

# Understanding Transnational Radical Islamism

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## Article abstract

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## Understanding Transnational Radical Islamism

by  
Patrick Anderson

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the al-Qaeda movement within the categories of “global” and “local.” Both descriptions are relevant. Structurally, the label al-Qaeda is used to describe many things: the original al-Qaeda central organization; locally based affiliated groups that operate under its banner; and a global social movement of sympathizers and participants connected via the internet. Ideologically, the emergence of jihadist doctrine has taken place against the backdrop of social change on a global scale and can be convincingly analyzed as a direct symptom of modernity and globalization. However, the roots and aims of the movement are local. They pertain to specific societies and emerge from widely felt grievances against the state system and the ruling elites of the Arab world. As such, the al-Qaeda movement is best viewed as a global expression of local grievances: a new “global” strategy in the service of local goals centered on the states of the Middle East.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since 2001, Osama bin Laden’s portrayal of a global war between “Islam” and “the West” has been mirrored by several governments’ repeated invocation of a global contest between the forces of “democracy” and “moderation” and those of “extremism” and “Islamofascism.”<sup>1</sup> Such depictions give rise to an interesting question: to what extent might the structures, ideology, and aims of the *al-Qaeda* movement be described as “global?”

In answering this question, this article argues that *al-Qaeda*’s armed campaign against the US, declared in 1996 and later expanded in 1998 to include all “Jews and Crusaders,”<sup>2</sup> is far from the simple phenomenon evoked by such representations. On the contrary, contemporary transnational radical Islamism is a movement with roots in a complex convergence of global and local factors. As will be argued, while the *al-Qaedaist* social movement might well be described as “global,” and the movement’s ideology is a product of broad social trends on a global scale, the roots and aims of *al-Qaeda* are to be found not in the mythical global “clash of civilizations” but rather at the local state level.

### Structures: Groups

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, in a bid to attract support for military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq from skeptical populations, the US, the UK, and other governments engaged in a rhetorical strategy of aggregation: the downplaying of complexity and the repeated invocation of the simplistic dualisms of good versus evil, freedom versus tyranny, and democracy versus terrorism. The very idea of a “war on terror” represented a rhetorical device, which at every turn sought to portray acts of Islamist violence — whether in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, the UK, or anywhere else in the world — as part of a global struggle pitting the forces of progress and modernity (democratic, secular states) against those of reaction and barbarity (Islamist groups who use violence). The strategy was expressed in its most striking terms by the ethical dualism of George W. Bush with his “good versus evil” / “with us or against us” rhetoric and the merging of the issues of Islamist violence, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and “rogue states” in the run-up to the Iraq invasion. The UK’s Tony Blair spoke in a similar vein, arguing that “Islamic extremism” represented a powerful monolithic global ideology: “The struggle against terrorism in Madrid or London or Paris is the same as the struggle against the terrorist acts of Hezbollah in Lebanon or the PIJ in Palestine or rejectionist groups in Iraq. The murder of the innocent in Beslan is part of the same ideology that takes innocent lives in Saudi Arabia, the Yemen or Libya.”<sup>3</sup>

The work of Rohan Gunaratna, influential in US policy circles, lent intellectual weight to this approach, aggregating a multitude of militant groups under the banner of an organized and hierarchical *al-Qaeda*, linking Palestinian *Hamas* and Lebanese *Hezbollah* to bin Laden's group.<sup>4</sup> Vague and general assertions, including that "one in five Muslim charities" fund *al-Qaeda*'s campaign and that "[*al-Qaeda*'s] networks are intertwined in the socioeconomic, political and religious fabric of Muslims living in at least 80 countries," should, however, be treated with caution.<sup>5</sup> We should be wary of analyses that seek to combine all armed Islamist groups into one indistinguishable whole. Similarly, we should be wary of descriptions of a global operation with disciplined command-and-control structures, especially since much of Gunaratna's source material comes from unnamed "US intelligence sources."<sup>6</sup>

A more helpful approach is disaggregation. Armed Islamist groups must be distinguished on two levels. Most importantly, we should highlight the difference between Islamo-nationalist organizations and doctrinaire *jihadist* groups like *al-Qaeda*. Islamo-nationalist or irredentist groups fight to redeem land from non-Muslim rule or occupation, such as *Hamas* in Palestine, *Hezbollah* in Lebanon, the mainstream of the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq, parts of the insurgency in Afghanistan, and other groups in Kashmir, Chechnya, and elsewhere. This type of armed struggle is determined by the context (foreign rule or occupation), and it is viewed by its participants as one strategy among others, including political participation. Doctrinaire *jihadism*, in contrast, arises from the belief that all forms of democratic or secular government are illegitimate and that "*jihad* must continue until an Islamic government is ruling according to revealed law."<sup>7</sup> This worldview is characterized by a doctrine that prefers violent means over non-violent means (despite the possibility of engaging in the latter) and that draws heavily on the revolutionary message of Sayyid Qutb.<sup>8</sup> As far as doctrinaire groups are concerned, we should distinguish (although this task, as we shall see, is more difficult) between two types: those (the vast majority) who continue to view the "near enemy" — state regimes in Muslim-majority countries — as their sole target and those *jihadists* who have followed *al-Qaeda*'s strategic shift toward targeting the US and its allies.<sup>9</sup>

Ideologically, the rejection of democratic norms and the state system lies at the heart of doctrinaire *jihadism*. It is this rejection that distinguishes them most starkly from Islamo-nationalists and gives rise to the enmity between them.<sup>10</sup> In *jihadist* ideology the Islamic principle of *tawhid* — the absolute oneness of God — is redefined and given an all-embracing significance with clear political ramifications. This idea (as expressed in the Muslim confession of faith "There is no god but God") is regarded by *jihadists* as proof that Islam rejects all forms of popular sovereignty, democracy, constitutions, and parliamentary elections, and that such a rejection is one of the pillars of monotheism. In the words of Sayyid Qutb, "Any system in which the final decisions are referred to human beings . . . deifies [them] by designating others than God as lords over men . . . reducing others to the status of slaves . . . [and therefore] . . . to proclaim the sovereignty of God means to eliminate all human kingship."<sup>11</sup> Since the 1970s, Ayman al-Zawahiri, *al-Qaeda*'s chief contemporary ideologue, has railed against Islamo-nationalist groups, especially the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and branded them "infidels" and "tools in the hands of tyrants."<sup>12</sup> In fact, he has devoted an entire work to the subject, accusing the Brotherhood of transgressing fundamental Islamic principles by recognizing the Egyptian regime, accepting democratic principles based on popular sovereignty, and rejecting the *jihadist* principle that "sovereignty belongs to God alone," i.e., that legitimate political authority can only exist in the form of a theocratic state that implements "revealed law."<sup>13</sup>

This dispute around participation, wedded to a rejection of the *jihadi* principle that violent action is the only way to further political aims, was a key factor behind intra-Sunni Islamist armed conflict in Algeria in the 1990s<sup>14</sup> and more recently in Iraq. In the case of Iraq, in early 2006 the decision of the Iraqi Islamist Party to participate in elections and the establishment of the new government enraged doctrinaire *jihadis*. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi accused the Iraqi Islamic Party of "selling the religion . . . in exchange for a parliamentary seat."<sup>15</sup> By mid-2007, facilitated by a new US military strategy that explicitly recognized the differences between the Islamo-nationalist mainstream and the doctrinaire *jihadi* fringe of the insurgency (after four years of failing to do so), doctrinaire *jihadis* in the *al-Qaeda* mould were being attacked by mainstream Islamo-nationalist groups and were being successfully expelled from many parts of the country. The main differences between the Islamo-nationalists and the *al-Qaedaists* in Iraq were over political participation, nationalism, and the targeting of civilians. As one leading mainstream insurgent put it, "Our mantra is 'At the end of the rifle comes the pen,'" meaning that resistance ultimately has to give way to politics — whereas *al-Qaeda*'s mantra is "At the end of the rifle comes the cannon."<sup>16</sup>

As for the distinction between doctrinaire *jihadists* focused on "near enemy" targets and those who focus on Western targets, such a clear disaggregation is more difficult. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the merging of Zarqawi's group with *al-Qaeda* central, a trend has emerged of local state-based *jihadis* — in Iraq, Algeria, Yemen, and

