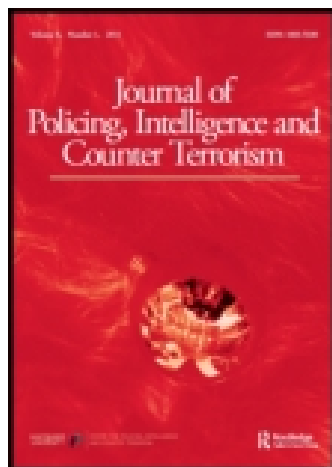


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# Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?

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## ABSTRACT

Abu Yahya al Libi's importance within al Qaeda and influence on its strategic decisions cannot be easily overstated. However, in his video entitled *Dots on the Letters*, released on 9 September 2007, Abu Yahya sabotaged the terrorist organisation from within by providing the United States with six potentially effective policy solutions to combat al Qaeda. These recommendations are: amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced violence; fabricating stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerating mistakes when possible; prompting mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* incriminating the Jihadist movement; supporting Islamic movements far removed from *jihad*; aggressively neutralising or discrediting the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist movement; and spinning minor disagreements among leaders of Jihadist organisations as major doctrinal disputes. Abu Yahya offered these policy recommendations to illustrate just how misguided the United States has been in its quest to defeat al Qaeda. This paper will analyse Abu Yahya's recommendations and their efficacy against al Qaeda. Through Abu Yahya's advice to America, al Qaeda may have unwittingly contributed to its own self-destruction.

## Introduction

Since his 2005 escape from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, Abu Yahya al Libi's stock within al Qaeda has continued to rise. As a member of the infamous 'Bagram Four' which escaped US custody, Abu Yahya al Libi (2008) publically defied and embarrassed the US and gave hope to his fellow Jihadists. Overnight he became the Jihadist movement's 'Robin Hood'. He is young, energetic, intelligent, charismatic, well-spoken, and considered by many to be the future of al Qaeda (Moss, 2008). Some experts have even called him the "Crown Prince of al Qaeda" (Brachman & Warius, 2008, p. 1). Further strengthening his appeal within the Jihadist movement, he, unlike Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, has religious training. Abu Yahya is not only a senior member of al Qaeda and member of its Shari'a Committee, but he has also been dubbed "al Qaeda's Defence Minister", "Theological Enforcer", and the "High-Command's attack dog" (Brachman, 2007; Scheuer, 2007).

Abu Yahya is believed to have been born in Libya in 1963 (*Homeland Security*, 2008). He is a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, whose goal in the 1990s was to topple the Libyan leader Colonel Moammar al Gaddafi. Although he went on to study Islam in Mauritania for five years, he lacks the authority to issue *fatwas*.

Abu Yahya's importance within al Qaeda and influence on its strategic decisions is substantial. He has provided al Qaeda with its own resident religious expert and has filled the religious void left by al Qaeda's former theologian Abu Hafs al Mauritani (Bergen, 2006, p. 359). In fact, his religious impact has been so substantial that Zawahiri uses Abu Yahya's own religious writing, entitled *Human Shields in Modern Jihad*, to justify al Qaeda's killing of Muslims. In addition, Abu Yahya's numerous appearances on *as-Sahab*, al Qaeda's media entity, ranks him second only to Zawahiri (al Libi, 2008).

## The video: Dots on the letters

In 2007 Abu Yahya released a 93 minute video interview, *Dots on the letters: As-Sahab's second interview with Shaykh Abu Yahya al Libi*, in which he outlined how the US could defeat al Qaeda. In it he provided six steps for the US to win the war of ideas.

Jarret Brachman (2007), at the Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, has suggested why Abu Yahya has provided the US with al Qaeda's weaknesses. He argues that it was neither out of "goodwill nor self-destructive tendencies". He explains Abu Yahya's actions as an "explosive cocktail of youth, rage, arrogance and intellect" with the purpose of first, exposing how disadvantaged the US is in competing with the terrorist network in the war of ideas and second, dispelling fears from within al Qaeda that the US will win the war anytime soon (ibid).

Another explanation for Abu Yahya's divulgence of the six steps to defeat al Qaeda is that it is a pre-emptive strike against what he believes the US may do in the future or what the US can do to subvert the al Qaeda organisation. In an attempt to convince his audience that al Qaeda is not full of "extreme fanatics", nor is it detached from the greater Jihadist "tide" and isolated from their own Muslim societies, Abu Yahya displays a sense of fear for what could happen in the future (al Libi, 2007). Almost in a reactionary manner, Abu Yahya emphasises that al Qaeda is not indifferent to the shedding of Muslim blood. Furthermore, as to warn all opposing clerics and ex-jihadist recanters, he states that the "school of melting and bending" of Islam "to prove the agreement of Islam with what Westerners believe" is the epitome of evil (ibid).

