

Disaggregating al-Qaeda: a Framework For Understanding the post 9/11 al-Qaeda Threat

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Abstract: This paper proposes a conceptual reification of the nature of post 9/11 al-Qaeda, arguing that it represents a decentralized, incipient global Sunni revolutionary insurgency with no clear command and control center rather than a transnational terrorist network. al-Qaeda today can be divided in three concentric circles: (1) the core leadership and ideologues (al-Zawahiri, Ben Laden) who serve as the inspirational leaders of the nebulous; (2) the "local" revolutionary jihadis, that is groups that share al-Qaeda's anti-Western agenda, but operate at the national level by either feeding existing nationalist insurgencies (al-Zarqawi in Irak for example) or trying to instigate new ones (Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula for example); and finally, (3) the "franchised" or "free lancer" groups, that is small networks based on "local" solidarity with few or no operational ties with the core al-Qaeda leadership, that are inspired by its global jihad and follow its overall "policy guidance." What emerges from this complex picture is that this insurgency still possesses immense durability and lethality; however, its excessive decentralization, strategy and organization undermine its revolutionary objective, which is to instigate the masses to overthrow all the Arab states. This sort of threat warrants a counterterrorism response on 2 fronts: a political-ideological and a law enforcement/military.

¹ The views presented here are from the author alone. They do not in any way represent the views of FINTRAC, nor of the government of Canada.

INTRODUCTION

What is the nature and character of the al-Qaeda threat we are facing today? Four years after the horrific September 11th 2001 attacks, there still exists no satisfying answer to this critical question. For example, the US National Strategy for Combating Terrorism recognizes al-Qaeda as a transnational terrorist network with a pyramidal, centralized command and control center, while the State Department contends that al-Qaeda's command and control structure "is increasingly being filled by small semiautonomous local affiliates and factions with little or no support or no direction from al-Qaeda itself."²

This paper contributes to this ongoing debate by proposing a framework for understanding the character and the nature of post 9/11 al-Qaeda. Specifically, I argue that al-Qaeda is not a centralized organizational network of global reach;³ rather, it is an amorphous, decentralized, global jihadi insurgency.⁴ This insurgency can be divided in three concentric circles: (1) the core al-Qaeda leadership (or the parent organization), headed by Bin Laden and Zawahiri, which plays more of an inspirational than an operational role; (2) the "revolutionary jihadis," that is groups linked with the core leadership, sharing its global agenda, yet tactically fighting against the "near enemy" either by endorsing or penetrating islamo-nationalist struggles (Zarqawi in Iraq for example) or by setting up revolutionary operational cells in different theaters (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula for example); and, finally (3), the "franchised" or the self-starter groups, that is deterritorialized groups that are inspired by al-Qaeda's global jihad ideology and plan attacks without the parent organization's active involvement or operational support.⁵

My central conclusion is that this insurgency still possesses appeal, durability and lethality particularly among aggrieved young Muslims living in the West and within local theaters of conflict. However, and more fundamentally, the nebulous remains structurally incapable of translating its acts of violence into effective popular mobilization, as it has no real institutional anchor in any major Arab country. As such, it cannot galvanize the whole Ummah to rise up against the Arab regimes as a prelude to a renewed attempt to liberate all of mandatory Palestine. A threat of this nature--both a security and political one-- thus mandates a counterterrorism response at both the military/law enforcement level and at the politico-ideological one aimed at discrediting the global jihad's revolutionary framing and its jihadi socialization process.

² George W. Bush, National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, (Washington D.C.: The White House, February 2003), 21-24 and State Department, Patterns of Global Terrorism 2004, Middle East Overview, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/31942.pdf>.

³ Many have argued that al-Qaeda has never been truly centralized because it also served as a catalyst for less capable regional groups. It would be incorrect however to confuse the concept of "nomadic jihad" – Afghan –Arab fighters returning to their home countries in the 1990s to stir up domestic conflict--with al-Qaeda as an organization per se organizing and executing attacks. As Jason Burke notes, "from 1996-2001, al-Qaeda's war council was in charge. Much of the operatives had sworn baiya to Bin Laden and it was a monolithic and unitary structure. It used to be a closely knit organization of former mujahideen that trained in Afghan camps and responded to a greater or lesser degree to operational instructions provided by the core." See Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2004), 1-25.

⁴ I use the terms global jihadi insurgency, "al-qaeda" and global jihad throughout this piece.