Somalia — adopting the *al-Qaeda* brand name. It remains unclear, however, the extent to which this rebranding represents a true strategic shift, i.e., an intent to turn their guns onto the “far enemy” outside the borders of the state or whether such rebranding is principally a propaganda move to draw attention onto locally based conflicts by associating themselves with “*al-Qaeda* central” and *al-Qaeda* in Iraq.<sup>17</sup> In Algeria, for example, the ‘merger’ between the GSPC (The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) and *al-Qaeda* central to form *al-Qaeda* in the Islamic *Maghreb* (AQIM) has not, at least until now, led to the Algerian organization mounting attacks in Europe or the United States. This has led one scholar to remark that in Algeria “the globalisation of jihad means no more than local suicide bombings, echoed by local e-propaganda.”<sup>18</sup> Even in the case of *al-Qaeda* in Iraq, targeting over the past eight years has been, and continues to be, more focused on Iraqi Shi’ites rather than on US or coalition targets, which reflects the *jihadist* hope that civil war in Iraq might act as a prelude to a regional conflagration between Sunni and Shi’a, and the first step toward achieving their wider revolutionary aims in the region.<sup>19</sup>

## The Social Movement

Analyses of *al-Qaeda* as a broad-based and multi-faceted social movement capture the contemporary complexity of the phenomenon better than any study focused on organizations. Jason Burke’s analysis, more persuasive and independently researched than Gunaratna’s, argues convincingly that even at *al-Qaeda*’s most organized period in late 2001, “to see it as a coherent organisation, with ‘tentacles everywhere’ . . . is to misunderstand . . . the nature of Islamic radicalism then and now. The contingent, dynamic and local elements of what is a broad and ill-defined movement rooted in historical trends of great complexity are lost [in such a description].”<sup>20</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid agree, arguing that *al-Qaeda* “underwent a fundamental transformation after the US-led war which destroyed *al-Qaeda*’s headquarters in Afghanistan, [changing] from a *quasi*-command-and-control structure . . . to a more loosely configured network based upon individual cells dispersed throughout the world,” making it now more of a “movement” than an established organization.<sup>21</sup> Burke adds that the most accurate contemporary portrayal of *al-Qaeda* is of an increasingly powerful and influential *idea* spread via global media, especially the internet.<sup>22</sup> This is not to say that in 2010 there no longer existed organized groups and structures related to the pre-2001 structures. There are conflicting reports as to what extent *al-Qaeda* central continues to operate effectively, and although there have been some reports of a resurgence post-2007, the jury is out.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Hegghammer highlights five “main participants” in the post-Iraq War *al-Qaeda* social movement: the old *al-Qaeda* leadership (i.e., Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri); the religious scholars, or “*jihad* sheiks,” who lend their authority to legitimize violent action; the strategic thinkers “who write about the best way — from a functional point of view — to fight the enemy;” the “active militant organisations” affiliated with *al-Qaeda*, such as “*al-Qaeda* in Iraq,” “*al-Qaeda* in the Arabian Peninsula,” and *al-Qaeda* in the Islamic *Maghreb*; and the “grassroot radicals . . . i.e. the thousands of anonymous participants on radical Islamist discussions on the Internet.”<sup>24</sup> Marc Sageman’s analysis, meanwhile, focuses primarily on these “grassroot radicals” who, since the 2003 Iraq invasion, have participated in a “leaderless *jihad*.” This concept refers to the new breed of “freelance” *jihadis* who mount operations alone (for example, Casablanca in 2003, Madrid in 2004, and London in 2005) without any significant physical link to *al-Qaeda* central.<sup>25</sup> They form part of a network linked much less by any physical contact than before and much more by the collective discourse of the several most influential *jihadi* forums on the internet, described by the author as the “true leader of global Islamist terrorism.”<sup>26</sup>

The emergence of a loosely linked social movement that thrives in the online world is partly the result of a deliberate *jihadist* strategy to create the conditions in which operations could be carried out by clandestine networks protected from detection by the absence of physical connections to other groups or to an organized leadership. Indeed, several prominent *jihadist* strategists have advocated this approach.<sup>27</sup> One of the most influential among them, Abu-Mus’ab al-Suri, published his decentralization theory in 2004 in his *Call for a Global Islamic Resistance*, in which the idea of a “leaderless *jihad*” is a prominent theme. Formulated as a way of responding to expanded counterterrorism policies post 9/11 — the targeting of financial resources, the assassination of *jihadi* leaders, military attacks on safe havens, and international security cooperation — al-Suri advocates a system whereby groups form from the bottom up among friends inspired by media propaganda, especially via the internet. Such a system would, he theorizes, maximize both the geographic spread of operations and support and their effectiveness, making them less visible to security and intelligence organizations.<sup>28</sup> In terms of *jihadi* doctrine, the decentralized model is grounded in the radical Islamist

assertion (and one of the ideological pillars of the *al-Qaeda* movement) that *jihad* (interpreted as armed action) is an individual duty incumbent upon all Muslims who are able to carry it out.<sup>29</sup>

## Ideology: An Omnivorous Doctrine

Explanations abound for the rise of the ideology of doctrinaire *jihadism* or what might today be called *al-Qaedaism*. Some place *al-Qaeda* in a long line of radical movements dating back to the Middle Ages and beyond, across the span of Islamic history.<sup>30</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, another tendency has been to point out the ideological debt *al-Qaeda* owes to modern European revolutionary movements, most notably anarchism, communism, and fascism.<sup>31</sup> Other academics, writing from a political science perspective, place *al-Qaedaism* at the end of a Sunni Islamist spectrum, emerging as a radical off-shoot from mainstream political Islam as articulated by twentieth-century theorists such as Mawdudi, al-Banna, and Qutb. These works emphasize the role of ideas emerging from nationalist, anti-colonialist, and reformist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Pakistan.<sup>32</sup> Another well-known, but rather partial, analysis focuses entirely on the role of Saudi Wahhabism.<sup>33</sup> Others combine these factors more convincingly, describing *al-Qaeda* as a “symbiosis” and a “disconcerting encounter” between Egyptian revolutionary Islamism and Saudi fundamentalism and correctly assigning more weight to the revolutionary Islamist current.<sup>34</sup> Taking the symbiosis thesis further, Burke argues that the power and attraction of *al-Qaedaism* lies in its eclecticism, combining as it does so many trends from within Islamic tradition — “millenarian, fundamentalist, reformist, revivalist, Wahhabi/Salafi and . . . Islamist.” Furthermore, he suggests that “a key element of the success of their discourse is that it combines so many elements of preceding ideologies.”<sup>35</sup>

All of these explanations make useful contributions to our understanding of the phenomenon. Perhaps the most striking characteristic that emerges from this body of literature, as reflected in the wide range of analyses and explanations, is the “omnivorous” nature of doctrinaire *jihadi* thought.<sup>36</sup> One of the most persuasive analyses of *al-Qaedaism*, Faisal Devji’s *Landscapes of the Jihad*, sees it as an ill-defined ideological composite, or syncretism, that should be analyzed as a direct symptom, not of any local tradition, but rather of modernity and globalization themselves.<sup>37</sup>

## Fragmentation of Religious Authority

The existence and influence of radical *jihadist* ideology is one symptom of a pervasive phenomenon that has affected the Muslim world in the modern era: the demise of traditional institutions of Islamic jurisprudence over two centuries and the resulting erosion of religious authority. A convincing argument can be made for a direct link between the decline of classical Islamic law and theology as expressed by the traditional institutions of Islamic jurisprudence and the rise of essentialist and ahistorical interpretations of the holy texts.<sup>38</sup> From this perspective, the reason why people like bin Laden are able to obtain the status of a religious authority in the eyes of their followers and to issue *fatwas* in the fashion of trained Islamic scholars despite their lack of credentials is that they operate within a long-standing and growing vacuum of religious authority. Leading Islamic legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl has written about the advent of what he calls “vulgarized” interpretations of Islam by reference to processes of “individualization” brought about by the dissolution of the classical Islamic legal tradition during the European colonial period, the subsequent sudden and traumatic birth of the modern nation-state, and the co-opting of religious authority by centralized state power, often characterized by despotism and corruption.<sup>39</sup>