Abu Yahya's pre-emption appears to be a mix of fear regarding what could happen, threats against Jihadist recanters, and strategic manipulation in the war of ideas that are all masked by his stoic delivery. The staged manner in which the *As-Sahab* interviewer posed the rehearsed questions is obvious by Abu Yahya's quick, unflinching response to each of the questions. Abu Yahya very clearly and succinctly devotes nearly fourteen minutes of his interview to address these six areas where the

US could inflict severe damage on al Qaeda. The orchestrated nature of the interview was demonstrated by the prompt question: "According to your outlook, what are the methods which the Crusaders might use to achieve this goal [victory in the war of ideas]?" (ibid). Regardless of Abu Yahya's reasoning for providing the US with al Qaeda's weaknesses, the US has been afforded an opportunity to act on valuable recommendations.

## Abu Yahya's six steps for defeating al Qaeda

Abu Yahya's six steps are revolutionary because of their insight and potential efficacy. An in-depth evaluation of this unsolicited advice from a high-level insider is warranted, in order to see how the US could use this counter strategy to al Qaeda's war of ideas. Abu Yahya's six steps for defeating al Qaeda are:

- (1) Focus on amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced armed action.
- (2) Fabricate stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerate mistakes when possible.
- (3) Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* that incriminate the Jihadist movement and its actions.
- (4) Strengthen and back Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach.
- (5) Aggressively neutralise or discredit the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist movement.
- (6) Spin minor disagreements among leaders of Jihadist organisations as being major doctrinal or methodological disputes (Brachman, 2007).

Collectively, this list is impressive because it hurts al Qaeda on many levels. It undercuts al Qaeda by detracting from both its tacit support within the greater Jihadist movement and sympathy from the fundamentalist Muslim community. It exacerbates fractures within al Qaeda and the Jihadist movement and undermines its legitimacy in relation to competing movements within Islam. Most importantly, it provides religious *fatwas* to counter Jihadist ideology. As al Qaeda has transitioned its focus from the military battle-space to the ideological battle-space, using clerics to debase al Qaeda's central ideology could cripple its organisational foundation (Burton & Stewart, 2008).

A recent speech by Juan Zarate (2007), the U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism, spoke of the current "markers of success" against al Qaeda in the War on Terror. Several of his markers lined up with Abu Yahya's recommendations for defeating al Qaeda. Zarate addressed how terrorists were being neutralised with consistency and frequency. He noted that rejection of al Qaeda has "started to emerge within extremist circles", a point which Abu Yahya said was a necessary precursor for America to defeat al Qaeda (ibid). While Zarate addressed some of Abu Yahya's points, a more comprehensive view of Abu Yahya's own markers of success could form a scorecard by which to evaluate American progress against al Qaeda and, possibly, a playbook by which to prosecute the war of ideas.

The balance of this paper will explore Abu Yahya's suggestions on how to defeat al Qaeda. Their analysis is critical to the development of a US counterstrategy in the war of ideas, and provides a blueprint for how the US could implement these steps in the future.

## ONE: EX-JIHADIST BACKTRACKING

Abu Yahya's first point (2007, at 37 minutes) was that the US could further its position in the ideological war by "announcing the backtracking of some of the Mujahideen's leaders in prison, their deeming themselves mistaken in what they used to believe and do, and their advising their brothers to abandon the path". Telling the story of ex-jihadists to the world is a powerful tool to defeat al Qaeda. Al Qaeda prides itself on being on the right side of history in the 'clash of civilisations'. It has argued that short-term Jihadist defeats at the hands of the West are inconsequential in the long war between Islam and the West. Al Qaeda has extended the time horizon of the war as to minimise the impact of any one tactical-level defeat. Even a draw can be viewed as a victory because the West was not victorious. However, the defection *en masse*, or even in part, of Jihadists could be the strongest antidote to counter this message that al Qaeda is winning the long war. Not only does it signal a shift in support for al Qaeda, but it denotes future problems in recruitment and flaws in sustainment of the campaign for the Islamic Caliphate.

Jihadist recruitment and radicalisation are analogous to wildfire in combustible areas; with every additional recruit who joins a Jihadist group, the impact on the "Jihadist tide" as Abu Yahya prefers to call it, is exponential. Each additional recruit serves as an ambassador for the greater Jihadist movement, inspiring family members, friends, and acquaintances by both the good news of their religious solidarity and victories, but also with their bad news of injury and death. While death is not necessarily viewed as bad as it leads to martyrdom, death at the hands of the enemy often inspires a sense of revenge from the mujahedeen's family, friends, and willing observers ready to accept the gauntlet.

Consequently, the most influential way to counter this spread of Jihadist recruitment and radicalisation is to inspire change from within. Promoting internal change is more effective than destroying Jihadist fighters because it averts their martyrdom and ability to live on in memory to fight another day. The operatives of this internal change could be ex-jihadists. Ex-jihadists have abandoned the cause for many reasons. Some leave because of disdain for the violations of non-combatant immunity and the targeting of civilians. Others disagree with the designation of the United States as the primary target instead of their more proximate sources of anger, such as apostate Muslim regimes. Still others are disillusioned with the harsh and primitive lifestyles of a Jihadist in Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Regardless of why ex-jihadists have defected, the critical step is the publication of their stories. These individual stories, although anecdotal, will help to illuminate the cracks in the Jihadist movement for all would-be recruits to see.

