

Jihadists Target the American Dream

By Brian Fishman

JIHADIST STRATEGISTS ARE under no illusion that al-Qa`ida can destroy the United States militarily. As a result, jihadist thinkers have identified more creative strategies to mitigate U.S. military might, most of which attempt to exploit perceived social and political dynamics within the United States. These strategies are dangerous and often diabolically insightful. Such strategies are also overly optimistic, as they are often predicated on the faulty assumption that American society is inherently unstable and only needs a small push to degenerate into chaos. These strategies point to the complexity of al-Qa`ida's war on the West and illustrate why the U.S. response must be just as calculated.

Dividing America by Derailing its Economy

In his seminal work, *The Management of Savagery*, Abu Bakr Naji argues that the power differential between the United States and its jihadist enemies is smaller than usually assumed.¹ According to Naji, the ability of the United States to control events around the world is based largely on a "deceptive media halo" that has convinced governments and individuals that the United States is capable of directing world events.² Naji argues that if jihadists can draw the United States into continual conflict in the Middle East, they can puncture this deceptive media halo. He also argues that the economic costs of such a conflict will spur internal social conflict in the United States, which will further undermine the halo. Naji believes that the United States is susceptible to internal conflict because the deceptive media halo papers over its own internal inconsistencies. According to Naji, by removing that halo, U.S. society will degenerate on its own.

These arguments were applied to Iraq early in the war by the Anonymous author of *Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dreams*,

1 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, translated by William McCants, Combating Terrorism Center.

2 William McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Stealing al-Qa`ida's Playbook* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, February 2006).

a jihadist blueprint for defeating the United States in Iraq.³ *Iraqi Jihad* is best known for its prescient analysis of Spanish public opinion just before the March 2004 Madrid train bombings, but the book's central thesis is that the United States can be beaten in Iraq by forcing it to bear the economic costs of rebuilding the country without allied help or an influx of Iraqi oil revenue.

Urging attacks on U.S. allies and Iraq's oil infrastructure, the author cites U.S. government reports to illustrate the high cost of the war. He ends the argument by triumphantly paraphrasing American pundits who argue that the war in Iraq is not worth the cost. *Iraqi Jihad's* author understands that the U.S. economy will not collapse under war expenses, but he is heartened by the disagreements those costs create in American society.

Targeting Race

Abu `Ubayd al-Qurashi takes this argument one step further. Al-Qurashi posits that the dream of economic advancement is the only substantive social bond in American society. He is convinced that ethnic and racial diversity makes American society inherently unstable and concludes that if al-Qa`ida can sidetrack the U.S. economy, it can instigate racial strife that will weaken the United States:

it is clearly apparent that the American economy is America's center of gravity. This is what Shaykh Usama bin Ladin has said quite explicitly. Supporting this penetrating strategic view is the fact that the Disunited States of America are a mixture of nationalities, ethnic groups, and races united only by the "American dream," or, to put it more correctly, worship of the dollar, which they openly call "the Almighty Dollar."⁴

During the past year, al-Qa`ida has accelerated efforts to divide the United States along racial lines. In a video

3 Anonymous, *Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dreams*, September 2003; for more, see Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged al-Qa`ida Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27:5 (2004).

4 Abu `Ubayd al-Qurashi, "A Lesson in War," *al-Ansar*, December 19, 2002.

released on May 5, 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri spoke glowingly of Malcolm X, apparently in an effort to attract support from African American Muslims.⁵ Zawahiri mentioned him again in a December 2007 speech.⁶ Zawahiri's endorsement of Malcolm X makes no theological sense for a self-declared Salafi-jihadist; Zawahiri's name-dropping was base politics.

Cracking the U.S. Foundation

Not all jihadist efforts to generate discord within the United States are predicated on economics. Jihadists understand that the "American Dream" is an expansive concept that includes notions about liberty, equality and opportunity. In November 2006, Yaman Mukhaddab published an article assessing al-Qa`ida in Iraq's declaration of the Islamic State of Iraq. Explicitly drawing on Naji's earlier work, he listed al-Qa`ida's most critical accomplishments in Iraq, culminating with the most important:

to subject the enemy to a bloody exhaustion—first, to bleed him dry economically, and then to bleed him humanly, socially, and psychologically in a way he cannot bear or compensate. This is what will lead him to defeat in the end and to turn in on himself, losing the ability, desire, or determination to continue the conflict. This will surely be accompanied by social and civil collapses within the enemy. At best, his state may disappear; at worst, his power to intervene in Muslim affairs will collapse.⁷

Many of Mukhaddab's arguments about al-Qa`ida's successes in Iraq were premature. Since he wrote, the ISI has been condemned by jihadist scholars, isolated by Sunni tribal groups and chased out of many of its former

5 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Interview With Ayman al-Zawahiri," al-Sahab, May 5, 2007. Zawahiri identified African American soldiers for a specific message: "I tell the soldier of color in the American army that the racist Crusader regime...altered the look of the shackles and changed the type of chains and try to make you believe that you are fighting for democracy and the American dream."

6 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Annapolis—The Betrayal," December 14, 2007.

