

A Dozen Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency

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Following the events of September 11, 2001, regional experts have expounded on Islamist threats in the Middle East, and beyond, in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America, while non-regionalists theorized about the future of terror and counter-terrorism. Was something new occurring? Or were al-Qaeda’s 2001 actions the logical consequence of jihadist efforts underway for nearly three decades? Would these events reshape the way the United States and other nations defined irregular or asymmetric challenges? Certainly this shift in terminology prevailed after Islamist insurgents in Iraq sabotaged reconstruction efforts. They were not supposed to be the key actors in the resistance. Former Ba`thists or Iraqi nationalists were thought to be leading the insurgency, and cooperation between these three elements was another ominous feature of the situation.

The US has not taken stock of all the knowledge previously acquired about Islamist terrorists. Why not? 1) They have been too busy facing insurgents every day and simultaneously attempting to rebuild and reconstruct Iraq. 2) Those of us on this side of the great water have been too busy squabbling about whether Islam or “Islamic culture,” as opposed to Islamist miscreants. Our lack of clarity is in part due to political factors; the stakes are high, if one teleologically addresses the issue, stronger arguments may be made for particular recommendations as opposed to others; and, 3) security studies, gravitating to

current conflicts, had ignored regionally-produced assessments of Islamist threats. It seems they are too laden with detail, too bound by the specificities of particular movements to reveal, or expose the strategies of smaller-scale threats and relevance of local regime responses.

The events of 9/11 were neither the first, nor the last action taken by extremist Muslims. Nor were they the first time that experts were caught short. A similar moment took place when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, generating a barrage of literature about the Islamic threat or future of political Islam. In that case, the primary event was the fall of an ally, the Shah, and his replacement with a hostile theocracy. The secondary event, the seizure of American hostages could be more obviously labeled “terrorist.” Analysts then documented the rise and spread of Islamist movements in Tunisia, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf states, revived earlier analyses of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin) founded in Egypt, or examined brief outbursts of violence such as the 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

Following 9/11 and the ouster of the Taliban from Afghanistan, a new, less dramatic turning point took place when in October of 2002, the Indonesia group Jemaah Islamiyyah bombed a Bali nightclub packed with foreigners, and Abu Mus`ab Zarqawi’s group announced itself as Jama`at al-Jihad wa al-Tawhid (the Group of Jihad and Unicity, later adopting a new name, Tanzim Qa’ida Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, Qa’ida Organization of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, a reference to Iraq). Similarly, Al-Qa’ida on the Arabian Peninsula (QAP) launched violent attacks in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 2003 through 2004, and terrorists set off ten bombs on early-morning commuter trains in Madrid on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March,

2004. Islamist extremists were proclaiming to the world that the U.S. might have driven the Taliban into the Afghani hinterland, but they would wage *jihad* wherever possible.

It goes without saying that we should distinguish those groups and individuals who have perverted Islamic principles from ordinary Muslims. On the other hand, it will not aid us to apply a universal strategy to all extremists and terrorists, nor is there a unified, or universal goal for extremists. True, they resemble other criminal elements: gangs, but will accept no ultimate pay-off; co-optation may be a temporary solution. They recruit and are recruited through a belief in an Islamic mission and the glorification of *jihad* and martyrdom. We must not discount their ideological motivation, or their recruiting talents, or we will not defeat them.

In a forthcoming study on this issue, I will explore known and unknown aspects of the Islamist insurgency. At this particular point in my study, I provide case studies of particular Islamist threats and local governments' responses (for Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Algeria). For today's meeting, I will elaborate on Islamist-extremist leadership, recruitment and symbol-laden attraction to potential *jihadis*. If we comprehend their grand strategy, a more specific doctrine honed to this particular threat may be crafted; one more specific than "defeat," "defend", "diminish," and "deny."