⁵ Jason Burke, one of the most astute observers of al-Qaeda, also offers a three level conceptualization of what "al-Qaeda is." See Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2004).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. I begin by briefly identifying where “al-Qaeda” lies within the larger spectrum of the Sunni Islamic activism. In the main body of the paper, I explain why al-Qaeda is an insurgency, flesh out my framework and then try to assess the future of the movement. The concluding section discusses counterterrorism policies to deal with this threat.

1) “al-Qaeda” and Islamism

To fully understand the nature of “al-Qaeda”, it is important to first and foremost disaggregate it from the larger consortium of Sunni Islamic movements and see where it stands within it. This is an important first step to assess al-Qaeda’s long-term trends, as it can provide insight into the likeliest manifestations of its violence and possible patterns of development.

Islamism, defined here as the active assertion that the Quran and the Hadith (traditions of the Prophet’s life, actions and words) contain core principles about governance, morals and society, and who tries to implement them in some way,⁶ can be divided into three main distinctive forms: political Islamism, that is, groups operating within the legal framework of their nation-states through mass mobilization aimed at pressuring leaders to implement shari’a (Islamic law); missionary or reformist islamism, that is, social movements whose overriding purpose is the preservation of Muslim identity through education, preaching and guidance; and finally, jihadi Islamism, which exists in 3 main variants: internal (combating ruling-elites considered kufr or impious); irredentist (fighting to redeem land ruled by non-Muslims); and global (combating the West).⁷ As the self-proclaimed vanguard of the Ummah, “al-Qaeda” is part of this jihadi branch of Islamism.

Yet, despite its immense destructive ability, al-Qaeda represents a minority both within the larger consortium of Islamic movements and within the jihadist movement. This is so 2 main reasons. First, there exists a significant fault line between mainstream/missionary Islamists and jihadis. Fundamental differences are both over tactics (violence, terrorism and guerrilla warfare vs political participation) and doctrine.⁸

⁶ Part of the complexity in studying Islamism is that it is a notoriously difficult term to define. Because many Islamic groups are both all-encompassing social movements predicated on Islam as well as lay political parties, many analysts equate Islamism with fundamentalism. This is misleading. Fundamentalists (also called Salafiyya) share two characteristics: (1) they follow a rigid, dogmatic and immutable reading and understanding of the founding religious texts (the Quran and the Sunna); and (2) they are generally concerned with religious exegesis and correcting the social behaviour/morality of individuals in order to make it conform to the example of the Prophet and his companions (the four rightly-guided caliphs). In this respect, fundamentalists are by and large apolitical. They urge believers to return to a pristine, pure, unadulterated practice of the faith. By contrast, Islamism connotes a political agenda. Although socially conservative, Islamists are political activists that aim to bring about a transformation of political, social and economic relations by reappropriating concepts borrowed from Islamic tradition and culture. See Graham Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 23, 45-47 and Guilain Denoëux, “The Forgotten Swamp: Navigating Political Islam,” *Middle East Policy* 2, no. 9 (June 2002): 63-65.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Understanding Islamism*, ICG Middle East/North Africa Report no 37 (March 2005): 1-2.

⁸ By contrast with the more radicals who have no faith in political action, mainstream Islamists believe that traditional concepts and institutions--shura (consultation), ijma (consensus), ijtihad (reinterpretation)--can be used to develop Islamically acceptable forms of popular participation and democratization. Comparing the differences in thought and strategy between the “mainstream” and “extremists” is Ahmad S. Moussalli,

Second, there is an important distinction within jihadi groups between violence that is primarily determined by immediate sociopolitical context (military rule or foreign occupation) and that which arises out of a doctrinal revolutionary preference for violence over non-violent alternatives.⁹ The Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah--the two biggest jihadi groups-- are irrendentist jihadis and not pan-Islamist ones. They have a nationalistic and country specific agenda. Their struggle is territorial--in the name of national liberation of Muslim minorities against a non-Muslim state (Israel)-- rather than against Arab ruling elites and the West, as is the global jihad's. Further, because both Hamas and Hezbollah have an entrenched constituency and are firmly anchored in their respective socio-political landscapes, they operate in a context of costs and opportunities (e.g., their desire to construct a functioning polity, the demands from their constituents; their institutional survival) that do not allow them to pursue--regardless of how much they would want to--rigid, dogmatic black and white, "all or nothing" policies. This is contrary to international jihadis whose very objectives and form of political contestation are--by definition--strategic.