Noman Benotman, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, is one such ex-jihadist with significant power to reform the Jihadist movement and undercut al Qaeda. Benotman fought with bin Laden in Afghanistan in the early 1990s against the communist government. He achieved a level of importance within the Jihadist movement as to receive an invitation by bin Laden to a conference of Jihadist leaders in 2000 (Bergen & Cruickshank, Forthcoming, p. 1). Disillusioned by bin Laden's future plans to attack the United States, Benotman registered a dissenting view at the conference by voicing his opposition to attacking the powerful "far enemy". In the years that followed, he was further upset by al Qaeda's targeting of non-combatants (ibid, p. 2). He formally criticised al Qaeda in 2007 with a public letter to Zawahiri. While this recantation by Benotman was a significant event in the Arab media, it was not well circulated in the Western media (ibid, pp. 2-3). At a time when experts believe the future of al Qaeda lies in Europe, this recantation by a prominent ex-jihadist must be aired on the likes of BBC, CNN, German RTL, and Italy's Rai Uno.

The story of Benotman is not an isolated example. Abdullah Anas is another influential ex-jihadist recanter who had worked closely with bin Laden for ten years in Afghanistan. Further solidifying his stature within the Jihadist movement, Anas married the daughter of one of the founding fathers of al Qaeda, Abdullah Azzam (ibid, p. 9). After disavowing al Qaeda, the former *mujahedeen* has publically worked to stem Islamic extremism. He has even spoken out against extremism in sermons at the Finsbury Park Mosque in London, a traditional hot-bed for radical Islamic thought. Greater dissemination of this story, and the more recent stories of like-minded individuals with similar backgrounds, could pay significant dividends in undermining al Qaeda's recruitment potential.

## TWO: JIHADIST MISTAKES

Abu Yahya's second point (2007, at 38 minutes) is:

"Fabricating some repulsive lies or exaggerating and blowing up some [al Qaeda] mistakes ... considering them to be deviations glued to the Jihadist methodology and an inseparable part of it, and widening their circle to make them a general rule, covering all Jihadi groups in all fields of *jihad*".

This promotion of Jihadist "mistakes" can be disaggregated into two basic components: 1) the exposure of true stories where al Qaeda has damaged its own reputation, and 2) a disinformation campaign focussed on introducing negative stories about al Qaeda that may not be entirely true. In the first case, the US can improve on exposing these propaganda gifts from al Qaeda. Regarding a disinformation campaign, the US should look into mirroring some of the CIA's successes during the Cold War.

While al Qaeda has marketed itself as an Islamic movement postured to strike invading military forces and Western civilians, most of its violence has impacted Muslim civilians. Al Qaeda's reasons for targeting Muslim civilians are manifold. First, it is easier to attack soft targets filled with civilians than it is to attack up-armoured and prepared American military convoys. Jihadist attackers are also not

always trained to the level necessary to execute precision attacks that limit harm to non-combatants. Moreover, al Qaeda's definition of non-combatant is so unclear that it is difficult to assess strict guidelines for adherence. Lastly, Abu Yahya has himself sanctioned the killing of Muslims in his writings on *al-Tatarrus* (use of human shields). Abu Yahya discards fourteen centuries of Islamic doctrine that strictly limits the permissibility of killing Muslims by creating his own doctrine that states Muslims should "accept the idea of sacrificing the shield [human shield] and engage in a fierce war using weapons of mass destruction" (Brachman & Warius, 2008, p. 3). Increased media exposure of this disrespect of human life and attacks on non-combatants, whether against Muslims or non-Muslims, will increase animosity towards al Qaeda.

While unable to assign causation, polling data demonstrates how al Qaeda's miscalculation in targeting non-combatants has detracted from its support base. Al Qaeda has overstepped its bounds in regards to inflicting terror in Muslim civilians. Its increased suicide attacks in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Pakistan have helped lead to an exodus of its supporters. In a *Terror Free Tomorrow* survey from 2005 (at <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/articlenav.php?id=71>), the year suicide bombings first peaked in Pakistan, the number of Pakistanis believing that suicide bombing was justified dropped from 73% to 46%. Similarly, a January 2008 poll in Pakistan shows that support for bin Laden has plummeted from 46% to 24%, and backing for al Qaeda dropped from 33% to 18% in the last six months of 2007 (at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23094334/>). Moreover, a Pew poll showed that support for suicide bombings in Pakistan dropped from 41% in 2004 to only 25% in 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2005). Generally, while Muslims most sympathise with al Qaeda because it confronted the US, their support for al Qaeda has waned because of its tactics.

This falling support for al Qaeda due to its targeting of non-combatants can be accentuated by highlighting the personal stories of its victims. Supplementing news stories with a face and a personal story adds the human dimension to the carnage of al Qaeda's terror attacks. The global networks of al Qaeda's victims, for example, provide this face to the tragedies of al Qaeda's movement and can aid its downfall through exposure to the world.