A key difference between past extremist leaders, "former Osamas," and those now operating is their diversification and multiplication of capabilities thanks to a broad, malleable strategy. Islamist extremists have been very successful in recruiting future extremists, fighters, suicide bombers, talented coordinators and leaders. Whereas Martin Kramer noted some time ago, that their Achilles heel was their inability to cooperate with

other actor<sup>1</sup> – those with differing ideologies; more true for extremists, than moderates, who have formed useful alliances for themselves in Egypt, Lebanon, and now in Iraq. That in turn is due to the flexibility of their grand strategy. Some other factors, responses to local repression, or scrutiny have only enhanced their flexibility.

When Egyptian Islamists faced trial in that country, many fled, recruiting others to the jihad in Afghanistan; some going on to Chechnya. Their routes traversed transient sanctuaries: Saudi Arabia, Yemen, through the Western desert to Libya. The Saudi Arabian government has emphasized its inability to contain Osama bin Ladin, though it stripped him of his citizenship. He traveled to the Sudan where he could continue to build his organization. So Islamists who lose ground in Iraq will move elsewhere. Some have already tried to do so, back into Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states should take heed.

Leaders have acquired the ability to mushroom, or as defense experts put it, “franchise.” Ability is not exactly the right term here, Al-Qa’ida did not establish Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi’s organization. He and groups like al-Qa’ida fi Jazirat al-`Arabiyya can self-nominate, declare an alliance with AQ, to increase their own status, recruitment efforts, and place in the history of jihad efforts.

Thanks to movement, reconstitution, franchising, and the malleable aspects of their grand strategy, even when Osama bin Ladin is captured, or killed, a dozen new Osamas will have emerged. On March 31, 2003, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt predicted that an American-led war on Iraq would create “one hundred new bin Ladens” Intentional, fortuitous, or merely reactive, leader-regeneration, “mushrooming,”

obviously predates the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In fact, Osama bin Ladin, is, in a sense an avatar of earlier leaders: Juhayman al-`Utaybi, Salah Sirriyya, Shukri Mustafa, Muhammad abd al-Salam Farag, and Shaykh Abdullah `Azzam just to mention a few. Certain elements of their strategies or visions enhanced the portability of Islamist movements and personae. They were responsible for attacks of lesser scale and intensity aimed at the “near enemy” (as opposed to the “far enemy”) Muslim, so-called “apostate” targets in the Middle East, rather than Western targets. Nonetheless, the kidnapping of the Egyptian former Minister of Awqaf, Shaykh adh-Dhahabi and al-`Utaybi’s seizure of the Grand Mosque on the heels of the Islamic revolution in Iran resounded through the Muslim world, raising fears that Islamic revolution could migrate. Leaders of these earlier movements were typically a generation older than their adherents, educated, and they provided new ideological tools to extremists.

Salah Sirriyya, a Palestinian agronomist, an adherent of the Islamic Liberation Party that Nabahani initially established in Palestine, infiltrated the Technical Military Academy in Egypt. His followers were unsuccessful in their efforts to attack President Anwar Sadat on that particular occasion, but the specter of Islamists, active in their countries military or security forces still concerns us today.

Shukri Mustafa led his followers in the group Takfir wa-l-Higrah away from society, underground, describing their flight from *jahiliyya* (barbarism like that in the pre-Islamic era) as a necessary stage in jihad akin to the Prophet’s (s.a.w.s.) journey from Mecca. In 1977, they attacked nightclubs along Shari`a al-Haram, a longtime playground for Arab tourists, and a few months later kidnapped the moderate,

Muhammad adh-Dhahabi, and killed him. More than 400 members were arrested, and Mustafa, though executed, had broadened the scope of action for future radicals, in rejecting contemporary society, and targeting an exemplar of moderate Islam.

Juhayman al-`Utaybi, grandson of an Ikhwan warrior, challenged the guardianship of the Saudi royal family over Islam's sacred space. Al- Utaybi also presented his followers with a *mahdi* – a guided one, his brother-in-law al-Qahtani – demonstrating a linkage to the rationale of Islamic purist movements of the past.