The thrust of this analysis is that the erosion of Islamic jurisprudence over more than a century has brought about a democratization (almost a protestantization) effect where unqualified laypersons from outside the juridical tradition are empowered as legitimate interpreters of the word of God and revivalist movements emerge emphasizing direct contact between individuals and scripture without recourse to the clergy. This idea is as destabilizing as it is liberating, for although the view that any individual is as qualified to interpret the scriptures as any other does not, in itself, lead directly to radical conclusions, it does allow those with political agendas to abuse the texts, picking and choosing those words that support their cause and ignoring in the process centuries of traditional exegesis. In doing so, they promote literalist, ahistorical interpretations, which in turn encourage black-and-white thinking. In this regard, Abou El Fadl observes that “Islamic law and theology have become the extracurricular hobby of pamphlet readers and writers . . . [who] . . . have reduced the Islamic heritage to the lowest common denominator . . . a vehicle for displays of power.”<sup>40</sup> More recently, the role of the internet in this process has been examined. Sageman stresses the egalitarian nature of contributions in chat

rooms on the internet, where each opinion appears as authoritative as another and where no one's contribution can be silenced.<sup>41</sup>

Further influencing these trends is what has been referred to as “the objectification of Muslim consciousness” in the post-colonial era. As Dale Eikelman and James Piscatori theorize, over the past half-century, the advent of mass education and mass communications in Muslim-majority states has given rise to a process whereby, more and more, large numbers of believers start to meditate on certain questions: “‘What is my religion?’ ‘Why is it important to my life?’ and ‘How do my beliefs guide my conduct?’” In this way, long-held and taken-for-granted truths are opened up to examination and religion is increasingly seen as “a self-contained system that its believers can describe, characterize, and distinguish from other such systems.”<sup>42</sup>

The fragmentation of religious authority within Muslim-majority societies over the past two centuries is one of the most significant consequences of the dramatic social, political, and technological changes of the modern era, and it is a process that continues. Another facet of these processes is the geographic spread of Islamic practice brought about by migration. Both Olivier Roy and Jocelyne Cesari have written extensively about the nature of religious practice when removed from its traditional geographic and social context and emphasize the “individualization” of interpretation that results from such a shift.<sup>43</sup> The argument follows that when religion no longer has social authority, it falls upon the individual to formulate what it means to be a Muslim. Cesari observes, “to be a Muslim in Europe . . . means to lose one's relationship to Islam as a cultural and social *fait accompli*, and instead to open it up to questioning and individual choice.”<sup>44</sup> Roy, meanwhile, notes that the reformulation of Islam in the absence of social authority leads to a quest to discover a “pure” Islam, “delinked from any specific culture,” a project seen as one of loss — “an impoverishment of Islam . . . divorced from inherited cultural habits and collateral knowledge.”<sup>45</sup> Although the link between extremism and the “deterritorialization of Islam” is debatable and perhaps overstated, evidence does suggest that the difficulties confronting those living as a minority, including the overwhelming dominance of the majority culture, socio-economic marginalization, and racism, can contribute to a social context in which a small minority seeks refuge in radical doctrines, and the comforting certainties of a black-and-white world, where good versus evil, belief versus unbelief, Islam versus the West.<sup>46</sup>

More broadly, the fragmentation of religious authority brought about by the demise of traditional institutions, objectification, migration, and new communication technologies has heightened the trend of Islam being viewed as one ideology among other competing ideologies (such as secularism, democracy, socialism, etc.) and the resulting ascendance of Islam as a political manifesto that challenges the *status quo* and offers solutions to contemporary ills.<sup>47</sup>

Doctrinaire *jihadists* are an extremist fringe within Islamism, and Islamists are a tiny minority among Muslims, but they are a product of the same historical forces that have shaped the Muslim world and Islamic belief and practice over the last 200 years. In *al-Qaedaism*, according to Devji, the demise of the classical legal tradition has opened the door to “personalized . . . non-traditional interpretations of Scripture [which] draw upon the flotsam and the jetsam of received ideas and remembered histories spanning the Muslim tradition.”<sup>48</sup> These are arbitrary sets of beliefs and practices employed according to the demands of circumstance and need;<sup>49</sup> they are disparate ideologies that “depend upon the disintegration of traditional Muslim narratives and chronologies, as much as of modern theories of ideology and revolution.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, while dismissing “hypocrite imams” and warning young Muslims not to listen to their clerics, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri play the part of religious scholars, arguing that the contemporary political predicament of “the Muslim nation” demands revolutionary action from every individual, among which the deliberate targeting of civilians is permitted in the name of religion.<sup>51</sup> As one scholar notes, such justifications are “not based on the main schools of Islamic theology, but a new ideological starting point that provides Al Qaeda with a theoretical legitimisation for non-discriminatory, violent action.”<sup>52</sup>

## Abusing the Texts

The defining case of how doctrinaire *jihadi* ideology uses personalized interpretations divorced from legal tradition is in its interpretation of the concept of *jihad* itself. Particularly vulnerable to abuse, the doctrine of *jihad* as armed struggle (as opposed to its other meaning of an internal spiritual struggle) has long been a contentious issue. Indeed, there is no single authoritative voice in the Islamic tradition that has imposed its interpretation universally. The question of armed struggle, and in which circumstances it is legitimate, has been debated hotly by the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence for centuries.<sup>53</sup> The Koranic prescriptions on war are quite general, calling on Muslims to “fight in

the way of God,” establish justice, and refrain from disproportionate or unjust actions while fighting; mainstream Islamic scholarship tends to interpret *jihad* as self-defence or a “just war” only to be undertaken collectively and under certain carefully defined circumstances, typically in the defence of a country that has been invaded or occupied.<sup>54</sup>

The doctrinaire *jihadi* movement has exploited this vagueness to impose its own view. Drawing on the ideas of thirteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (whose worldview was shaped by the cataclysm of the Mongol invasions), modern *jihadist* intellectuals have resurrected the idea of an obligation on all individual Muslims to wage war against all regimes not considered sufficiently Islamic.<sup>55</sup> Ibn Taymiyyah’s *fatwa* proclaimed firstly that *jihad* was no longer to be considered as a collective obligation undertaken by a head of state in defence of occupied territory but rather as an individual duty and an offensive weapon against ‘apostate rulers,’ and secondly, that such a duty was to be considered the highest form of devotion. Six centuries later, Sayyid Qutb (perhaps the single most important intellectual source for the *al-Qaeda* movement)<sup>56</sup> again denounced traditional understandings of *jihad* and, drawing on Ibn Taymiyyah, offered his own interpretation. As Fawaz Gerges explains, “Far from viewing *jihad* as a collective duty governed by strict regulations (similar to just war theory in Christianity, international law, and classical Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*), *jihad* for Qutb was a permanent revolution against internal and external enemies who usurped God’s sovereignty . . . he dared to neutralize the entire body of traditional *fiqh* and provided jihadis with direct access to the original texts, which they used as weapons against ‘impious regimes’.”<sup>57</sup>

*Jihadi* ideologues readily drop the main corpus of Islamic theology, adapting Islamic principles in an *ad hoc* fashion to accord with their perspective on contemporary politics. Indeed, if the circumstances in which *jihad* could be declared were radically reconfigured by *jihadists*, so were the actions considered legitimate in the course of such an armed struggle. That the deliberate targeting of civilians is considered un-Islamic by the vast majority of Muslim scholars and Islamist activists was made clear in the days after the 9/11 attacks.<sup>58</sup> *Al-Qaeda*’s religious justification for 9/11, published in 2002, therefore, marked a clear departure from traditional thinking and a stark rejection of mainstream scholarship. Effectively, they argue that there is no unconditional prohibition against killing civilians in Islam and that under certain conditions (which in their view had been met) civilians can be deliberately targeted. Despite overwhelming opinion to the contrary among the vast majority of Muslim scholars (condemned by doctrinaire *jihadists* as “mouthpieces for Arab regimes” and “apostates”), *al-Qaeda* once again imposed its own interpretation of the scriptures to justify its standpoint. Chief among these justifications is the citation of Koranic verses that stress reciprocity in war: “And one who attacks you, attack him in like manner as he attacked you.”<sup>59</sup> In the contemporary *jihadist* view of global politics — an existentialist war between Islam and disbelief — the evidence points to a clear conclusion: “If the unbelievers have targeted Muslim women, children and elderly [as they are seen to have done in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere], it is permissible for Muslims to respond in kind.”<sup>60</sup> In an *ad hoc* approach, other Koranic verses are identified in order to argue that further conditions have been met to justify purposefully targeting civilians, among which are “assistance of civilians in deed, word, or mind” (i.e., the responsibility of citizens in a democratic state for the actions of its government) and the inability to distinguish civilians from combatants in battle.<sup>61</sup> As Quinton Wikorowicz and John Kaltner argue, “the sheer breadth of these justifications leaves ample theological justification for killing civilians in almost any imaginable situation.”<sup>62</sup>