Al Qaeda's poor judgement is not limited to killing civilians. Another tactic that damaged al Qaeda's cause was its employment of two mentally handicapped women as suicide bombers in Iraq. On February 1, 2008, an al Qaeda bombing killed 73 Iraqis, and was responded to almost immediately with condemnation by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In an uncharacteristically timely and well-engineered media release, she capitalised on this propaganda gift by saying that the attack proves al Qaeda is the "most brutal and bankrupt of movements" (*MSNBC*, February 2008). In addition, the spokesman for the Multinational Division-Baghdad said that "by targeting innocent Iraqis, they [al Qaeda] show their true demonic character" (*CNN*, February 2008). Further news coverage suggested conflicting reports that the handicapped women were remote detonated and that they were not aware of what they were doing. This remote detonation twist to the story identifies the nexus where true and accurate reporting of al Qaeda mistakes could intersect with possible fabrication and exaggeration.

Abu Yahya's verbiage of "fabricating repulsive lies" describes the foundation of a disinformation campaign that could wield powerful results against al Qaeda. The CIA's disinformation campaign during the Cold War is one such example. Specifically, the CIA used a radio disinformation campaign in Latin America to depose Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and Socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973 (Zakaria, 2002). The Soviets similarly spread disinformation that the US performed secret experiments on HIV that resulted in the AIDS epidemic in Africa (ibid).

Both the US and Soviet Union used front organisations to aid in this disinformation campaign. In the *Mighty Wurlitzer*, the CIA's many front organisations were exposed along with how the US undermined the Soviet Union and communism. These front organisations received a pay check from the CIA but were under no explicit obligation to follow CIA orders. The now defunct *Encounter Magazine* is one example of how a liberal voice impacted the Cold War's war of ideas. While such organisations would need insularity from overt connections to the US government, their benefits in criticising Jihadist extremism could be helpful in the current war of ideas against Islamic militants.

A second example of an effective disinformation campaign is al Qaeda's own use of disinformation against the US. Al Qaeda has used carefully orchestrated strategic misrepresentation campaigns running the gamut from slight exaggerations to incontrovertible lies. These strategic misrepresentations by al Qaeda have had one common goal: to incite fury in the Muslim community for Western acts while providing cover for Jihadist misdeeds. Once the anger stemming from the disinformation has reached its zenith, the question of content accuracy is almost a moot point. An example of this misrepresentation is Zawahiri's statement about the US informing Saudi Arabia to stop printing the Koran. In May 2003, Zawahiri said the following:

"Part of the Congressional report on the 11 September events, which the US Government banned its publication, included a recommendation to ban the Saudi Government from printing and distributing the holy Koran. Why? Because it includes verses that call for hating the Jews and Christians. Crime and arrogance have reached this point. This is why, beloved brothers, Muslims must consult each other, take care of their own affairs, examine their situation, and then strengthen themselves and rely on Almighty God in resisting this Crusader-Jewish campaign, which is aimed at destroying Islam and Muslims" (al Zawahiri, 2003).

In addition to al Qaeda, disinformation by other Jihadist groups propagated over the internet and in mosques has also debilitated the US' image. Simply spreading the idea that 9/11 was an internal operation or domestic conspiracy has provided the plausibility of innocence for militant Islamic groups. The results of this disinformation is that large majorities in Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia still believe that the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by Arabs (Van Evera, 2007, p. 3). A disinformation campaign when cleverly engineered and executed, such as by al Qaeda today and the CIA during the Cold War, can reap invaluable benefits.

### THREE: *FATWAS* THAT INCRIMINATE THE JIHADIST MOVEMENT

Abu Yahya (2007, at 41 minutes) stated:

“Third: among the greatest methods used in the ideological war is the issuing of *fatwas* – or rather, the procuring of *fatwas* – which criminalise *jihad* and the Mujahideen and describe them with well-known repulsive legal terms like ‘bandits’ ... ‘extreme fanatics’ and the like, and paint them with allegations of treachery and treason”.

This idea of pressuring Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas*, or encouraging non-violent *Salafi* clerics to issue their own *fatwas*, contrary to the Jihadist movement would have incredible power in cutting off Islamic extremism at the root (Bergen, Forthcoming, p. 13). Peter Bergen has compared this type of intervention on the part of clerics to religious chemotherapy that eradicates extremism. Since al Qaeda lacks the religious credentials to issue its own *fatwas*, it has been forced to seek outside clerics such as the Jordanian Palestinian scholar Abu Qutada to issue *fatwas* in accordance with its views (Burke, 2003, p. 166).

This idea of utilising *fatwas* against al Qaeda is distinct from Abu Yahya’s first point of exposing the “backtracking” of Jihadist leaders because it highlights the Islamic authority’s countering of jihad. As a religious movement, the issuance of religious decrees by senior religious leaders would directly subvert the core underpinnings of al Qaeda. Since al Qaeda lacks top-notch religious credentials, the promulgation of *fatwas* against it would be detrimental to its longevity. Abu Yahya’s idea of incriminating *fatwas* has two distinct parts. First, it would be the identification of moderate clerics to encourage their issuance of *fatwas* against the more extreme clerics and militants. Second, it would target extremist clerics and pressure them through a re-education program to recant and recall their past incendiary remarks. It is important to note that while there has been numerous *fatwas* against al Qaeda and militant jihad, their exposure must be increased to see an impact.