Muhammad `abd al-Salam Farag, ideologue of the Egyptian Tanzim al-Jihad (whose operative Khalid al-Islambuli assassinated President Sadat) emphasized *jihad* as well, claiming that it was a sixth pillar of Islam; and in Trotskyesque language (ironically similar to that employed by the Ba`th Party both in Syria, and Iraq) “continuous,” or “perpetual” – a never-ending *jihad*.

Shaykh Abdullah Azzam, a mentor to Osama bin Ladin, who himself migrated from Palestine to Jordan to Syria to Saudi Arabia and from there to Pakistan, inspired disciples with his strong personality and uncompromising message, altering the cause through his insistence that jihadists should confront the Western enemy, use Muslims in the West, all their global connections.

Just as al-Qaeda capitalized on the new elements of *jihad* supplied by these leaders, recruiters and current leaders are amplifying them. For instance Ramadan Abdullah Shallah of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, located in Damascus is fluent in Arabic, English, and Hebrew and even knows Yiddish phrases, since he, like many Palestinians from the Gaza area worked in construction labor for Israelis. He attended university in Zagazig in

Egypt and knew all of the Arab students at the University of Durham where his focus on Islamic economics reflects the ideas of figures like Muhammad as-Siba'i, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. He wielded some influence on the academic discourse about Islamist movements as editor of *Qira`at Siyasiya* (Political Readings) the journal of WISE a former research institute in Tampa, Florida connected with the University of Florida. By showing Arabic readers that even American academics (like Lou Cantori, Richard Bulliet, or Bernard Lewis) treated Islamist ideas as manifestations of a broader intellectual phenomenon, alongside Islamist writings or interviews, the image of the movement and the notion of its inevitability grew. None of these academic collaborators knew he would then assume the leadership of Islamic Jihad, so the lesson of "sleepers" may remain here as well.

Osama bin Ladin has achieved infamy eclipsing Shallah's through the attacks in the United States. But one asks: why if Islamists are poor at alliances, and overeager to purge others, does his message continue to attract adherents? The answer is that through his connections and financial wherewithal, al-Qaeda did not require alliances with others, when it could attract sufficient numbers of Islamists from all locations. To do this, he, and others, used arguments that Americans are familiar with – that local governments were oppressive and corrupt; and charges that only Muslims identify with – that local governments are anti-Islamic, or suppress true Muslims.

In Saleh Al-`Awfi, a former Saudi police officer, and leader of al-Qa`ida on the Arabian peninsula, (QAP) until recently (he was most probably killed at al-Qassim in early April, his body too badly burned to identify) we perceive the methodology of Salah

Siriyya's underground organization and the cyber-expertise of many of today's groups. As soon as QAP published its *Sawt al-Jihad*, recruitment began anew. The web publication interviewed al-`Awfi who denied that it was best to go fight in Iraq, rather than Saudi Arabia, and demeaned those participating in negotiations with the Saudi government.<sup>2</sup>

Abu Musab Zarqawi's savagery has added a new twist to the coercion of local populations, without which his group, QAP, and others could not operate. And Abu Abdullah al-Shafi'i of Jaysh al-Ansar al-Sunna has cooperated with him, despite differences in the prevailing goals of the two groups. (Note: elements of Nasrallah's pragmatic and Fadlallah's more spiritual appeal will be discussed here) Despite differing backgrounds, all share that same broad goal of jihad and Islamic mission, *da`wa* which could as easily be transferred to Yemen, or Indonesia. In other words, the leader of Ansar al-Sunna primarily aims to fight Kurdish parties, and QAP is primarily concerned with weakening the Saudi royal family, and Hizbullah is primarily concerned with retaining influence in Lebanon. They identify with Muslim movements elsewhere (Chechnya, the Philippines, Malaysia) and those movements draw inspiration from them.