7 Yaman Mukhaddab, "Al-Qa`ida Between a Past Stage and One Announced by al-Muhajir," Keepers of the Promise web forum, November 14, 2006.

strongholds. Operationally, al-Qa`ida in Iraq is in dire straits. Nonetheless, al-Qa`ida's supporters will likely claim a strategic success in Iraq because of the economic and social strain the conflict places on the United States. For Mukhaddab, sustaining direct confrontation between al-Qa`ida and the United States—rather than operational victories—is the best indicator of strategic success. Glued to Western media for signs of social tension in the United States, Mukhaddab believes that sustained confrontation with al-Qa`ida is eating at the very foundation of the country. As Mukhaddab sees it:

Al-Qa`ida has put a complete end to these foundations that hold together this doddering sinful society (The United States), held together as a society only by the values of personal freedom, the freedom to acquire, and the freedom of capital. As soon as these disappear, the bonds of the society, being based only on them, will of necessity dissolve. The collapse will become only a matter of time. It will take place when the citizens lose their patience over the disappearance of these foundations. And this is what has begun to be clearly visible in American society. Everything we read, hear, and see of commiseration about freedoms and unease about the repression and restriction of freedom of opinion and freedom of capital is only the first sign of this unrest over the loss of the foundations of the building of this vulgar, materialistic society.⁸

Mukhaddab's argument suggests that partisan shouting matches pitting national security concerns diametrically against civil liberties do not completely reflect the strategic threat jihadists pose. Just as the 9/11 attacks were designed to bait the United States into invading Afghanistan, Mukhaddab hopes that continued conflict with al-Qa`ida will bait the United States into undermining its intellectual foundation.

Mukhaddab's ideas are innovative, but that does not mean his strategy is viable. Like *Iraqi Jihad's* author,

Mukhaddab's argument reveals that he misunderstands the utility of heated debates in a healthy democracy. There is no doubt that laws such as the USA PATRIOT Act spark impassioned arguments, but those disagreements hardly represent an existential threat to the United States. Considered within the historical scope of American efforts to balance civil liberties with national security concerns, these are solvable problems.

Key Issues for the Future

The vast majority of U.S. thinking about al-Qa`ida addresses the group's ability to strike the United States and its allies militarily. This is appropriate, as a government's first priority is to protect its citizens. Indeed, al-Qa`ida's ability to strike at the United States in creative and dangerous ways should not be underestimated. Yet, the focus on al-Qa`ida's military threat should not obscure the jihadist ideological assault on the American dream. The most important pieces of al-Qa`ida's strategy to undermine the United States are social and political, not military. There are a number of lessons from this fight that should be applied to the U.S. strategy to combat al-Qa`ida and its associated movements.

1. *Keep the eye on the ball.* Al-Qa`ida wants to prevent the United States from being able to project power around the world. Since its ability to do so is a function of military, economic and political strength, al-Qa`ida would like nothing better than to distract the United States from policies that bolster and safeguard those strengths. Fighting jihadists is not a grand strategy by itself. Policies that undermine the international trading system, American competitiveness versus growing economies, the ability to project (and credibly threaten) military action against rivals and the ability to contain state challengers do not serve U.S. long-term interests.

2. *Jihadists understand the basis of American power.* Naji, al-Qurashi and Mukhaddab correctly identify American ideals and economic strength as critical pillars of American power. Jihadists will target these pillars militarily, but they understand that in a war that will last decades, political and social attacks will be more effective. Al-Qa`ida has—and will again—attempt to bait the

United States into military actions that undermine American social, economic and political strengths.

3. *Jihadist thinkers assume that the American behemoth has a fragile core.* Jihadists understand the power, but not the durability, of American ideals. Perhaps because of the religious grounding of their ideology, they do not fully comprehend the strength of a society built around secular concepts of liberty, equality and opportunity.

4. *Jihadists will try to find credible messengers.* Al-Qa`ida's leaders understand they are not credible messengers to the American people, which is why al-Qa`ida's most sophisticated propaganda videos cobble together commentary by Western pundits to advance their agenda.⁹ Al-Qa`ida would like to invert the American strategy of finding and empowering voices that delegitimize al-Qa`ida among Muslims. For all of the reasons cited by Mukhaddab, however, Americans should be loath to stifle political debate for fear of manipulation by al-Qa`ida's propagandists.

5. *Jihadist predictions may backfire.* Jihadist predictions of imminent social chaos in the United States serve an internal propaganda purpose. By offering prospective jihadists a blueprint for "victory," they excite people to join the movement. In the long-run, however, this is a double-edged sword. If confident jihadist predictions of victory do not produce results, potential supporters may lose faith in their leadership.

Brian Fishman is a Senior Associate at the Combating Terrorism Center and an Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. Mr. Fishman has published numerous articles on al-Qa`ida's strategy in Iraq and elsewhere. Before coming to the Combating Terrorism Center, Mr. Fishman worked on Defense and Foreign Affairs for Representative Lynn Woolsey. He has a BA from UCLA and a master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The Power of Truth," al-Sahab, September 20, 2007.