When considering Muslim clerics, it is imperative to differentiate between the non-violent and violent *Salafi* scholars. The *Salafi* movement is used to describe “proper religious adherence and moral legitimacy” to Islam (Wiktorowicz & Kaltner, 2006). The schism within this movement revolves around the use of violence and, hence, Islamic scholars are separated into those supporting violence and those who oppose it. Interestingly, since the non-violent *Salafi* scholars comprise the vast majority of the movement, their message should be louder.

Al Qaeda and the few violent *Salafi* scholars, however, have hijacked the entire *Salafi* movement and made it appear that violence is the true Islamic interpretation. They contend that they are the “real *ulama* [clerics], the only ones capable of interpreting Islam free of corruption and revealing the truth to the masses” (Wiktorowicz, 2007, p. 227). Al Qaeda ties these non-violent scholars to the Ministry of Interior of Saudi Arabia and has called them “palace lackeys”. Bin Laden has differentiated the *ulama* by stating only “the true *ulama* support *jihad* against America” (ibid). Al Qaeda could be countered by more moderate clerics issuing contradictory *fatwas*.

Recently there has been some success by Middle Eastern governments to force the hand of extremist clerics to recant for their past remarks and even speak out against al Qaeda. They have even used prominent non-violent *Salafi* clerics to retrain Jihadists in prison with a more moderate interpretation of the Koran. The opponents of these “reprogramming campaigns” have attributed the recent trend of clerics and ex-jihadists recanting as a by-product of torture in the prisons of secular governments. Abu Yahya actually expressed scorn for this governmental and clerical pressure in the very same video that he provides the recommendation for this policy. Abu Yahya said in his *Dots on the Letters* video (2007, at 41 minutes): “Tell me, what do you expect from someone who sees the sword above him, the rug in front of him and the sheik dictating to him the proof and evidence for the obligation of obeying the ruler?”

The names on the list of rehabilitated clerics, however, demonstrate that even extremely credible religious figures, especially those clerics not prone to doctrinal vacillation, have already spoken out against al Qaeda.

The first is the Saudi religious scholar Sheik al Oudah. Lending to his credibility within the Jihadist movement, he was the founder of the Islamic awakening movement in the 1980s known as *Sahwa*. While not regarded as an American sympathiser, he began criticising bin Laden in September 2007 (Bergen, Forthcoming, p. 3). His personal criticism of bin Laden stated that al Qaeda's leader had “hijacked Islam”, and that while Oudah believed he was unable to influence bin Laden himself, he wanted to tell bin Laden's followers about the problems of al Qaeda (ibid, p. 4). The transformational impact of Oudah on future Jihadist recruitment and retention within al Qaeda has been enormous and his further exposure can only harm the Jihadist movement.

Sayyid Imam al Sharif, aka Dr. Fadl, is another significant cleric who has forsaken al Qaeda. As the ideological godfather of al Qaeda and Zawahiri's mentor, Dr. Fadl published the ‘Bible of modern *jihad*’ called *The Basic Principles in Making Preparation for Jihad* (ibid, pp. 4-5). Then in November 2007, Fadl momentarily withdrew his support for al Qaeda in the blistering book entitled *Rationalization of Jihad*. Fadl later called bin Laden and Zawahiri “extremely immoral” and cautioned Muslim youth against being “seduced by them” (ibid). While Zawahiri countered that Fadl's message is skewed because he wrote it from an Egyptian prison cell, the damage was already done to al Qaeda and the greater Jihadist movement.

The significance of Fadl's reversal should not be overstated, and it could be attributed to religious reorientation while in prison. Whether he was in fact a product of new reprogramming initiatives or not, the rehabilitation programs in the Middle East and Asia have thus far had an excellent track-record and should be continued for both radical clerics and captured militants. This counterterrorism approach defined as “ideological reorientation”, tries to alter core ideological beliefs of terrorists in order to bring those beliefs “in line with societal norms” (Blaydes & Rubin, 2007, p. 462). This approach would be, for example, particularly important in altering the perception of martyrdom. While experts believe that one of the metrics of Jihadist victory is the “institutionalization of a culture of martyrdom”, negating this culture and reinterpreting the concept with scholarly support would counter much of al Qaeda's sacrosanct ideology (Cozzens, 2009, 88).

Saudi Arabia currently runs a very effective program in which those rehabilitated persons must sign forms agreeing to avoid Jihadist activity. In honour-based societies, those family members and local clerics that collect their ex-jihadist from prison upon release agree to ensure there will be no relapse (Bergen, interview conducted on 3 April 2008). Yemen, Indonesia, Egypt, and Singapore have also followed suit with similarly effective retraining systems. While Yemen has had some problems with recidivism, Singapore has successfully de-radicalized primarily because of its emphasis on “intensive religious debate and psychological counseling” (Blaydes, & Rubin, 2007, p. 462). The power of moderate clerics working in prisons and using their religious backgrounds to debunk violent interpretations of the Koran has paid huge dividends and dissuading Jihadists from returning to battle. The success of moderate clerics as intermediaries between the government and religious extremists is no more apparent than in Egypt in the 1990s. Moderate clerics in Egypt rigorously taught members of Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Group in prison using jurisprudence lectures and intensive religious seminars based on Dr. Fadl’s reformed and non-violent writings (ibid, p. 471). This growing trend is also highlighted by the British Home Ministry’s recent interest in soliciting the mentorship of moderate clerics from Egypt’s al-Azhar, the country’s top religious establishment, for ideological reorientation of its Muslim prisoners.