This explains why despite the fact that there is known tactical cooperation (sharing of data or expertise) between Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, there is very little evidence pointing to the strategic cooperation/operational coordination of attacks between Hamas-Hezbollah on one side and Al-Qaeda on the other.¹⁰ The nature of their jihads and the ideational sources of their conduct are at odds.

It follows then, quite logically, that it is incorrect to hold that al-Qaeda's global ideology is shared by all jihadis, let alone all Islamists; as I have shown, al-Qaeda is only a small branch of an extremely complex consortium of movements. Lumping all Islamists together is thus dangerous and counterproductive: it risks radicalizing the very forces we need to empower to defeat the global jihad.

2) Framework: nature and character of al-Qaeda

2.1. Character: al-Qaeda as a global insurgency

Bard O'Neill defines insurgency as "a struggle mounting a non-ruling group and the ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g., organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics."¹¹ Insurgents certainly use terrorism as a tactic; but in contrast with terrorists, they use it in the service of a revolutionary strategy, rather than as a purely coercitive tool.

"Modern Islamic Fundamentalist Discourses on Civil Society, Pluralism and Democracy," in *Civil Society in the Middle East* Vol. 1, ed. Augustus Richard Norton, (New York: Leiden, 1995), 79-120.

⁹ ICG, *Understanding Islamism*, 15.

¹⁰ Hamas and Hezbollah have routinely condemned al-Qaeda's attacks, even if they share deep antipathy for US foreign policy and an ideological rejection of the existence of the State of Israel. For a criticism of the September 11th attacks, see MSANews, September 14, 2001, available at:

<http://msanews.mynet.net/MSANEWS/200109/20010917.15.html>. For an ideological rejection of al-Qaeda's methods and attacks, see the statements made by Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadllah in, "Faldallah to Al-Hayat: There is no clash of cultures with the West but a struggle against Arrogance," *Al-Hayat*, 15 September 2002, p10 and "Conversations and Texts by Fadllalah" quoted in Fawaz Gerges, *Far Enemy: Why the Jihad went Global*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 237-238.

¹¹ Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Terrorism* (Washington: Brassey's, 1990): 13.

Two characteristics make “al-Qaeda” a global insurgency and inform its nature: its revolutionary objectives and its framing processes.

Objectives. Through numerous fatwas (religious edicts), al-Qaeda has stated that its ultimate objective is to topple what it considers the “impious rulers” across the Muslim world, and in doing so, reestablish the caliphate, install a caliph (pan-Islamic ruler) and recuperate “usurped” Muslim lands (Israel).¹² The September attacks and subsequent attacks must not obscure this fundamental objective of the nebulous; their jihad is first and foremost a war within Islam (a fitna) to capture that state at the local level.¹³ The objective of the 9/11 attacks, Seif-al-Adl (al-Qaeda’s no 3) writes, “was to reinvigorate and unify a splintered, war-torn jihadist movement and restore its credibility in the eyes of the Ummah. At the heart of this thinking is the idea advanced by Sayyid Qutb: that only an Islamic vanguard can rid Muslim society and politics (ignorance of divine authority) and restore hakimiya (God’s sovereignty) to earth.”¹⁴ Al-Qaeda’s long-term objectives are thus in accordance with O’Neill definition of insurgency.

Framing processes: What fundamentally distinguishes al-Qaeda from other terrorist group (be they transnational or otherwise) is its commitment to both politics and violence through a mobilizing process social movement theorists call “framing.”

Frames are akin to political manifestos; they represent interpretative schemata that provide a framework for comprehending one’s surrounding environment. David Snow and his colleagues identify three main framing tasks for movements: first, movements construct frames that diagnose a problem in need of redress. Second, they offer solutions to them, including specific tactics and strategies; finally, movements provide a rationale to motivate and support collective action.¹⁵ To transform such mobilization potential into actual mobilization, movements need to achieve “frame alignment.” Such “frame alignment” only occurs however when there is some congruence between movement interpretive orientations and the individual. Therefore, the burden is on a movement to enhance its mobilization and create avenues for contention by drawing upon grievances, the cultural symbols, language and identities of its constituents.