## Aims: Global Identities and the “Clash of Civilizations” Myth

The modern era has also encouraged a resurgence of the idea of a worldwide Muslim nation or *umma*. The feeling of a shared identity across borders is one felt by many Muslims and is influenced by the doctrine of *tawhid*.<sup>63</sup> In recent decades, globalized media, mass education, and migration have contributed to an intensification of this transnational sentiment. There is nothing unusual about such solidarity, and it is not particular to religion or to Islam: the rise of transnational identities and Diaspora politics — whether they are based on religion, nationality, gender, class, ethnicity, or other ideology — are defining characteristics of the modern era. *Al-Qaeda*ist discourse, however, essentializes the *umma* and defines it in opposition to an equally essentialized “West,” exploiting pan-Muslim identity to propagate the idea of a “civilizational clash.” However flawed, the “clash” thesis is powerful and has entered popular discourse, not least because such a thesis has been mirrored and defended by prominent academics and politicians in the US and Europe.<sup>64</sup> Among Muslims its power derives from the historical context from which it has emerged — perceived injustice over at least a century of relations between the European colonial powers, the US, and some Muslim-majority societies.

It is not surprising that pan-Muslim sentiment is aroused when co-religionists are seen to be suffering around the world. Global *jihadist* propaganda feeds off and exploits these feelings to encourage an exclusive politics of identity, an extreme religious transnationalism that places grievances in a simple framework of oppressed/Muslim versus oppressor/unbeliever and ignores the complexities of history. When *al-Qaeda* justifies 9/11 as “a service to Islam in defence of its people,”<sup>65</sup> bin Laden refers to the miserable state of the *umma* and Islam under attack<sup>66</sup> or when Mohammed Siddique Khan justifies the 7/7 London bombings as a defence of “my people” who daily suffer “bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture” at the hands of “infidels,”<sup>67</sup> a repeated rhetorical device is employed: injustices are identified, linked, and globalized; blame is assigned; and revolutionary violence is offered as a solution that demands every individual take up arms in a defensive and just war.<sup>68</sup> By repeatedly linking all the conflicts in the world that involve Muslims into one anti-Islam conspiracy, the imagined community of the global Muslim nation is invoked within the framework of a powerful Manichean narrative. Fred Halliday refers to this linkage as the “rhetorical . . . political geography of the new Greater West Asian crisis.”<sup>69</sup> This rhetorical landscape of Muslim suffering and oppression, reinforced by propaganda videos that graphically demonstrate the suffering of Muslims and in some cases desensitize the viewer to violence, has been, and remains, one of the most powerful recruiting tools for the *al-Qaeda* movement.<sup>70</sup>

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent chaos added a new and potent symbol to the *jihadi* inventory of grievances. The power of the Iraq war to galvanize and radicalize opinion worldwide was demonstrated in the attacks on Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005. This is not to say that these attacks were to be explained solely in terms of the Iraq war but rather that it was a key factor. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies reported in 2005, “the war in Iraq has both intensified the *jihad* and eroded the ability of Western governments to fight back . . . recruitment to radical causes has increased.”<sup>71</sup> This propaganda effort has been reinforced by the perception that certain well-publicized acts of brutality committed by coalition forces in Iraq, shocking even in the context of a war, are representative of the moral vacuity of “Western society.” The photographs of abuse and sexual violence at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay reinforced the perception among some that this behavior was representative of the nature of “Western” culture as a whole, which the US and its allies sought to impose upon them.<sup>72</sup> Such feelings serve *al-Qaeda*’s propaganda effort and the spread of its portrait of a corrupt West.

A further factor in this process of radicalization was that the mainstream Islamo-nationalist insurgency in Iraq allowed doctrinaire *jihadis* to attach themselves to a cause and movement with wide support in the Sunni Muslim world. Radical Sunni Islamism asserted itself in Iraq against the background of an indigenous nationalist uprising with a goal of national liberation from occupation and in the service of Sunni power and identity in a struggle against Shi’a (perceived as Iranian) dominance. The vast majority of those who made up the insurgency were native Iraqis from the Sunni community, uninterested in any wider ideological agenda. Their motives and grievances had roots in the US invasion and occupation, the ascendance of the Shi’a and Kurds as the wielders of political power, and the consequent disenfranchisement (real and perceived) of the Sunni Arab minority.<sup>73</sup>

Despite widely differing goals and ideologies, the confessional flavor of the nationalist insurgency helped doctrinaire *jihadis* in Iraq and elsewhere draw on the grievances of the mainstream to legitimize their own arguments and actions. Indeed, the belief that the Sunni Arab insurgency in Iraq represented a justified resistance movement in the service of national liberation was accepted and promoted by many in the Sunni Muslim religious establishment. In this regard, Gerges argues that the invasion of Iraq “backfired and revived *al-Qaeda* after it had fallen in a coma” by alienating “most of the important secular and religious Muslim groups that had rejected and opposed *al-Qaeda*’s global *jihad*” in the wake of 9/11 and who had even given their tacit support to the US campaign to oust the Taliban in 2001.<sup>74</sup> Two important examples of this alienation of mainstream Sunni Muslim opinion were the *fatwas* of Cairo’s Al-Azhar University and of Sheikh Qardawi. Al-Azhar, the oldest institution of religious higher learning in the Islamic world, issued a *fatwa* advising “all Muslims in the world to make *jihad* against invading American soldiers,” characterizing such actions as “a binding religious duty.” Qardawi (another prominent Egyptian-born cleric), meanwhile, declared that “death while defending Iraq is a kind of martyrdom,” and even went as far as to sanction attacks on Iraqi civilians who commit the “crime” of assisting the occupying forces.<sup>75</sup> These were mainstream sources with a wide audience in the Muslim world. With such widespread support for the traditional idea of a struggle against non-Muslim occupation in Iraq, *al-Qaeda* benefited from a blurring of the divisions between their own doctrinaire struggle and the mainstream Islamo-nationalist *jihad*.

Iraq represents a recent and powerful confirmation of the “clash of civilizations” myth for many, but the idea of an imperial, expansionist West as the cause of all ills has an older pedigree and was as prevalent in leftist and secular



nationalist discourse as it is now among Islamists of all shades including *jihadists*. Indeed, the power and resilience of the “clash” myth lies in the fact that it has its roots in real historical grievances. Therefore, the broad global context of 9/11 and similar attacks is not only one of the individualization of religious interpretation, mass population movements, and the strengthening of transnational identities but also of a long-standing political and economic asymmetry between Western and Muslim-majority societies.