#### FOUR: STRENGTHEN OTHER ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Abu Yahya (2007, at 43 minutes) stated:

“Fourth: strengthening and backing some of the methodologies adopted by Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, especially with a democratic approach and those groups which melt and bend the source texts and iron them out so that they agree with the civilisation, culture and methodologies of the West, and portrays these groups as moderate, balanced, reasonable and civilised alternative, and accordingly, pushing these groups into ideological conflict with the Jihadist groups, feeding that conflict and busying the Mujahedeen with it”.

This idea that the US should strengthen and support Islamic movements dissimilar to al Qaeda is also insightful. This idea is premised on the fact that there are many competing movements within Islam and that the competition for recruits is often fierce. There are multiple suitors for young, impressionable, and deeply religious Muslims. For example, in Gaza, Hamas and al Qaeda-like start-ups such as Fatah al Islam have often “stepped on each others’ toes” (Bergen, interview conducted on 24 April 2008). In this situation, favouring the group that is less radical, less militant, and most embraces democracy would be a great step in strengthening these movements if this association does not negatively impact the organisation to a point where it was better off before American aid. With America’s poor credibility in the Muslim world today, the utility of this support must be carefully assessed.

One approach the US could adopt in deciding which competing Islamic groups to fund would be to observe those groups al Qaeda’s leaders are constantly chastising

and ascertain why they conflict with each other. For example, Zawahiri has attacked both Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood because they have utilised democracy. Whether they have fully embraced democracy or “embraced the tactic of elections to gain power” could be debated; however, these groups are closer on the political spectrum to democracy than strictly authoritative religious groups.

The incompatibility of democracy and the Sharia Law is one of al Qaeda's primary concerns. The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic organisation, has not taken al Qaeda's criticism without a fight. It has begun to mobilise its resources against al Qaeda, and its Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood, Mohammed Akef, has said; “we have made a huge effort in combating [the radicals] through spreading a moderate understanding of the Koran” (Bergen, Forthcoming, p. 8). As such, the more competitors to al Qaeda that emerge or become stronger, the more al Qaeda's recruiting pool will narrow. Furthermore, as Abu Yahya noted, when competition increases, al Qaeda will have to divert a portion of its time and resources to dealing with these other organisations. The US should look into initiatives that support al Qaeda's competitors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as long as they embrace Islamic moderation, non-violence, and democracy.

Some experts have observed that the individuals who join al Qaeda do so because the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas are not extreme enough and thus the recruiting pools may not overlap. However, since these less radical, less militant groups have served as a ‘gateway drug’ for individuals such as Zawahiri, strengthening the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas could help to influence these potential converts to the more extreme groups prior to their departure to al Qaeda. By demonstrating that these more mainstream groups are indeed more moderate, balanced, and reasonable than al Qaeda, and indeed the ‘civilised alternative’, al Qaeda will be forced to use precious resources to negate this message in the eyes of both sympathisers and potential supporters.

## FIVE: NEUTRALIZE IMPORTANT FIGURES OF AL QAEDA

Abu Yahya's fifth suggestion (2007, at 44 minutes) of “killing, capturing, incapacitating or defaming the guiding Jihadi symbols, isolating them and preventing their voice from reaching the people” is something that the US has done fairly well. Abu Yahya stated that by decapitating the senior members and guiding thinkers of al Qaeda, remaining members of the movement will be left “without an authority in which they can put their full confidence and which directs and guides them, allays their misconceptions, and regulates their march with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Michael Scheuer, the former head of the CIA's bin Laden unit, has stated that with the neutralisation of al Qaeda's leaders, namely bin Laden, “the acceleration and proliferation of Islamic militancy may moderate” (Scheuer, 2006, p. 287). Scheuer further states that if al Qaeda's leadership survives and US policy remains status quo towards the Muslim world, “the pace, violence, and internationalization of the defensive *jihad* [bin Laden] calls for likely will grow” (ibid).

Since the US invasion of Afghanistan, the bureaucracy of al Qaeda has been devastated and does not pose the strategic threat to the US that it did prior to 9/11. In one fell swoop, al Qaeda lost its sanctuary, lines of communication, funding and access to bank accounts, training bases, and most of its men. Marc Sageman has placed the remnants of al Qaeda Central, the original members from the Afghan resistance of the 1980s, at only a few dozen men. He has also said that the second wave of al Qaeda that joined in the 1990s has been whittled down to only about a hundred fighters (Sageman, 2008, p. 38). Bruce Hoffman has offered an important caveat to Sageman's argument in that he states al Qaeda is "remarkably agile and flexible organisation that exercises both top-down and bottom-up planning and operational capabilities" (Hoffman, 2008). With this in mind, and with al Qaeda's ability to both top-down and bottom-up plan for attacks, surgical strikes on al Qaeda's leaders in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan is all the more important. Indeed, the recent resurgence of al Qaeda in the 2009 in the border region demonstrates the need for this intervention before the al Qaeda organisation can mount a return to its pre 9/11 stature.