Al-Qaeda’s leadership and core ideologues advance two militant frames in order to achieve “frame alignment” and motivate violence against the West: (1) they portray their violence as a defensive jihad against the perceived “enemies of Islam” (the West, Israel and the “impious” Arab regimes) and (2) they portray jihad as an individual obligation (fard ‘ayn), as opposed to the traditional conception of it as collective duty (fard kifaya).¹⁶ As

¹² For statements concerning al-Qaeda’s strategy see Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*, (Washington D.C.: Brassey’s, 2004).

¹³ The shift in the jihadist’ strategy from the “near enemy” to the “far enemy” is carefully laid out in Ayman al-Zawahiri’s book, *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*. Extracts of the book were published by Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), Dec 2-12, 2001. Passages related to the shift in the jihadists’ strategy are found in Barry Rubin, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 175-185 and Montasser al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Laden’s Right- Hand Man*, translated by Ahmed Fekry (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 30-34, 60-73.

¹⁴ Quoted from Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 188.

¹⁵ David A. Snow, “Framing processes, Ideology and Discursive Fields,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004): 386-387.

¹⁶ For a good overview of al-Qaeda’s frames, see Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kalner, “Killing in the Name of Islam: al-Qaeda’s Justification for September 11,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol X, no 2, (Summer 2003): 76-92.

studies of persuasion and framing have noted, the impact of movement framing is determined by its resonance with the experiences and worldview of the target audience. Specific context gives a frame “empirical credibility” in the eyes of potential followers.

“We are being attacked in Palestine, Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia, Kashmir, the Philippines and everywhere,” Bin Laden stated in his October 2001 interview with al-Jazeera. “The wounds of the Muslims are deep everywhere. But today our wounds are deeper because the crusaders and the Jews have joined together to invade the heart of dar-al-islam: our most sacred places in Saudi Arabia, Mecca and Medina, including the Prophet’s Mosque, and the al-Aqsa mosque and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The only way to destroy this atheism is by jihad, fighting and bombings that bring martyrdom. Only blood will wipe out the shame and the dishonor inflicted on Muslims. Whoever does not participate in the battle or does not support a fighter for Allah... God will punish before the Day of Judgment.”¹⁷

Al-Qaeda’s portrayal of its anti-Western jihad as a struggle in defense of Islamic lands and faith against the enemies of Islam is a purely strategic frame. It is used as useful rallying cry and a potential instrument of political mobilization.

It is precisely this ideological capacity to try to raise the “consciousness of the masses” that makes al-Qaeda an insurgency rather than a mere terrorist organization. Without it, al-Qaeda’s terrorists would be perceived as lacking any sort of justification for their violent actions and hence would lose support.

2.1. Nature of post 9/11 al-Qaeda

Many authors have persuasively argued that al-Qaeda’s loss of physical sanctuary and the death and/or capture of 15 of its 37 top operatives have seriously undermined the organizational capacity of the centralized organization that planned the September 11th attacks.

To ensure its organizational survival in a post 9/11 world, the al-Qaeda of old has morphed into a non-hierarchical nebulous. Its new nature is a function of both its mobilization strategy (i.e., its “defensive jihad” against the perceived enemies of Islam) and its organizational features (i.e., a nebulous with no political outlook, possessing no entrenched constituency). Schematically, we can divide the global jihad in three concentric circles: the “ideological” leadership; the revolutionary jihadis; and the franchised groups. I look at each in turn.¹⁸

The core leadership. The top circle of the nebulous comprises the key ideologues or what I would call “the established authorities of the global jihad.” These individuals are the ideological forefathers of the jihadi-salafi movement and the original founders of al-Qaeda. They include Bin Laden and Zawahiri, but also other inspirational leaders such as Abu Qatada al-Filastini (who is part of al-Qaeda’s fatwa committee) and Abou Mohammad al-Maqdissi.

These leaders serve two purposes: first, they determine the nebulous’ vision, overall direction and dictate its long-term strategy. Second, through their propaganda

¹⁷ Quoted from Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 180.

¹⁸ My framework draws from Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* and Dominique Thomas, *Les Hommes d’Al-Qaeda: Discours et Stratégie* (Éditions Michalon: 2005) respective conceptualization of the global jihad.

efforts and use of modern communications, they try to legitimize their “defensive jihad” by demeaning non-violent avenues of challenging US and Western powers. In doing so, they seek to impose their own interpretive violent vision of Islam on behalf of the Muslim community as well as on other non-violent Islamists. This process of appropriating cultural foundations for violent purposes plays a critical role in the reproduction and expansion of the nebulous’ membership.