Halliday divides this period into “three superimposed periods of asymmetric relation”: European colonialism, the Cold War, and economic globalization.<sup>76</sup> Although there is no space here to rehearse the historical details, we should highlight the enduring legacy of the colonial period (1870–1945), especially the creation of the state system in the Middle East after 1918 and the many unresolved issues that have bred conflict and a sense of deep injustice ever since. These include the Sykes/Picot agreement, which carved up the Middle East according to the interests of the UK and France; the creation of the state of Israel; Israel’s relations with the Arab states; US sponsorship of Israel; the dispossession of the Kurdish people; and the status of Kuwait.<sup>77</sup> Of particular importance in this rhetorical landscape of injustice is Palestine, which has been the major element in the symbolic politics of Islam since 1948 and especially since 1967, the year when Jerusalem and its Muslim holy sites were occupied by Israel.<sup>78</sup>

As for the role of the Cold War in the rise of Islamism and its radical off-shoot *jihadism*, we should remember that it was the perceived communist threat represented by revolutionary Arab socialist governments, such as those in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Iraq, and later the Islamic revolution in Iran during the Cold War period, that directly led to the funding and support by Saudi Arabia and other Western-allied regimes of many Islamic activist groups. In the case of Saudi Arabia, this effort also involved widespread evangelism of Wahhabi Islam as a way of countering secular, communist ideology and boosting the authority of the Saudi regime.<sup>79</sup> Referring to the role of Islamist militias in the fight against the forces of communism in Afghanistan and Yemen, Halliday notes “the intimate relation between the rise of the armed Islamists and the crushing of the left in the Cold War.”<sup>80</sup>

The third period of asymmetric relation that continues to the present day is economic globalization. Several analyses of the rise of radical Islamism frame the phenomenon as a counterpoint to the socially destabilizing effects of Western market dominance.<sup>81</sup> These factors include social fragmentation, job insecurity, and the “commercialization, commodification and contractualization of more and more areas of human activity and relationships.”<sup>82</sup> In some Muslim-majority societies, the perception that such changes are intimately linked to a neo-imperialist project has led to protest movements by politico-religious actors who derive much of their legitimacy from manifestos that offer radical alternatives to “Western” prescriptions of socio-economic development.<sup>83</sup>

As we have seen, *jihadist* discourse exploits the core grievances of societies in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world to recruit support for its campaign. But how do these grievances and the civilizational clash invoked in their articulations relate to the aims of the *jihadi* movement? Discussions of these questions often focus on a debate over whether *al-Qaeda* views itself as fighting a religious, “cosmic” war with practical politics and irrelevance and its aim as “the vanquishing of evil itself,” or whether it is essentially a political movement with religion as a utilitarian side-issue.<sup>84</sup> Such debates risk diverting attention away from the fact that *jihadists* view religion and politics as inseparable, and Islam is regarded as having “a mandate to order the whole of human life.”<sup>85</sup> What distinguishes *jihadists* from other Islamists is not the application of religious principles to politics but rather an individual interpretation of contemporary politics — its ills and remedies — married to an individual interpretation of scripture. Therefore, the use of indiscriminate violence backed up by a good-versus-evil worldview, no matter how shocking, should not lead us to view the *al-Qaeda* social movement as apocalyptic. The language and imagery may be religious, and those who participate may believe that they are fulfilling heavenly edicts, but the aims and the agenda of such activity are not geared toward the end of times. On the contrary, radical doctrinaire *jihadists* have set out clearly their view of the ills of contemporary society and a strategy to rectify those ills. The rallying cry of the “clash of civilizations” is a not an end in itself but rather a means to an end.

## The Importance of States

It is the roots and aims of the global *jihad* that draw us most strongly to local factors. Despite the global reach of modern Islamic radicalism, the “omnivorous” nature of its ideology, the context of globalization and the asymmetric relationship with the West in which it has emerged, and the religious terms in which it is articulated, the phenomenon is the result of a myriad of local grievances within Muslim-majority countries, especially the Arab states of the Middle East. Although in its most recent form this movement expresses itself globally, and many within the movement see themselves

as soldiers in a cosmic struggle, its roots and agenda lie locally within specific state-based societies. The transformation of state-based revolutionary action into a global war, therefore, represents a new path to the same destination. This shift is the result of two assumptions on the part of *jihadist* strategists: first, that the only way to achieve their long-held strategic objectives — the overthrow of “apostate” regimes, the installation of an Islamic state governed by their version of *Shari’a*, the defeat of Israel, and the restoration of the Caliphate — is to attack the “head of the snake,” i.e., the United States, and second, that the best way to achieve widespread support for, or acquiescence in, such a project is to invoke the image of Islam under attack.<sup>86</sup>

Prominent *jihadist* writers and strategists, such as Al-Suri, Zawahiri, al-Qurashi, and al-Muqrin, have all offered detailed accounts of short- and long-term aims and strategies to achieve such aims, and all stress the importance of controlling territory and taking power.<sup>87</sup> In his “Call to Global Islamic Resistance,” Abu Musab Al-Suri emphasizes four consecutive strategic goals:

1. Expelling the Crusader and Jewish campaigns under the leadership of America and its allies;
2. Eliminating the agent forces and hypocrites who work to achieve the goals of the invading campaigns;
3. Overthrowing the regimes of apostasy and betrayal in our country;
4. Establishing *Shari’a* on the remnants of those apostate forces.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Zawahiri states the principal objective as being “a piece of land . . . on which [to] establish and protect the state of Islam and launch its battle to restore the rational caliphate based on the traditions of the prophet,”<sup>89</sup> or in the words of bin Laden, it is the “triumph of religion and the establishment of a Muslim state . . . ruling according to revealed law.”<sup>90</sup>

The strategic shift among some doctrinaire *jihadists* (a minority) toward targeting the United States and its allies and the move towards a “global” *jihad* in the mid-1990s represent a new path to this same objective — seizing power within states. This mutation reflects the widespread belief that militants, within their individual states, have been prevented from achieving any significant change because of US policies in the Middle East, especially its support for Israel and the dictatorships of the region.

The failure of local radical Islamist insurgencies to achieve their objectives within their own states led to a new strategy as a way to ensure the survival of the *jihadi* movement. In terms of propaganda and recruitment, this would involve stepping onto the world stage, inviting massive media coverage, recasting its participants as defenders of Islam against the global tyrant, and starting a cycle of violence by provoking the US and its allies into military action in Muslim-majority states, thereby undermining local regimes that inevitably would be forced to side with the enemy.<sup>91</sup> In terms of military strategy, the other principal goal as stated by bin Laden, is, by provoking it into a long military campaign, to “bleed the US economy” through attrition, forcing economic decline, “disintegration,” “contraction,” and a concurrent decline in financial and military aid to the “near enemy,”<sup>92</sup> or, in *jihadi* parlance, “killing the branches by attacking the trunk.”<sup>93</sup>

Commenting on this strategy, Gilles Kepel explains the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington as “an attempt to reverse a process in decline with a paroxysm of destructive violence”<sup>94</sup> and as a realization of the myth of the “clash of civilizations” in

A desperate attempt to arouse, motivate, inspire Muslims [and] above all . . . to provoke the US into attack, to start a cycle of violence . . . [and thus] . . . to build universal solidarity among Muslims in reaction to the victimization and suffering of their Afghan brothers.<sup>95</sup>

This thesis reflects the stated view among the theorists and founders of the global *jihadist* movement that *al-Qaeda* would act as “a vanguard” to wake the masses<sup>96</sup> and that only a “spectacular act could mobilize the masses.”<sup>97</sup> By drawing the US into direct military intervention in Afghanistan and the Middle East, *jihadists* hoped to provoke massive popular protest, instability, and the possibility of a political space for the rise of radical Islamist power in Middle Eastern states — the ultimate strategic goal.<sup>98</sup>

The failure of doctrinaire *jihadist* insurgents in Algeria and Libya in the wake of their participation in the Afghan-Soviet war influenced this appraisal, as did the failed Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Syria in the 1980s.<sup>99</sup> The most important state in this regard, however, is Egypt. Ideologically and organizationally, Egypt is at the epicenter of the

*jihadist* movement. Both in terms of the genesis of modern Islamism and its radical offshoot *jihadism*, Egypt is key. Despite the prominence of Osama bin Laden as a figurehead and financial backer, it is the Egyptian insurgency, the ideological offspring of Qutb and Faraj, that is perhaps the single most important forerunner of *al-Qaeda* and the *al-Qaedaist* movement.<sup>100</sup> Most of the leaders of the *al-Qaeda* core organization are Egyptian militants with a history of focusing on the “near enemy,”<sup>101</sup> whose failure in the domestic context — the break-up of the Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* organization and its subsequent ceasefire agreement with the government in 1997 — impelled the search for a new strategy.<sup>102</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of *Islamic Jihad*, who had been jailed in the wake of the assassination of President Sadat, was most influential in the decision to merge with bin Laden’s organization, becoming *al-Qaeda*’s number two and the principal contemporary ideologue of the movement.<sup>103</sup>

Zawahiri has outlined the reasons for the strategic shift in his memoirs, stressing that, despite the operational redirection toward the US and its allies, the “near enemy” — the Egyptian regime — remained the ultimate target. Concluding that the *jihadi* insurgency in Egypt would always be frustrated by the nature of the easily policed terrain of the Nile Valley,<sup>104</sup> al-Zawahiri says he was attracted to the mountains of Afghanistan as “a tributary and base for jihad in Egypt and the Arab region, the heart of the Islamic world, where the basic battle of Islam was being fought.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, the 1998 amalgamation of Zawahiri’s group with bin Laden’s organization and the formation of *al-Qaeda* represented a new strategy toward the same aims. The move to Afghanistan was a means of acquiring a new operational freedom (“a kind of laboratory . . . like an incubator where its [the *jihad*’s] seeds would grow and where it could acquire practical experience in combat, politics and organisational matters”<sup>106</sup>) and, in collaboration with bin Laden, a new global strategy to attract widespread support, media coverage, and to undermine the Arab regimes by hitting the United States.

