

Success of the Meta-Narrative: How Jihadists Maintain Legitimacy

By Akil N. Awan

AL-QA`IDA'S IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE is almost entirely predicated on issues of legitimacy. Al-Qa`ida and its followers are constantly striving to convince supporters, neutral audiences and even enemy publics about the justness of their cause, the morality of their strategy and the legality of their methods. Al-Qa`ida's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, famously alluded to the importance of the ideological battle in a 2005 letter to Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, stating, "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *umma*."¹

Achieving legitimacy has been a challenge for the jihadist movement. Successive attempts to propose their worldview and establish credibility in the Muslim world have been hampered by their acts of violence and terrorism that ostensibly violate religious and cultural mores. Nevertheless, global jihadism has continued to attract a surprisingly diverse set of individuals to its ranks. The ideological cohesion within this eclectic cohort has been derived principally from the alluring simplicity of the jihadists' meta-narrative. According to this narrative, jihadists associated with al-Qa`ida or its ideology are the crucial vanguard standing in the way of a historical global assault on Islam by the "Zionist-Crusader Alliance." The jihadists consistently attempt to convince Muslims to view contemporary conflicts through this prism. This is achieved by building grassroots legitimacy among populations, mobilizing public support for their operations and consolidating their existing constituencies. Failure to achieve legitimacy, al-Zawahiri warned, will cause the jihadist movement to be "crushed in the shadows, far from the masses who are distracted and fearful."²

1 "Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, July 9, 2005.

2 Ibid. According to al-Zawahiri, "the victory of Islam and the establishment of a caliphate in the manner of the

This article will show how jihadists manufacture religious legitimacy, why their battlefield operations provide them a distinct authority exceeding that of established religious scholars, and warns that the jihadist meta-narrative could be increasingly adopted by larger segments of the Muslim community in the future.

Manufacturing Legitimacy

There are a number of methods pursued by jihadists to manufacture legitimacy within the jihadist landscape. Most commonly, jihadists engage in processes of ad hoc self-legitimation, in which selective excerpts from the Qur'an and prophetic traditions, deployed both ahistorically and without context, are used to dispute mainstream interpretations, or to formulate novel interpretations that violate clear tenets of Islam.

One example is the unlawful targeting of civilians.³ This highly discerning reading of the Islamic canon⁴ is exacerbated by the recourse to quasi-religious "authorities" who serve to corroborate and support these aberrant worldviews. Remarkably, these "religious" leaders are themselves rarely trained in the classical religious sciences and, therefore, are unqualified to issue religious edicts or engage in serious exegesis of the Qur'an and other religious texts.⁵ Indeed, the lack of

Prophet...will not be accomplished by the mujahid movement while it is cut off from public support."

3 For a discussion of some of the arguments put forward by radicals to justify the killings of civilians, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

4 The global jihadists' employment of the Qur'an to bolster their claims is also highly selective and revolves around a subset of approximately 75 verses from the Qur'an's total of 6,236 verses.

5 In fact, the vast majority of both jihadist ideologues and their followers have undergone modern secular educations. Usama bin Ladin, for example, studied civil engineering. Both Ayman al-Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (one of the founding members of al-Qa`ida) studied medicine. Abu Mus`ab al-Suri (the most important strategist of modern jihadism) and Khalid Shaykh Muhammad (the principle architect of the 9/11 attacks) both studied mechanical engineering. Muhammad `Atif (al-Qa`ida's former military chief) was an agricultural engineer and later a policeman. Abd al-Salam Faraj (who wrote *The Neglected Duty*, which raised jihad to an individual religious obligation, and who was executed for the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat) was

religious credentials among the jihadist leadership has long been recognized as one of their potential weaknesses.

Aware of their lack of theological literacy and legitimacy, jihadist leaders adorn themselves in the regalia of religion, most recognizably their impeccable white robes, pious beards and saintly turbans. This practice,

"By being perceived as taking action against supposed wrongs committed against Muslims globally, the jihadists are able to undermine the credibility of other dissenting voices who use rhetoric alone in defense of the umma."

combined with a superfluous religious-canonic rhetoric, serves to cloak what are often highly political or worldly aims. More problematic, their lack of religious credentials do not necessarily divest jihadist leaders of the religious mantle, as these quasi-scholars are often viewed by Muslim communities as more truthful, genuine and rightly-guided than "mainstream" religious scholars, who are often perceived as being tainted by complicity with and subservience to secular or despotic regimes in the Muslim world. Moreover, this pariah status often grants jihadist leaders autonomy from political machinations, internecine conflicts and "worldly" affairs, within which mainstream scholars often become embroiled. This allows jihadist leaders to yield a potent legitimacy not based on scholarly erudition.

an electrician. Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi (the former head of al-Qa`ida in Iraq) did not even manage to complete his high school education. Indeed, even Sayyid Qutb, often regarded as the ideological godfather of jihadism, was a journalist and literary critic.