Uncertainty still remains, however, as to the extent of the core leadership’s operational role in planning and executing attacks. Many argue that Bin Laden and Zawahiri remain operational, and that as a result, killing or capturing them will likely eradicate the nebulous. They point to Seif-al-Adl’s--al-Qaeda’s military commander--alleged involvement in the May 2003 attacks in Saudi Arabia as evidence of their claims.

I believe this view is incorrect not only in light of the insurgent threat that al-Qaeda poses and the military onslaught it has endured since 9/11, but also because it is contradicted by much of the open source evidence. According to the State Department’s Pattern of Terrorism 2004, it is not at all clear that the core leadership is in touch with militants and dictates specific operations. Out of 10 “al-Qaeda” related terrorist attacks from September 12th 2001 until March 31st 2004, only one was related to the core leadership (the firebombing of a synagogue in Tunisia in 2002).¹⁹

The revolutionary jihadis. The revolutionary jihadis form the second group of the global jihad. It is from their ranks that those with the leadership skills needed to organize operational cells and conduct attacks come from. In general terms, revolutionary jihadis seek to operationalize the overall direction of the core leadership either via cyberspace²⁰ or within the various theaters of jihad across the Arab world.

Mostly led by veterans of the Afghan war,²¹ revolutionary jihadis exhibit two key features: (1) even though they share the same doctrinal and strategic anti-Western objectives of the larger network, they are not united operationally and possess different tactical outlooks. According to their theater of operation, revolutionary jihadis are either “internationalist” in their nature and their recruitment drive (for example, Zarqawi, a Jordanian, has enlisted numerous foreign jihadis to fight along side of him against the US) or local in their recruitment drive (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat in Algeria, Asbat-al-Ansar in Lebanon, the Libyan Islamic

¹⁹ Audrey Cruth Cronin, “Terrorist Attacks by al-Qaeda,” Congressional Research Service, March 31st 2004, available at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/033104.pdf>. See also RANS-MIPT Terrorism Incident Database available at http://db.mipt.org/mipt_rand.cftm.

²⁰ Key documents offering operational advice on the web include: Jihadi Iraq: Hopes and Realities analysed in Lia Brynyar and Thomas Hegghamer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged al-Qaeda Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, 2004: 355-375 and Al-Qaeda’ search for new fronts: Instructions for jihadi activity in Egypt and Sinai analysed by Reuven Paz, available at http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_7_vol_3_-_The_new_front_in_Egypt_and_Sinai.pdf.

²¹ A quick scan at key revolutionary jihadis shows that they are all veterans from the first Afghan War: Abu Musab al Zarqawi (Iraq), Abdel Aziz al-Mouqrin (dead, Saudi Arabia), Saleh al-Awfi (Saudi Arabia), Abou Walid al-Gambi (Saudi Arabia), Youssef al-Ayeeri (Saudi Arabia), Abou Omar al-Sayf in Chechnya; see Thomas, *Les Hommes d’al-Qaeda*, 1-2.

Fighting Group, etc) but “internationalist” operationally (i.e., they target foreign presence).²²

The case of Abu Muzab al-Zarqawi in Iraq and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula illustrates this diversity of tactical outlooks. While the former is fighting the “far enemy” (the US locally in Iraq) for global objectives--transforming Iraq into al-Qaeda’s new physical sanctuary in order to export the jihad to the rest of the region--, the latter is fighting the “near enemy”--foreign presence on Saudi Arabian soil--to achieve a local objective, that is overthrowing the ruling Al Saud family.

(2) These jihadis’ doctrinaire preference on violence and non-inclination towards politics impacts their strategic orientation in two ways. First, to get support and thus to survive organizationally, internationalist jihadis need to play to the defensive understandings of jihad; hence they have no choice but to try to link up with various insurgencies across the Muslim world (like Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia) and/or label the ruling-elites that they are fighting as kufr so to portray themselves as defenders of the Umma.²³

Second, seeing as they are uninterested in any form of political activism, local revolutionary jihadis have no strong institutional anchor within any Arab state that would allow them to instigate their regional revolution. Thus, rather than relying on a mass mobilization strategy, they tend to rely on the “conscience raising model” of terrorism, highly elitist urban. A few spectacular attacks are meant to galvanize the masses into revolutionary activism against the ruling-elites. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula embodies this strategy.