The idea that the *jihadist* movement’s highest priority is the overthrow of regimes in the Middle East and the eventual conquest of Jerusalem under the banner of Islam (and not a war against the “far enemy” — the US and its allies) is a belief held by the vast majority of doctrinaire *jihadis* today.<sup>107</sup> Ideologically, this view reflects the writings of Mohammed Abd al-Salam Faraj, a disciple of Qutb and an important influence on a generation of Egyptian *jihadis*, including al-Zawahiri. Faraj argues that the “near enemy” must be prioritized because “liberating Jerusalem must be waged under the banner of Islam, not the internal impious leadership, lest [it] be the main beneficiary of such a victory . . . [and also because] . . . the colonial presence in Muslim lands is the fault of these Muslim rulers.” Faraj concludes by arguing that “the jihad’s first and foremost priority must be to replace these infidel rulers with a comprehensive Islamic system [and therefore that] any other external agenda would be a waste of time.”<sup>108</sup> As late as 1995, Zawahiri still adhered to this same notion that “the road to Jerusalem goes first through Cairo” and that “the fight against apostate regimes must come before other fights.”<sup>109</sup> His conversion to the notion of the global *jihad* should be interpreted not as an abandonment of this idea but rather as a different path to its fulfilment. As Gerges emphasizes, “Localism and not globalism informed the thinking and action of jihadis.”<sup>110</sup>

For bin Laden, meanwhile, armed conflict with America is intimately connected to the “special relationship” between the Saudi regime and the US, especially since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent US-led war to repel his forces.<sup>111</sup> Indeed, it is this single issue that dominated bin Laden’s discourse in the 1990s: his “Declaration of *Jihad*” specifically targets “the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places.”<sup>112</sup> In this sense, in the Saudi context, bin Laden is not an anomaly, for although the vast majority of Saudi citizens find bin Laden’s means reprehensible, there is substantial sympathy for his message — distaste at the US-Saudi relationship, the stationing of US troops on Saudi soil, US support for Israel, domestic corruption, economic inequality, and Western cultural incursion into the fabric of Saudi society.<sup>113</sup>

Although bin Laden has been less explicit about the importance of the return home from exile and has promoted a more internationalist line than his Egyptian counterpart, the need for regime change in Saudi Arabia is a recurrent theme in his statements. Drawing on a long tradition of Islamist dissent in Saudi Arabia, and tapping into the widely felt grievances that emerged in the 1990s, bin Laden refers to the “bitter repression, [the] terrible injustice . . . [and the] . . . humiliating poverty” which the Saudis suffer, expressing a belief that the regime has “desecrated its legitimacy” and must be overthrown.<sup>114</sup> Other stated grievances against the Saudi regime include the “betrayal” of Palestine, represented by their peace initiative with Israel in 2002, and the state’s crackdown on *jihadi* and reformist Sheiks.<sup>115</sup> In a December 2004 statement, bin Laden effectively calls the Saudi royal family infidels and expresses his opinion that it was the duty of every Muslim to overthrow them by violent means.<sup>116</sup> He also accuses the Saudi regime of colluding with the US in the invasion of Iraq. Fundamentally, the struggles against the US and the Saudi regimes are viewed as the same thing. By targeting the United States through *al-Qaeda* central, and by supporting the local *jihadist* movement (an *al-Qaeda*

franchise organization) within the country against the regime, *ihadists* see themselves as involved in a double-pronged strategy in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>117</sup> But is the idea that the *ihadi* movement is principally concerned with seizing state power in Muslim-majority societies contradicted by the “freelancers” of the *al-Qaeda* social movement? After all, these *ihadi* operatives are people who live, and in many cases were born, in countries far from the Muslim-majority states where power is sought.

Much has been made of the link between “deterritorialized” Islam — Muslims living as a minority in Western countries, especially in Europe — and radicalization. In the wake of 9/11 and the attacks in Madrid and London, the fact that many of the operatives involved had strong links with Europe — and in some cases had been born in Europe — was used to support the thesis that these attacks had more to do with revenge attacks in the context of an identity war than with revolutionary politics in Muslim-majority states, with Europe and “westernized Islam” to blame.<sup>118</sup> However, as Alison Pargeter argues, this link is far from clear. Despite some evidence to suggest that the stresses of living in a minority culture and the fragmentation of religious authority in the Diaspora can be factors in radicalization,<sup>119</sup> and although many *ihadi* sympathizers in Europe do appear to be motivated by the clash of civilizations myth — “the lowest common denominator”<sup>120</sup> of all *ihadi* ideologies — the vast majority of *ihadi* operatives in Europe have had strong links to their country of origin (or that of their parents) and have been concerned with the internal politics of those states. Most of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudi citizens, committed *ihadists* and highly religious, who, although coming together in Hamburg, were already in most cases committed to armed struggle before their arrival in Europe.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, although alienation and marginalization were often presumed to be behind the radicalization of the second-generation Pakistani operatives who carried out the London attacks, the role of internal Pakistani politics and especially the issue of Kashmir have often been overlooked as factors in their radicalization.<sup>122</sup> Although the call to global *ihad* and the exclusive identity politics that surround it have played a part in radicalization in some Western countries, it would be simplistic to view this as the sole or main cause of such radicalization. Moreover, we should also not be distracted by high-profile cases of European *ihadis* into forgetting that the majority of *ihadis* are young males from the core and Maghreb regions of the Arab world.<sup>123</sup>

In his authoritative study of international relations in the Middle East, Fred Halliday describes the global *ihadi* movement as a “dramatic transnational expression” of a generalized “crisis of the state” in the wider Middle East (what he refers to as the “Greater West Asian Crisis”).<sup>124</sup> From this perspective, as we have argued, the shift toward the “far enemy” and the invocation of a global *ihad* is symbolic and propagandistic: its primary goal is neither religious nor cultural but rather political. The aim is to take power from those who control states and to hold onto it: “Religious fundamentalism in all countries has one goal . . . to seize power, political, social and gendered, within their own societies,”<sup>125</sup> or in the words of al-Zawahiri, “The foremost duty of Islam is to depose Jahiliyah from the leadership of man, and to take the leadership into its own hands and enforce the particular way of life which is its permanent feature.”<sup>126</sup> The main targets of terrorist attacks such as 9/11 are thus the “hypocritical regimes” (*munaḥiq*) so often threatened and condemned by bin Laden in his statements over the past 10 years.<sup>127</sup> In a similar vein, Gerges argues that “the birth and evolution . . . of the jihadist movement . . . stem largely from a deep structural and developmental crisis facing the Arab world, in both socioeconomic and institutional terms . . . a crisis of governance and political economy.”<sup>128</sup> The central dynamic of the Islamist challenge is, therefore, not a civilizational or cultural clash with the West but rather contemporary state/society relations in “Greater West Asia” — relations defined primarily by “the effective militarization of the opposition in weak states (Afghanistan/Pakistan/Yemen/Somalia) and a growing popular resentment against the governing elite in the major Arab states (in particular Saudi Arabia and Egypt).”<sup>129</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This article has examined the structures, ideology, and aims of the *al-Qaeda* movement in order to explore the extent to which it might be described as “global.” Simplistic analyses of the type repeatedly put forward by George W. Bush and Tony Blair between 2001 and 2007 have served the agenda of the *jihadist* movement. The danger of the “global” analysis, especially when applied to the structures and aims of *al-Qaeda*, is that it reinforces the dangerous fallacy of the “clash of civilizations” — a *ihadi* recruitment tool and the lowest common denominator of all *ihadi* ideology. However, as this article has shown, it is necessary to take into account historical trends of great complexity at the local, regional, and global level to begin to understand this phenomenon.