Legitimation also focuses inordinately on elevating the “lesser jihad”⁶ to an individual duty, or *fard`ayn*, and an obligatory sixth pillar of Islam.⁷ Attempts at extolling the virtues of jihad and convincing fellow Muslims of its centrality to their lives are not new, but rather follow the tone and precedent set by earlier militant works written during the 1970s and 1980s. The most important among these

“Global jihadism’s legitimacy has been predicated in large part on the ascendancy of deeds over words, and most jihadists have attempted to usurp traditional authority from clerics and religious leaders in this way.”

historical works include the widely-acclaimed *Defense of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation After Faith* (1979) and *Join the Caravan* (1987), two works penned by the Palestinian scholar and chief proponent of the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union, Shaykh Abdullah Azzam. Equally important was the seminal jihadist diatribe against the established Sunni position on jihad, *The Neglected Duty* (1981), authored by Abd al-Salam Faraj, an electrician and leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a group responsible for the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981.⁸

6 The “lesser jihad” refers to conventional warfare against an external enemy (and is predominantly defensive in nature), whereas the “greater jihad” entails every Muslim’s internal spiritual struggle. For more, see Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

7 Michael David Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

8 Johannes J.G. Jansen, *The Neglected Duty: The Creed of Sadat’s Assassins and Islamic Resurgence in the Middle East* (New York: Macmillan, 1986); Richard C. Martin, “Discourse on Jihad in the Postmodern Era,” in Jonathan E. Brockopp ed., *Islamic Ethics of Life: Abortion, War* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 160

Men of Deeds, Not Words

Beyond this religious imperative, global jihadism’s legitimacy has been predicated in large part on the ascendancy of deeds over words, and most jihadists have attempted to usurp traditional authority from clerics and religious leaders in this way. Mohammed Siddique Khan, the ringleader of the July 7, 2005 London bombers, spoke disparagingly of Muslim scholars in the United Kingdom and implied that “real men” such as himself, whose deeds and sacrifices were self-evident, were most worthy of the Prophet Muhammad’s legacy:

Our so-called scholars today are content with their Toyotas and their semi-detached houses...If they fear the British government more than they fear Allah then they must desist in giving talks, lectures and passing fatwas and they need to stay at home—they’re useless—and leave the job to the real men, the true inheritors of the prophet.⁹

The meteoric rise of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), epitomized this trend. Despite being theologically illiterate and hailing from a criminal background, al-Zarqawi achieved immense popularity and prestige as a result of his notorious video beheadings and the instigation of bloody sectarian strife in Iraq. His violent excesses were so flagrant that even al-Qa`ida’s central leadership found them disconcerting, with al-Zawahiri rebuking the AQI leader:

Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable, also, are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You should not be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the shaykh of the slaughterers.¹⁰

Nevertheless, al-Zarqawi’s grisly actions continued to propel him to international prominence, evident in the bestowal of two particularly dubious

9 Ibid.

10 “Letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.”

honors: the title of the *amir* of AQI, and a U.S. bounty of \$25 million for his death or capture, matching the reward for Usama bin Ladin himself at the time.

Placed in stark contrast to perceived apathy, weakness or inaction of Muslim rulers, clergy and even other Islamists, the jihadists’ tangible response to an external threat is uniquely placed in the Muslim world. Regardless of how odious or counterproductive this response may be, the jihadists cannot be accused by their opponents of inaction. Therefore, while revisionist former jihadists such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl) may decry al-Qa`ida’s tactics, or dispute the outcomes of their actions, they have been unable to offer effective alternatives. As a result, by

“Jihadist ‘field experience’ endows them the ability to be free from error of judgment and action, and outside the scope of scholarly criticism.”

being perceived as taking action against supposed wrongs committed against Muslims globally, the jihadists are able to undermine the credibility of other dissenting voices who use rhetoric alone in defense of the *umma*. Consequently, the jihadists are able to arrogate themselves the authority of Islamic officialdom.

Increasingly, this brazen self-aggrandizement has given rise to claims of religious infallibility, which insists that jihadist “field experience” endows them the ability to be free from error of judgment and action, and outside the scope of scholarly criticism.¹¹ Consequently, they do not need to exonerate themselves from accusations and critiques,¹² but rather

11 E. Alshech, “The Emergence of the ‘Infallible Jihad Fighter’ - The Salafi Jihadists’ Quest for Religious Legitimacy,” Middle East Media Research Institute, 2008.