The franchised groups. The “franchise” groups represent the third subgroup of the nebulous. Franchise groups are small, widely scattered and extremely decentralized independent cells with no group membership. Some are sleeper cells, but most are groupings. They generally have no organizational connections to the core leadership, but are inspired by its global jihad ideology. As Marc Sageman has shown, there is very little evidence of top-down recruitment in the global jihad: joining the jihad centers on sporadic, spontaneously formed groups.²⁴ It’s a bottom-up process where members volunteer for the cause. The glue that holds these groups together is the perception that Islam is under siege.

In contrast with revolutionary jihadis, franchised groups do not necessarily try to centrally organize local insurrections against Muslim governments (as in Saudi Arabia, Yemen) nor do they follow country-specific short-term tactical objectives (Iraq) for the broader movement. Linkages certainly exist with some gatekeepers and operatives of the larger movement (hence the importance of security services tracking individuals of concern),²⁵ but the distinctive feature of these franchised groups is that they become

²² On the nature and ideology of QPA, see International Crisis Group, Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists? ICG Middle East Report no 31 (2004): 14-17.

²³ See the statements from the QPA in Id.

²⁴ See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004): 99-137.

²⁵ Jamal Zougam, the prime suspect of the 2004 Madrid bombings, had close ties to Amer Azizi, one of al-Qaeda’s top officials in Europe. Spanish Court Proceedings #35/2001 concerning the activities of al-Qaeda in Spain, quoted from Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zarqawi: the New Face of al-Qaeda* (Other Press: New York, 2004), 183.

radicalized/operational domestically and conduct their operations independently of any central hub.²⁶

This seems to be the most likely direction of the global jihad. Franchise groups are believed to be behind the Madrid attacks in 2004, Casablanca in 2003, Egypt in 2004, and London 2005.²⁷

Conclusions. Two broad conclusions follow from my framework. First, the threat we are now facing goes beyond Bin Laden, Zawahiri and other inspirational leaders. Capturing or killing them will only be a short term ideological victory; it will not be an operational one, as al-Qaeda is an insurgency, not a transnational terrorist group with top-down recruitment processes. Today, it is a mixture of revolutionary jihadis and franchise groups, united against what they perceive are the enemies of Islam that are the main drivers of the global jihad.

Second, the organizational dynamics of this insurgency is both its greatest strength and weakness. Looking at strength, such an insurgency can be extremely lethal, as it can carry multiple attacks in multiple theaters and pursue various tactical goals (trying to enact revolutionary change in the Arab world, coercing the US to withdraw from the region and fighting it in Iraq, exporting the jihad in Europe, etc) at the same time. As such, it poses a tremendous security threat.

However, and more importantly, organizational dynamics and al-Qaeda's place within the broader Islamist movement undermine its potential for achieving revolutionary change across the region. To begin, al-Qaeda still remains a tiny minority within the larger Islamist movement, even amongst jihadis. Not only has it not been able to re-activate former militants from Egypt and Algeria to fight against the West (al-Jamm'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt and the Algerian Armée Islamique du Salut, the former military wing of the FIS)--a fact overlooked by many analysts--²⁸ but it has not been able to co-opt the

²⁶ For a list of examples, see Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, 267.

²⁷ Providing evidence of this Reuven Paz in his "From Madrid to London: Al-Qaeda exports the war to Europe," available at http://www.e-prism.org/images/PRISM_no_3_vol_3_-_London_Bombings.pdf. The IISS also notes that the "London conspirators were radicalized in Britain, came together spontaneously and independently, used bomb recipes that were available on the internet, and carried out the attacks on their own." IISS strategic comment, "The Jihad: Change and Continuation," www.iiss.org/stratcom, September 2005.

²⁸ Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (EIG) is the largest jihadist organization in the Arab world. Many western analysts still claim that EIG is an integral part of al-Qaeda. Much of the confusion surrounding this lies with the fact that Rafa i'Taha, one of the groups' key leaders, signed the charter of the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders that formalized the existence of al-Qaeda in 1998. Since March 1999 however, al-Jamm'a al-Islamiyya's Majlis al-Shura (the Consultative Council) has proclaimed a cease-fire in Egypt that it has held ever since. Subsequently, in a series of books, al-Jama'a's historical leaders have repudiated their violent objectives, tacitly acknowledging that their jihad against the Egyptian regime was illicit rebellion, rather than "self-defence." In 2003 and 2004, they have also presented a comprehensive critique of al-Qaeda's jihad. Whether this ideological shift is genuine or not is irrelevant: EIG's actions speak louder than its words. Since the 1999 cease-fire, there has been not been any documented attack within Egypt related to the EIG. This begs the question: if it is true that EIG is still actively involved in al-Qaeda's operations, why has there not been more militant activity by the group? Indeed, given its size, paramilitary character and its international support network (which is surely not fully dismantled), one would have expected more militancy and anti-Western violence by the groups' sleeper cells in line with al-Qaeda's strategy, especially after the September 11th attacks. For a description of the EIG's four book initiative see, ICG, "Egypt's Opportunity," 7-10 and Montasser al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda*, 73-92. For al-Jam'aa critique of al-Qaeda see Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 200-215. Gerges details the two EIG books that deal specifically with al-Qaeda: the first authored by Mohammed Essam Derbala is titled *Al-Qaeda*