In terms of armed groups, the “global” approach is most often used for political ends, aggregating, as it tends to, all armed Islamist groups into one monolithic enemy. More helpful studies analyze organizations individually and take the local context into account, differentiating between Islamo-nationalist groups and doctrinaire *jihadis*. Several contemporary analyses correctly focus not merely on armed organizations but rather on the wider *al-Qaeda* social movement, which has become increasingly relevant since the invasion of Iraq. This social movement is indeed a global phenomenon, led as it is by the collective chat-room discourse of thousands of participants across the world-wide web.

In terms of ideology, the “omnivorous” nature of *jihadi* doctrine and its development led us to a broad historical analysis that could well be described as “global.” The broad context in which the ideology of *al-Qaedaism* has emerged is dramatic social change on a global scale: modernization; two centuries of colonization and decolonization; the individualization of religious practice; and the advent of mass education, mass media, and mass migration across many Muslim-majority societies.

When it came to the crucial discussion of the roots and aims of *al-Qaeda*, however, the “global” analysis came up short. Despite the power of the “clash of civilizations” myth, the idea of an inevitable clash between “Islam” and “the West” should be seen as a rhetorical device, a transnational identity myth, and a recruitment sergeant in the service of finite aims. The principal aim of doctrinaire *jihadism*, as articulated by *jihadi* strategists, is to seize state-power in Muslim-majority societies and impose “God’s law.” From this perspective, the strategic shift toward the United States and its allies represents a global expression of local grievances and a new global means of achieving long-held, locally based goals.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See “President Commemorates Veterans Day, Discusses War on Terror,” found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/11/20051111-1.html>, accessed 3 January 2007.
  - <sup>2</sup> As cited in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 24-30.
  - <sup>3</sup> “Speech to the Foreign Policy Centre,” *The Guardian* 21 March 2006, found at: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/iraq/story/0,,1736105,00.html>, accessed 20 June 2006.
  - <sup>4</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda, Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), p. 13.
  - <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
  - <sup>6</sup> Such analyses invoke Cox’s formulation that “theory is always for somebody and for some purpose.” See Robert W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981), p. 2.
  - <sup>7</sup> As cited in Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al Qaeda in its Own Words* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 68.
  - <sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group, “Understanding Islamism: Middle East/North Africa,” Report No. 37, 2 March 2005, found at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3301&l=1>, accessed 15 June 2006.
  - <sup>9</sup> See Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why the Jihad went global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-5; and Devin R. Springer, et al., *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 59-60.
  - <sup>10</sup> See Alistair Crooke and Mark Perry, “How to Lose the War in Terror,” *Asia Times*, 8 June 2006, found at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HF06Ak04.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HF06Ak04.html), accessed 24 July 2006; and Anders Strindberg and Mats Warn, “Realities of Resistance: Hizballah, the Palestinian Rejectionists and al-Qaeda compared,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXXIV, no. 3 (Spring 2005), pp. 23-41. Crooke and Perry cite the religious leader of *Hezbollah* the Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah who in discussing the limits of violence draws a parallel between Western ‘just war’ theory and the concept of *jihad* within traditional Islamic jurisprudence: “We know that in war innocent people will die, because this is the nature of war. But this does not excuse responsibility or negate the requirement that we do everything that we can to save the innocent. This is an ideal that the United States and the West has and this is the ideal that we also have. It is a basis for the beginning of an understanding, because it is this belief that separates us from our enemies in the world and inside of our own societies.” (Part 5)
- Strindberg and Warn, meanwhile, employ the category of specificity to distinguish the Islamo-nationalist groups from their doctrinaire counterparts: “The struggles of the former are . . . against a *specific enemy*, and rooted in the needs and aspirations of *specific peoples*. The *specific national projects* of these movements aim at developing institutions and empowering their constituents; they stand accountable to those they represent; and they form part of, and cooperate within, a pluralistic spectrum of ideologies and creeds . . . Bin Laden’s movement stands accountable to *no specific constituency* because it limits its struggle to *no specific territory*; it seeks to create an *alternative* to the institutions and thought of modernity; and it rejects, other than on tactical grounds, political and religious pluralism as those outside the group are seen as *kuffar* (infidels) or *murtadun* (apostates).” Strindberg and Warn, “Realities of Resistance,” p. 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary R. Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 57-62.
  - <sup>12</sup> Cited in Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda’s Road to 9/11* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 122.
  - <sup>13</sup> Cited in Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, p. 61.
  - <sup>14</sup> See Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghrib,” *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (2009).

- <sup>15</sup> Cited in D. Hazan, "Al-Zarqawi: A Post Mortem. Prior to His Killing, Al-Zarqawi had Lost His Sunni Allies," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series*, no. 284, 30 June 2006, found at: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=ia&ID=IA28406>, accessed 2 August 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, "Iraq After the Surge 1: The New Sunni Landscape," *Middle East Report* No. 74, 30 April 2008, pp. 16-17.
- <sup>17</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 129-30. See also Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad."
- <sup>18</sup> Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad," pp. 224-26.
- <sup>19</sup> See Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Iraqi Insurgency and the Risk of Civil War: Who Are the Players?," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 1 March 2006, pp.18-36, found at: [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060301\\_iraginsurgplayers.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/060301_iraginsurgplayers.pdf), accessed 1 March 2006; Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p. 267; Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (2006), p. 22; Toby Dodge, *Iraq's future: The aftermath of regime change*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper 372 (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 13-14; and Phillippe Errera, "Three circles of threat," *Survival* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 82-85.
- <sup>20</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, "Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia: Asymmetric Threats and Islamist Extremists," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 26 January 2005, found at: [http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/050106\\_al-qaedainsaudi.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/050106_al-qaedainsaudi.pdf), accessed 1 July 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 290.
- <sup>23</sup> Sageman, *Leadership Jihad*, pp. 125-29.
- <sup>24</sup> Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," pp. 15-17.
- <sup>25</sup> Sageman, *Leadership Jihad*, p. 31 and p. 141.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- <sup>27</sup> Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 108-16.
- <sup>28</sup> Cited in Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 108-09.
- <sup>29</sup> See Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, pp. 105-22.
- <sup>30</sup> See Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," *Middle East Report* no. 221 (Winter 2001), pp. 28-33.
- <sup>31</sup> John Gray, *Al Qaeda and What it Means to be Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). Gray examines the life of one of the principal ideologues of the modern *jihad*, the Egyptian Muslim Brother, Sayyid Qutb and goes on to underline the paradox of an ideology rooted in a Western political tradition used to reject Western culture: "Qutb's writings are filled with horror of the West, but he borrowed many of his ideas from Western sources . . . he was especially indebted to European anarchism. . . . The intellectual roots of radical Islam are in the European counter-enlightenment." Gray, *Al Qaeda*, pp. 24-25. See also Malise Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America* (London: Granta Books, 2002), pp. 91-92.
- <sup>32</sup> See Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).
- <sup>33</sup> Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Saud from Tradition to Terror* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
- <sup>34</sup> See John Esposito, *Unholy War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 85-94.
- <sup>35</sup> Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 40.