12 Al-Zawahiri has attempted to engage his critics through his text *The Exoneration* (2008) and through the 2008 virtual open meeting facilitated by al-Sahab. His response, however, has focused principally on the critics’ inability to comprehend the “true” state of the situation due to their absence from the fronts of jihad.

insist that anyone who seeks to criticize their methods or goals must first serve alongside them on the frontlines before they are afforded that privilege. This has proven to be a particularly expedient rejoinder in the spate of recent criticisms from former jihadists such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, Noman bin Othman and imprisoned members of the LIFG.

Indeed, the repudiation of renowned jihadist icons such as Imam al-Sharif, who was not only present at the founding of al-Qa`ida in 1988 in Peshawar, but was also the most significant legal philosopher of the jihad during his generation, is hardly surprising. Despite their impeccable jihadist credentials, the critiques of these various revisionists are readily dismissed by a new, younger generation of jihadists, for whom the views of these older luminaries are at best deemed anachronistic, and at worst shaped by their incarceration or association with despotic regimes. In a 2008 al-Sahab video response to al-Sharif's "Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World," al-Qa`ida operative Abu Yahya al-Libi argued,

If this document really expresses the convictions of its putative author, why are the security apparatuses keeping him behind bars...when he could do them a much greater service elsewhere?... They should bring him to the [various] jihad fronts...to debate [with the mujahidin]...and explain their errors to them.¹³

The manner in which jihadist deeds are mediated and disseminated has also played a significant role in their ascendancy. With the growing sophistication of the internet and its adoption as the principle arena for the propagation of jihadism,¹⁴ media efforts have increasingly focused on autonomous, user-generated content, often without official jihadist sanction.¹⁵

13 "Abu Yahya Al-Libi Rejects Sayyed Imam's 'Document of Right Guidance,' Urges Mujahideen to Continue Jihad," Middle East Media Research Institute, 2008.

14 Akil N. Awan, "Virtual Jihadist Media: Function, Legitimacy, and Radicalising Efficacy," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10:3 (2007): pp. 389-408.

15 Akil N. Awan and M. al-Lami, "Al-Qaeda's Virtual Crisis," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 154:1

Rather than presenting cogent theological arguments designed to appeal to reason, this content relies far more on emotive imagery and on engendering solidarity and allegiance. Polished montages of jihadist video clips, accompanied by stirring devotional songs, appeal to the senses and render issues of theological legitimation far less important and even obsolete. This virtually-mediated propaganda of the deed is crucially important to the web-savvy youth and non-Arabic speaking Muslim diaspora audiences, both of whom contribute disproportionately to the propagation of the culture of jihadism.

Conclusion

If the jihadists can successfully persuade audiences that they are somehow lax in their religious observances as Muslims, or worse, are committing grave sins, they may be capable of engendering a mindset amenable to the broader jihadist worldview. London bomber Mohammed Siddique Khan provided a typical bullying harangue in his posthumously released "Martyrdom Testament,"

"Despite tacit support for classical defensive jihad, it is ironic that the jihadists themselves continue to severely undermine their own legitimacy with their penchant for increased bloodshed and violent excess."

stating, "Jihad is an obligation on every single one of us, men and women, and by staying at home you are turning your backs on jihad which is a major sin."¹⁶

When engaging in discussions of jihadist legitimacy, it is necessary to acknowledge the uneasy truth that a great number of their actions are beyond censure in the wider Muslim world. Against the backdrop of military invasion and occupation of two Muslim-majority countries, attacks (conventional or oth-

(2009): pp. 56-64.

16 Mohammed Siddique Khan, "Martyrdom Testament," 2005.

erwise) against military targets within these theaters are invariably considered legitimate and labeled as "classical defensive jihad." This includes improvised explosive device attacks against coalition convoys, or highly discriminate killings of U.S. soldiers by snipers. Such tactics cannot even be placed under the rubric of terrorism, and the U.S. military itself has been wary of distinguishing between insurgents and terrorists in this respect.

Yet despite tacit support for classical defensive jihad, it is ironic that the jihadists themselves continue to severely undermine their own legitimacy with their penchant for increased bloodshed and violent excess. Suicide attacks and other bombings that kill large numbers of Muslim civilians in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and other theaters of conflict only erode support for their cause. Moreover, attacks in Western countries specifically targeting civilians expose the fallacy of their meta-narrative. Such indiscriminate tactics, combined with their dystopic and intolerant vision of the post-jihad future, must be emphasized as they remain the jihadists' greatest ideological vulnerability.

Dr. Akil N. Awan is the current RCUK Fellow in the "Contemporary History of Faith, Power and Terror," and Lecturer in both International Terrorism and Contemporary Islam in the Department of History and the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research interests are focused around processes of radicalization, global jihadism, the new media (particularly Web 2.0), and the history of terrorism. His monograph on "Processes of Radicalisation" will be released in 2010 alongside a second book on Political Violence in the New Media Ecology, which is co-authored with A. Hoskins and B. O'Loughlin.