Once these 'guiding thinkers' of al Qaeda are obtained, however, a nuanced approach to dealing with their capture must be adopted. The captured Jihadists, regardless of the level of importance within al Qaeda, must be processed, interrogated, and imprisoned without the fanfare associated with recent captures or killings of other key figures. If bin Laden is brought to justice and paraded around, he will have a "platform for global propaganda" (Howard, 2002). Not parading a high-level detainee, however, is counterintuitive to the political desires of displaying the fruits of its labour and providing a short-term psychological victory against al Qaeda. Nonetheless, the value of a martyred bin Laden or Zawahiri can be greater in captivity or death than on the battlefield. To prevent al Qaeda figures from becoming martyrs of mythical proportions, they must be "stripped of their glory" and treated as common criminals (Sageman, 2008, p. 42). They cannot be afforded the extra publicity that has been so vital in building up al Qaeda's reputation. Even applying the title of terrorist instead of criminal provides bin Laden and his associates with "a status and dignity that they seek and that they do not deserve" (Howard, 2002, p. 8). As Margaret Thatcher famously stated in 1985, "publicity is the oxygen of terrorism". A relatively quiet capture of bin Laden and other high-level al Qaeda figures would steal this oxygen necessary for their legends to thrive.

## SIX: EXPLOIT INTERNAL DISPUTES

In Abu Yahya's final thought for how the US could win the war of ideas, he stated (2007, at 45 minutes):

"Blowing out of proportion some of the minor, interpretive disputes which might occur among the Mujahedeen, and considering them to be doctrinal/methodological disputes, and inventing new names and descriptions for those groups on the basis of these disputes, and making it an inroad for them to fan the flames of differences".

In this idea, Abu Yahya acknowledges disputes within both al Qaeda and the Jihadist movement and he offers that America could attempt to spin even minor disagreements between the leaders of Jihadist organisations into monumental arguments. Abu Yahya (2007) recommended a concerted “war of defamation” against al Qaeda that provides “a safe-haven for rumourmongers, deserters, and demoralisers, [where] the door is left wide open for defamation, casting doubts, and making accusations and slanders”. He argued that if Americans exploited these divisions, Jihadist propagandists would be left as “hoarse as someone shouting in the middle of thousands of people”. A closer look at past al Qaeda disputes would show that the US has helped al Qaeda by not exposing both its internal rifts and those between itself and other Jihadist groups. As al Qaeda has characteristics of a networked alliance, exacerbating internal and external rifts could dissolve the glue that holds it together (Bergen, 2002, p. 199).

There are three major fault lines within al Qaeda that, if properly exploited, could create considerable damage to the organisation. These rifts involve the treatment of Shia, the doctrinal contradictions and differing scholarly interpretations regarding non-combatant immunity, and the targeting of the US instead of apostate Muslim regimes in the Middle East. To date, there has been considerable controversy within al Qaeda over these issues with the most notable public disagreement between Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi over the organisation’s view of Shia.

Regarding the treatment of Shia, al Qaeda appears to be playing something similar to the ‘good cop, bad cop’ routine. While the good cops (bin Laden and Zawahiri) try to secure Muslim unity in the fight against the West, the bad cops (Abu Yahya and the former al Qaeda leader in Iraq Zarqawi) have called for the demise of the Shia. Whether bin Laden has consciously allowed Abu Yahya to disrespect the Shia is difficult to know; however, al Qaeda currently benefits from having its top leaders call for Muslim unity against the West and its second-tier senior leaders consolidate Sunni support by calling for and executing attacks on Shia. Al Qaeda appears to be getting the best of both worlds by playing this dichotomy out in the global media. With the US failing to expose this strategy, it has allowed al Qaeda to carry-on unchecked with its bifurcated message. The disagreement between Zawahiri’s goal of Muslim unity and Zarqawi’s sensational attacks against Shia has been a public point of contention between the two and highlights this point of al Qaeda senior-level disagreement.

An even closer look at bin Laden’s priority of goals demonstrates that bin Laden and Abu Yahya’s stance on the Shia question is incompatible. Bin Laden’s current desire for Muslim unity and Abu Yahya’s anti-Shia rhetoric point to what Scheuer has called the “most lethal strategic danger to al Qaeda ... the premature, worldwide intra-civilisational conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shiites” (Scheuer, 2007, p. 5). The Sunni-Shia divide is so delicate and incendiary that at the time of Saddam’s fall, the graffiti in Baghdad read: “better a thousand Americans than one Tikriti” (Ajami, 2006, p. 149). Thus, by certain senior members of al Qaeda calling for the destruction of Shia, they are in direct contradiction to bin Laden’s sequential priorities of: 1) driving Americans out of Muslim world, 2) destroying apostate Muslim regimes and Israel, and 3) once the first two are complete, dealing with the Shia (Scheuer, 2007, p. 5). The US should emphasise these strategic differences pertaining to sequential priorities.

