhammed Haniff Hassan of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore for reviewing this paper.

ENDNOTES

¹ After the U.S. strategy on “Global War On Terrorism” began to fault, the U.S. government is now seeking craft its campaign as “a struggle against violent extremism.”

² Many academics attributed terrorism to poverty and lack of education. Bin Laden comes from the richest non-royal Saudi family and al Zawahiri, his deputy, comes from one of the most educated families in Egypt.

³ Ustaz Haji Ali Haji Mohamed, “The Peaceful Message of Islam,” in *Fighting Terrorism: Preventing the Radicalisation of Youth in a Secular and Globalised World*, Abdul Halim Bin Kader, ed. (Singapore: Taman Bacaan Permuda Pemuda Melayu Singapura, 2007), 87.

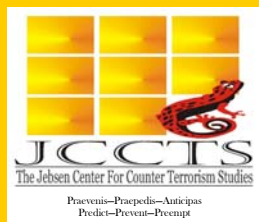
⁴ “Al-Qaeda,” from Jane’s World Insurgency and Terrorism, January 9, 2004. Available at <<http://jtic.janes.com>>.

⁵ For instance, Tawhid Wal Jihad renamed itself “al Qaeda in Iraq,” Jemmah Islamiyah (Noordin Mohammed faction) renamed itself “al Qaeda organization of the Malay Archipelago,” and the Salafi Group for Call and Combat renamed itself the “al Qaeda organization of the Islamic Maghreb.”

⁶ Bin Laden kept the name of al Qaeda a public secret until the U.S. attacked Afghanistan in October 2001. As such, he did not focus on building support for al Qaeda as a single group, but for the wider jihad movement throughout the 1990s and beyond.

⁷ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (London: Hurst & Company, 2002) and *The 9/11 Commission Report* provide insight into the origins of the group.

⁸ Abdullah Azzam, “Al-Qa’idah al-Sulbah,” *Al-Jihad*, 41 (April 1988), 46. The original Arabic text was translated into English by Reuven Paz, then Academic Director, International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Israel. See also Abdullah Azzam, *Iklan al-Jihad* (Peshawar, Pakistan: Maktab Khidmat al-Mujahidin), 95-131.



- ⁹ See published extracts from Ayman al-Zawahiri's book in "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, (London), December 2-10, 2001.
- ¹⁰ "Syeikh Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahab (1115-1206H/1701-1790M)," available at <<http://media.isnet.org/islam/Etc/Wahab.html>>. Accessed December 6, 2004.
- ¹¹ "Translation of Osama's videotape," Al Jazeera Television, October 30, 2004.
- ¹² Robert Fisk, "Interview With Saudi Dissident Bin Laden," *Independent* (London), July 10, 1996.
- ¹³ "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Mosques," *Al-Islah* (London), September 2, 1996.
- ¹⁴ "Text of Fatwa Urging Jihad Against Americans," *Al Quds Al Arabi* (London), February 23, 1998. The *fatwa* argued that defensive jihad was necessary "in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip [the U.S. and Israel]."
- ¹⁵ "Al-Qa'idah al-Sulbah," translated by Reuven Paz from *Al-Jihad* No. 41 (April 1988), 46.
- ¹⁶ Al Qaeda Training manual recovered by the British Police in Manchester, n.d. n.p. p. 2.
- ¹⁷ Gunaratna., 21.
- ¹⁸ Briefings by CNI, the Spanish Intelligence Service, Madrid and on Operation Crevice, SO 13, New Scotland Yard, London, December 2004.
- ¹⁹ Bouchaib Slim, "Osama and Azzarqawi: Rivals or Allies," *IDSS Commentaries* (55/2004), 2.
- ²⁰ Gunaratna, 3.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 5.
- ²² *Ibid*, 21.
- ²³ Interviews with al Qaeda members, 1999.
- ²⁴ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology," *CRS Report for Congress*, November 16, 2004, 5-6.
- ²⁵ Al Zawahiri videotape broadcasted by Al Jazeera, available at <<http://alsaha.fares.net/sahat?128@209.WcGqojKhRA5.0@.1dd6a9e9>>.
- ²⁶ Of the original 3,000-4000 members in 2001, under 500 are still alive or active. See Global Pathfinder ICPVTR database, Singapore, August 2005.
- ²⁷ Burke, 1. See also author's interview with Keith Weston, Director, Police International Counter Terrorism Unit, Thames House, London, November 2004.
- ²⁸ Nat Hentoff, "Kangaroo court in Guantanamo Bay," *Chicago Sun-Times*, December 5, 2004.

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