- <sup>36</sup> Omar Saghi, "Osama Bin Laden the Iconic Orator," in Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 24.
- <sup>37</sup> Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005).
- <sup>38</sup> See Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," pp. 31-33; Dale F. Eikelman and James P. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp.131-35; and Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst and Co., 2004), pp. 148-201.
- <sup>39</sup> Of particular importance in this process has been the introduction to Muslim-majority states of concepts of law inherited from the European legal tradition — code-based and centralised — which resist the fluidity of classical Islamic law and the pervasive influence of modern-European-inspired political ideologies, not least nationalism and socialism. See Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," pp. 31-33.
- <sup>40</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam," in Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism* (Oxford: One World, 2003), p. 45.
- <sup>41</sup> Sageman, *Leadership Jihad*, pp. 118-19.
- <sup>42</sup> Eikelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>43</sup> Roy, *Globalised Islam*; Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and the United States* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2004).
- <sup>44</sup> Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet*, p. 45.
- <sup>45</sup> Roy, *Globalised Islam*, p. 25.
- <sup>46</sup> For both points of view, compare Roy, *Globalised Islam*, pp. 304-308 and Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (London: IB Tauris, 2008), pp. 109-14.
- <sup>47</sup> Eikelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, pp. 44-45.
- <sup>48</sup> Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, pp. 41-42.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-53.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 29-30.
- <sup>51</sup> Reza Azlan, *How to Win a Cosmic War* (London: Heinemann, 2009) pp. 135-36.
- <sup>52</sup> Christina Helmich, "Al-Qaeda — terrorists, hypocrites, fundamentalists? The view from within," *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005), pp. 39-54.
- <sup>53</sup> See Esposito, *Unholy War*, pp. 64-67 and Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, p. 107.
- <sup>54</sup> See, for example, Abou El Fadl, "Islam and the Theology of Power," p. 29; Esposito, *Unholy War*, pp. 65-66; and Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, p. 112.
- <sup>55</sup> Azlan, *How to Win a Cosmic War*, pp. 108-109.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 112 and Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, p. 29.
- <sup>57</sup> Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp. 4-5. For a detailed discussion on how the writings of Sayyid Qutb influenced *al-Qaeda* and the events of 9/11, see John C. Zimmerman, "Sayyid Qutb's Influence on the 11 September Attacks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 222-52.
- <sup>58</sup> Quintan Wikorowicz and John Kaltner, "Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qaeda's Justification for September 11," *Middle East Policy* X, no. 2 (Summer 2003).
- <sup>59</sup> As cited in *ibid.*, pp. 86-87.
- <sup>60</sup> As cited in *ibid.*, p. 87.



<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 86-90.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>63</sup> Eikelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, p. 138.

<sup>64</sup> See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>65</sup> As cited in Wikorowicz and Kaltner, "Killing in the Name of Islam," p. 83.

<sup>66</sup> Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> As cited in Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad*, p. 152.

<sup>68</sup> Azlan, *How to Win a Cosmic War*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>69</sup> Fred Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World* (London: Saqi, 2002), p. 40.

<sup>70</sup> See Helmich, "Al-Qaeda," pp. 47-48. Here, Helmich analyzes an early *al-Qaeda* propaganda video describing images of "a world on fire, headlines in the form of enflamed letters appear on the screen, indicating the localities to be shown — Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq and Kashmir . . . frequently repeated images of Israeli soldiers beating up Muslim women, Palestinian children throwing rocks at tanks and the destruction of Palestinian homes . . . then to Chechnya, presenting images of . . . freezing Muslims, dying outside in the snow at night. Turning to Iraq, the audience is confronted with the sight of severely disabled infants. Images of American soldiers and the 'ungodly' ruler Saddam Hussein complete the picture of a Muslim country suffering at the hands of the unbelievers. Finally, bloody images from Kashmir, such as beheaded toddlers and wounded teenagers conclude this display of world-wide Muslim suffering at the hands of 'unbelievers.'" See also Sageman, *Leadership Jihad*, pp. 71-80.

<sup>71</sup> The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Jihad: Change and Continuation," 11, no. 7 (September 2005), p. 2, found at: <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/past-issues/volume-11---2005/volume-11-issue-7/the-jihad>, accessed 29 June 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Zaki Chehab, *Iraq Ablaze: Inside the Insurgency* (London: IB Taurus, 2006), pp. 112-15.

<sup>73</sup> See Cordesman, "The Iraqi Insurgency," p. 16 and Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (London: Hurst, 2006), pp. 59-124.

<sup>74</sup> Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, pp. 270-74.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>76</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 161.

<sup>77</sup> The effects of colonialism are also associated, on a cultural level, with the imposition of doctrinaire secularism in certain Muslim-majority societies and the assault on Islamic social and moral codes that this represented. These effects were perhaps most extreme in Turkey and Iran during the first decades of independence. See, for example, Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), pp. 113-16.

<sup>78</sup> Esposito, *Unholy War*, p. 84.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-10.

<sup>80</sup> Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World*, p. 36.

<sup>81</sup> See John L. Esposito and Michael Watson, eds., *Religion and Global Order* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002) and Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>82</sup> Esposito and Watson, *Religion and Global Order*, p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> These developments reflect the observation that "globalisation divides as much as it unites . . . signalling a new freedom for some, upon many others [descending] as an uninvited and cruel fate." See Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, pp. 88-89.

- <sup>84</sup> Compare Azlan, *How to Win a Cosmic War*, pp. 4-5 with Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou, *Understanding al-Qaeda: The Transformation of War* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 63-79.
- <sup>85</sup> As cited in Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy*, pp. 54-58.
- <sup>86</sup> Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 57-95.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>88</sup> As cited in ibid., p. 71.
- <sup>89</sup> As cited in ibid., p. 74.
- <sup>90</sup> As cited in Kepel, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 68-69.
- <sup>91</sup> See Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al-Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 309 and Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 65.
- <sup>92</sup> As cited in Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, p. 316 and Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 74-77.
- <sup>93</sup> As cited in Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 69.
- <sup>94</sup> Kepel, *Jihad*, p. 5.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- <sup>96</sup> As cited in Burke, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 37.
- <sup>97</sup> As cited in Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 166.
- <sup>98</sup> Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, pp. 255 and 316.
- <sup>99</sup> As cited in Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 86-87 and Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad*, pp. 100-01.
- <sup>100</sup> See Stéphane Lacroix, "Ayman al-Zawahiri, Veteran of Jihad," in Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda*, pp. 151-52; Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, pp. 67 and 83-84; and Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 63-65.
- <sup>101</sup> Bergen emphasizes this point: "Al-Qaeda may have been largely financed and nominally led by Bin Laden, but both its ideological outlook and its key personnel derived from Egypt's Jihad group." Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, p. 82.
- <sup>102</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda's Road to 9/11* (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 255-61.
- <sup>103</sup> Lacroix, "Ayman al-Zawahiri," pp. 151-61 and see also Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, pp. 64-65.
- <sup>104</sup> For an account of the demise of al-Jihad's Egyptian campaign, see Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 255-61.
- <sup>105</sup> As cited in Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, p. 62.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 63.
- <sup>107</sup> Gerages, *The Far Enemy*, p. 11.
- <sup>108</sup> As cited in ibid., pp. 10-11.
- <sup>109</sup> As cited in Kepel and Milelli, *Al-Qaeda*, p. 178.
- <sup>110</sup> Gerages, *The Far Enemy*, p. 13.
- <sup>111</sup> Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former head of the Saudi intelligence service, believes that the arrival of US troops on Saudi soil in 1990 was "the catalyst that led to what he is now." Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom: Saudi Arabia and the Momentum of Reform* (London: Hurst, 2003), p. 234.
- <sup>112</sup> As cited in Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, p. 24.

- <sup>113</sup> See Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, pp. 237-41 and Nawaf E. Obaid, "The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic leaders," *Middle East Quarterly* (September 1999), found at: [www.meforum.org/article/482](http://www.meforum.org/article/482), accessed 2 January 2007, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>114</sup> As cited in Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>115</sup> Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, p. 149.
- <sup>116</sup> As cited in Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, pp. 245-46.
- <sup>117</sup> Bruce Riedel and Bilal Y. Saab, "Al-Qaeda's Third Front: Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2008), pp. 33-46.
- <sup>118</sup> Roy, *Globalised Islam*, p. 51.
- <sup>119</sup> See Sageman, *Leadership Jihad*, pp. 65-66.
- <sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 144.
- <sup>121</sup> Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad*, pp. 110-13.
- <sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 141.
- <sup>123</sup> Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 166.
- <sup>124</sup> Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, p. 159.
- <sup>125</sup> Halliday, *Two Days*, p. 47.
- <sup>126</sup> As cited in Springer, *Islamic Radicalism*, p. 74.
- <sup>127</sup> See Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, pp. 120-23.
- <sup>128</sup> Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p. 273.
- <sup>129</sup> Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations*, p. 162.