The second rift is the differing doctrinal interpretations of non-combatant immunity within the scholarly Muslim community. As previously discussed, the targeted killing of both Muslim and non-Muslim civilians has caused a rift in al Qaeda which has forced many al Qaeda members onto its enemy's bench. As the carnage of the attacks and the human element of the victims are increasingly exposed, this rift could widen. With polling numbers indicating plummeting support within the Muslim world for the targeting of non-combatants, the die-hard followers of this tactic could find themselves isolated enough to break away from al Qaeda. If this occurred, the fracturing of the movement would be a tactical-level victory for the US.

The highlighting of this ideological rift between the moderate non-violent clerics and al Qaeda and their relatively few scholarly supporters would isolate an issue in which al Qaeda clearly holds the religious minority position. With Dr. Fadl, Egypt's al-Azhar, and Sheik al Oudah as ideological opponents today, al Qaeda appears to be out-classed in their religious credibility by the reformed and non-violent scholars. This discrepancy for a terrorist organisation bent of acting on the behalf of Islam will undermine its future.

The third dispute within al Qaeda was the decision to attack the US instead of focusing on the apostate-perceived Muslim regimes of the Middle East. Those that opposed attacking the US believed the near enemies in the Middle East were still the primary target, and that attacking the far enemy (US) would only bring disaster upon the future of the movement. Whether these opponents believed that fighting the US would detract from al Qaeda's effort against regimes in the Middle East, or if they believed that it would be an unwinnable battle, their dissent has been loud enough to create a seed of uncertainty within al Qaeda.

In addition to internal al Qaeda disputes, the disagreements between al Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups could help undermine the greater Jihadist movement. In addition to the previously mentioned rift between al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, al Qaeda and Hamas have also quarrelled extensively. With comparable views towards Israel, Shia, and the West, an amenable relationship would be expected. However, in the past year, al Qaeda has condemned Hamas numerous times. It has criticised Hamas because it yielded to international law, "forfeited" too much of Palestine, trampled Sharia Law, and adopted democracy. Zawahiri (2007) said:

"The Hamas Movement's leadership has transgressed on the rights of the Muslim nation and agreed to what it called respecting the international agreements, thus ridiculing Muslims' minds and sentiments. I am sorry to face the Muslim nation with the truth, and to tell it please accept our condolences for [the loss] of the Hamas leadership ... Now, at the time of the deal, the Hamas leadership is handing over to the Jews most of Palestine ... Hamas leadership has abandoned the rule of Shar'iah".

With al Qaeda's public ridicule of a Jihadist group, exposing these macro-level disagreements via the global media would increase in-fighting, unpack suppressed dissent, and fracture the movement.

One final issue that has the potential to ostracise al Qaeda from the greater Muslim community is al Qaeda's adoption of *takfir*. *Takfir* is the ability to decide who is a Muslim and who is a *kuffar*, or nonbeliever. With al Qaeda's self-proclaimed *takfir* authority, many Muslims are disenchanted with al Qaeda. For example, while Turkish people consider themselves Muslims, bin Laden calls the Turkish government apostate and labels its people the worst form of Muslim because they have a secular government, embrace democracy, and are allied to the West. Muslims, such as those in Turkey, are approaching the tipping point where they will not accept al Qaeda calling them *kuffars* and will rebel *en masse* against al Qaeda (Moghadan, 2008).

Adding to the impending *takfir* confrontation, al Qaeda is also on shaky ground regarding the use of women in its suicide bombings. Moreover, al Qaeda has not addressed the role of women in its internet chat-rooms and their on-line interaction with men (ibid). Al Qaeda has run into contradictions with its selective embrace of modernisation regarding the media and internet. The media savvy, publicity mongering al Qaeda and its relatively high tech media campaign runs juxtaposed to the Taliban's abhorrence for modernity and technology. Exploiting this disharmony could drive a wedge between al Qaeda and other Jihadist groups.

## A Golden Opportunity

Abu Yahya has provided the US with a golden opportunity to turn the tide against al Qaeda in the war of ideas. His admission of "mistakes" that al Qaeda has made is telling because it highlights what al Qaeda deems as detrimental to its organisational viability. Further, his anger at the Jihadist "racanters" is telling and stands out in an otherwise stoic and well thought out speech. His point of infighting within both al Qaeda and the "Jihadist tide", and the use of moderate clerics to negate the *jihad's* inertia and underpinnings, demonstrate the very vulnerabilities that Abu Yahya and bin Laden may very well have discussed together and fear the most. Successfully implementing Abu Yahya's ideas would severely cripple, if not destroy, al Qaeda. In a war where brute military force has proved to be insufficient alone in defeating the enemy, a pivotal turn in the war of ideas is greatly needed to win the long fight. Abu Yahya's insightful, lucid pointers have provided a foundation for the way forward.

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