two biggest jihadi groups in the region-- Hamas and Hezbollah--, who reject its globalization of the struggle against the West.

Moreover, the diversity of tactical outlooks employed by the revolutionary jihadis demonstrates that there exists no clear “operational center of gravity” for the nebulous to achieve its global political objectives. Tensions between both local and global agendas-- as evidenced for example by Al-Qaeda in Iraq fighting the US and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula seeking to overthrow the Saudi monarchy-- undermine the global jihad’s organizational discipline and its potential for achieving its long-term strategic objectives.

Finally, by becoming increasingly fragmented and by not possessing any rear base/societal support in the Arab world, al-Qaeda cannot effectively translate its attacks into effective political mobilization.

3) Future trends in the global jihad

Based on the logic of my framework, two somewhat contradictory trends appear to be likely. On the one hand, al-Qaeda will likely continue to penetrate and to link local struggles-- whether they are against the “near enemy” (the Arab regimes) or the “far enemy” (US, the West and Israel)-- with an overarching global Islamist framework of “defensive jihad” against the enemies of Islam. In doing so, it will try to achieve what it failed to do so far: the ideological convergence among militants of all stripes.

Given the strategic returns that it offers, Iraq is likely to remain the most important theater of operation in this regard. Not only can it serve as potential base to spread conflict across the region, but it also has the potential to create a new class of talented “Arab Iraqis” with experience in urban combat. In a way similar to today’s revolutionary jihadis, these Arab Iraqis will likely try to foster civil conflict back at home., “The al-Qaeda membership that was distinguished by having trained in Afghanistan will gradually dissipate, to be replaced in part by the dispersion of the experienced survivors of the conflict in Iraq” states the 2005 report by the National Intelligence Council.²⁹

On the other hand, facing greater counterterrorist measures, we are also likely to witness a greater decentralization of the global jihad and a resulting increase in the activity of the franchise groups. United by al-Qaeda’s ideology but not answering to it, these free-lancers are likely to become the main drivers of the global jihad.

Such groups have two different origins. The first is related to local political context. Absent any credible non-violent outlets for contention, Islamic activists frustrated with both domestic and pan-Arab/Islamic issues can “externalize” their local conflict and join the global jihad. In fact, there is some flimsy evidence suggesting that this trend is becoming apparent in Egypt.³⁰

Strategy: Mistakes and Dangers (2003) and the second, authored by Nageh Abdullah Ibrahim is titled Islam and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century (2004)

²⁹ Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 264.

³⁰ According to the Cairo Times, on September 9th 2002, 51 members of a group called Al-Wa’d (The Pledge) were sentenced to prison terms on charges for conspiring to assassinate President Mubarak and other prominent officials. In September 2003, 25 people were arrested on charges of establishing a clandestine group named “The Jihad group for Supporting Muslims at Home and Abroad.” In April 2003, 16 members of a group called the “Qutbists” were arrested on planning anti-Israeli and US attacks. See International Crisis Group, “Egypt’s Opportunity,” ICG Middle East Briefing Paper (April 2004: 18)

The second source of franchising occurring is among disaffected, uprooted Muslims living in the West. Radicalized local groups based on local solidarities--like the London bombers—will assume the “al-Qaeda” label and carry out attacks in its name according to what they see as its overall strategy.

This trend towards excessive decentralization will likely be facilitated by the internet. Serving both as a vehicle of propaganda as well as a tool of tactical guidance and technical knowledge on matters pertaining to target selection, weapons production, surveillance and counter-surveillance, the internet is increasingly providing a virtual training facility for would-be jihadis.³¹ Documents such as the encyclopedia of Jihad--a 6500 page book--offers a would be bomber all the operational knowledge to become a fighter. A previously unknown cell, radicalized by events in Palestine or Iraq, can self-recruit and become operational with the available content on the web. The nebulous, in short, is already moving towards quasi in self-governing mode.³²

4) Conclusion: how do we deal with this threat?