At this point in the presentation, I am showing some clips from a recruiting videotape made by Zarqawi's *Tanzim Qa'ida Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn* obtained in Falluja. It is a superb recruiting tool that illustrates the strategies of critiquing the West, personalizing and ritualizing martyrdom, documenting group actions and multiplying their impact. The video features religious quotations and non-traditional "religious" music (borrowing from the Eastern church and Western and Arabic traditions) that add to

the drama of the tape. In the very first segment, viewers see a small Iraqi child led away by American “occupiers,” calling for her father. Muslims are under siege, and *jihad* is compulsory for all in order to save children and innocents. Young suicide-attackers from various Arab countries read their “wills” on tape, believing that this satisfies the cultural and religious instructions to obtain permission and provide for one’s dependents. Each attacker is first seen against the background of a martyr’s stairway, leading upwards to the light, to Paradise. The ritual washing of one attacker’s body is shown as well as the ritual mourning given to martyrs. While Muslim intellectuals have spoken and written about the need to separate martyrdom from these violent acts of *jihad*; there is no mistaking the power of the call to martyrdom in this tape. The tape also illustrates subtleties of coercion. Given, the cultural construct of Arab masculinity, what young man would retract his sworn, videoed testimony? And Western news footage, maps of attack areas, actual bombings and news items are cleverly embedded, used both as graphics, and to demonstrate the power of the group (President Bush reacts to de Mello’s death).

These *mujahidin* cannot explicate their leader’s methodologies, rather, they emotionally identify with components of an organic philosophy. Timing and resources are essential to the *jihadi*-recruiter, who often works through peer networks. Young people are targeted who will not consult others. Immediate provision of funds, transportation, and weapons, or training facilitates the process. Islamist-extremists also seek out young people who can easily be manipulated, according to testimony from

captured operatives in Saudi Arabia; some were coerced into committing crimes so they would not go to the police.

To retain sanctuary, Islamist extremists of all functional levels intimidate surrounding civilians. This has been achieved through violence, attacks on religious sites (belonging to the Shi`a), on police, contract workers, as well as the now infamous kidnappings and beheadings of so-called “apostates” and “infidels” in Iraq. Fouad Ajami reminded CNN listeners that some of these techniques are not new, in a reference to the Lebanese civil war. Then there were the GIA massacres in Algeria that peaked in 1997, and evidenced a smaller peak in 1994.

Do massacres and bombings by extremists help or hurt their cause? According to Kramer’s thesis (and others, such as Giles Kepel) Islamist violence should have obliterated their popular support. Still, to properly answer this question, we must examine our own belief in the use of superior force. When the object of Islamist violence can be demonized as an outsider; then, of course, violence is perceived differently. So, Hizbullah, which practiced, but then ceased coercion against civilians, reserved violence for Israelis, and so are feared, but also respected by the Lebanese population.

Experts have warned that Islamism is so inevitable – as a general movement spanning moderation to extremism -- that it will be impossible to eradicate. Hence, we can expect to see governments continue their tactic of suppressing violent elements and co-opting those amenable; attempting to remove the *jihad* from the *jihadi*. To focus on the apparent disjuncture between the *mujahidins*’ ultimate and current goals, or these goals and their present abilities would be a tactical error.

As democratization proceeds in the Middle East, we will see a greater number of Islamists attain political power. This is a cause for concern; for a careful and cautious weighing of the costs and benefits of our tactics in the War on Terror. While we become more adept at countering the irregular methods of our Islamist-extremist opponents, let us not forget their demonstrated talents of evolution.

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<sup>1</sup> “They cannot tolerate those who differ with them, certainly not long enough to obtain power. Impatient for that power, they begin to purge society even before they rule, with disastrous results for themselves.” Martin Kramer, “The Mismeasure of Political Islam” in M. Kramer, ed. *The Islamism Debate* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, 1997) p. 170.

<sup>2</sup> [To those *mujahidin* who want to go to Iraq:] “Your country, the Peninsula, is in greater need of your services. There are several borderlines here to protect. The enemy that you want to go to, those who are defaming the honors in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and in Palestine, that enemy is here, amongst you. He is on your land, pillaging your Religion and your treasures. It is the lawful duty of a Muslim to close the hole that is nearest to him. Clerics have agreed that, if an enemy occupies one of the Muslim countries, he needs to be pushed away from the nearest point, then the one after that.” Posted June 25, 2004, still available on <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1169117/posts> last visited 4/12/05.