This paper has proposed a conceptual reification of what “al-Qaeda is.” It has argued that al-Qaeda should not be considered a transnational network, but rather a global insurgency divided in three subgroups: the inspirational leadership; the revolutionary jihadis; and the franchise groups.

In order to defeat this threat, effective counterterrorism policy needs to destroy the active generation of al-Qaeda terrorists, while also preventing the next one from emerging. To do so, counterterrorism should focus on two levels: first, at the military/enforcement one, with a focus on both denial and homeland security measures, and second at the political-ideological level.

Given the extreme decentralization of the threat, denial measures should focus on the disruption of local operational/attack cells, safe havens, jihadi internet websites and terrorist finances. Denial measures should also focus on the micro-mobilization mechanisms that lead individuals to join radical groups—such as the jihadi socialization process that inculcates values of violence and the broader structures that support them—for example, radical preachers, logistical and propaganda cells, etc. Homeland security measures should focus on greater emergency preparedness and the protection of key physical infrastructures as well as a greater understanding of the socio-cultural hardships facing the local communities from which the future generation of franchise groups will come from.

The second response to this threat is at the political-ideological level. Even though al-Qaeda cannot structurally achieve its revolutionary objectives, its greatest appeal lies in its “defensive jihad” framing. By portraying itself as the defender of the Umma, al-Qaeda frames its attacks as acts of unparalleled heroism, religious obligation and personal redemption. In doing so, it seeks to foster a culture of martyrdom that generates future volunteers for suicide attacks.³³ Whether this framing is used for propaganda purposes or not to “instigate and mobilize,” the fact remains that it is the glue that holds the nebulous together.

³¹ See IISS, “Jihad: Change and Continuation,” 2.

³² Dominique Thomas, *Les Hommes d'al-Qaeda*, 113.

³³ Mohammed Hafez, “Manufacturing Human Bombs: Strategy, Culture and Conflict in the Making of Palestinian Terrorism,” available on the web at: <http://www.nijpcs.org/terror/Hafez%20Paper.pdf>, 1.

The key to defeating al-Qaeda is therefore to delegitimize its militant framing. As social movements theorist have argued, the ability for a movement to transform a mobilization potential into actual mobilization is contingent on “frame resonance.”³⁴ Because al-Qaeda’s framing is militant and supports high-risk activism, it can only “resonate” in an environment where the US/West regional policies are perceived to be at “war against Islam” and where non-violent institutional avenues of contention are perceived to be effective. This is because very few individuals are likely to engage in an armed struggle --no matter how aggrieved they are--when they believe that opportunities for peacefully attenuating their grievances are available and are perceived to be effective.

Accordingly, western policymakers should pursue three key long-term strategies: they should actively pursue a just and fair solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestine remaining the cause célèbre in the Arab world and a fundamental source of support for global jihadis. Second, they should actively pursue the resolution of various local insurgencies that breed revolutionary jihadis. Finally, they should strongly push Arab regimes to democratize, even this means allowing Islamists to participate in the process.³⁵ al-Qaeda views democracy as the death knell of Islam, but many non-violent Islamists have accepted it, at least in practice. By giving Islamists a stake in the system, political inclusion serves to de-radicalize them while increasing their commitment to working within the established order. More importantly, by providing a non-violent outlet for contention, inclusion will strengthen them, while marginalizing the more extremists by undercutting their claims that militant jihad is the only means to foster change in the region and to challenge Western hegemony.

³⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Introduction,” in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2004), 16.

³⁵ Democratization, however, has some important tradeoffs for both the Arab regimes and for Western interests. Other than pragmatic concerns over the Islamists’ popularity, concerns for secular Arab regimes refer to what role Islam should play in shaping national identity. How to integrate popular, non-violent Islamic movements within the public sphere without destabilizing the whole system is one of the most difficult issues facing secular Arab regimes. Concerns that arise for the US (and the West) are essentially over geopolitics and how Islamists in power might undermine the following Western and US strategic interests in the region: the preservation of a steady flow of oil, the Israel-Palestinian peace process, the proliferation of WMD, securing the peace in Iraq, and preventing the emergence of regional hegemons.

