

## **Al-Qaida's Appeal: Understanding its Unique Selling Points**

*Lecture at  
The "Treating Terrorism" Conference  
Organised by Dubai Consultancy Research and Media Centre,  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
17-18 March 2008.*

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## Introduction

Despite its seemingly extreme ideology and its even more extreme use of political violence, al-Qaida has been able to elicit sympathy and support from a surprisingly large number of people. Suspected al-Qaida members have been arrested in dozens of countries around the world, and opinion polls in both Western and Middle Eastern countries have showed that relatively large numbers of young Muslims express sympathy with al-Qaida. In other words, we have a situation where al-Qaida has killed civilians on a massive scale, including a large number of Muslims, but it still seems to enjoy relatively widespread support. How can we explain this apparent conundrum?

I argue in this presentation that al-Qaida's continuing appeal is a result of three key factors. First, al-Qaida *propagates a simple popular message*, which resonates strongly with deeply held grievances in the Muslim world. The organisation strives to follow the popular mood in many respects. Secondly, al-Qaida has created for itself *a powerful and captivating image*. It has become the world's most feared terrorist organisation, which is an immense attraction for certain groups of young people. In some countries in Europe, it has become "cool" to be a jihadi. Thirdly, the strength of al-Qaida's appeal lies in *its global character*; unlike most terrorist groups of today, membership of al-Qaida is open to virtually everyone, irrespective of ethnicity and nationality. As long as one is willing to accept its extremist ideology, anyone can, in principle, become an al-Qaida member.

My humble opinion is that these three factors: *simple message*, *powerful image* and *global character*, lie at the very core of al-Qaida's appeal today. By studying these three factors in more detail, we may also find clues to identifying al-Qaida's inherent weaknesses. I will return to these weaknesses at the end of my talk.

## Al-Qaida's simple populist message

Let me begin by explaining why I think al-Qaida's core message is so powerful, and why it resonates among young Muslims in most parts of the world. In propaganda, the key to success is simplicity of message and linkages with real-world grievances. Al-Qaida's propaganda has succeeded in both. During the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s, militant Islamist groups condemned the rulers in Muslim countries as apostates, hypocrites, and collaborators. They called for overturning Muslim regimes and preached the need for an Islamic state. Their theoreticians talked about abstract notions such as excommunication (in Arabic: *takfir*), and God's sovereignty on earth (in Arabic: *hakimiyya*), concepts which were formulated by Sayyid Qutb back in the 1960s. However, the problem for these militants was that this message did not have much resonance among ordinary Muslims. Very few Muslims were ready to sacrifice their lives for the abstract notion of an Islamic state. Furthermore, there is a religious taboo against internal strife among Muslims, (in Arabic: *fitna*), and militant Islamists who justified the killing of other Muslims often found themselves isolated and marginalised.

In my view, al-Qaida has shrewdly avoided ideological missteps and failures of previous Muslim extremist groups. It has not propagated the revolutionary, anti-regime Qutbist ideology of previous jihadi groups. Instead, al-Qaida has consistently rallied its followers around a simple populist pan-Islamic message, which is that "Islam is under attack", militarily, religiously, and economically. Al-Qaida focuses almost exclusively on the foreign or "Crusader" occupation of Muslim land, foreign desecration of Islam's holiest places, and how foreigners plunder the Islamic world's natural resources, especially oil.

This choice of focus on foreign occupation, religious desecration, and economic imperialism is not coincidental. Al-Qaida strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri has written extensively on why this choice of focus is so important for al-Qaida.<sup>1</sup> He correctly observes that Muslims will not sacrifice their lives for the abstract notion of an Islamic utopian state. However, they will die for *al-Aqsa*, and they will sacrifice themselves for liberating Palestine or other countries under occupation such as Afghanistan or Iraq. Al-Suri's conclusion is that Muslims are deeply touched by anything that smacks of foreign occupation. Hence, he urges al-Qaida to harness the power of pan-Islamic sentiments and the strength of popular Muslim solidarity in order to rally a mass following.

I also believe that these identities are key to understanding the power of al-Qaida's propaganda. Al-Qaida's simple message of foreign occupation, desecration, and exploitation seems to resonate deeply among Muslims today. The reason for this is simple: there is some truth to it. The Western world, led by the United States, has a strong and visible presence in this part of the world: militarily, economically, and politically. There are US-led military coalitions occupying Iraq and Afghanistan, while the United States supports Israel militarily, economically, and politically, even if the latter continues to maintain an illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories. The ruling elites in many Muslim countries are not elected, corruption is widespread, and there is a widespread belief – right or wrong – that the United States keeps these regimes in power to secure its access to the region's oil reserves. The list of widely shared popular grievances against the United States' foreign policies in the Islamic world is very long. Hence, it is very easy for al-Qaida to find good arguments for its propaganda messages.

## Al-Qaida's image

Let me turn to al-Qaida's second key selling point, namely its *image*. Today, new information technologies are revolutionising our lives, at least in the way we communicate and socialise. Young people especially seem to live a considerable part of their lives in the virtual world of Facebook, or in other cyber communities. Furthermore, the new information technologies allow more and more people to disseminate their message to a global audience. In other words, the mass media is changing rapidly. The major news agencies face competitors, and the battle for capturing people's attention is tougher than ever. Hence, image and branding have become absolutely vital components in any marketing campaign that aims to promote a product or an idea through mass media.

Terrorism and violence have always attracted the media's attention, but al-Qaida has succeeded more than any other terrorist group in modern history in captivating and thrilling the world through its acts of violence. From its very inception, al-Qaida has given top priority to carrying out spectacular and unprecedented attacks. Until al-Qaida gained a foothold in Iraq, its total number of attacks was actually very small. However, its operations were audacious, and almost mind-boggling in devastation. Al-Qaida was very innovative in the art of terrorism. Its bombing of the USS Cole warship in Yemen and the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on America were unprecedented acts of terrorism. The attacks on America made al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden household names all over the world, and a powerful media image of al-Qaida was created. Over night, al-Qaida succeeded in elevating itself to a "vanguard" among Muslim extremist groups, and managed to outbid groups with more limited regional objectives.

Al-Qaida's acts of violence provoked massive countermeasures by the United States and its allies. You will probably recall that the Bush Administration stated that 9/11 was not an act of terrorism, but rather it was "an act of war". By using the word "war" about 9/11, the US

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<sup>1</sup> A translation of extensive excerpts of al-Suri's writings can be found in my book *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

President *de facto* declared that al-Qaida was a worthy counterpart in a global confrontation with the United States. To remove any doubt about who was the key player in the post 9/11 world order, the United States unleashed the so-called “Global War on Terror” against al-Qaida. In other words, the whole world witnessed a new drama unfolding. And it was al-Qaida and the United States who starred in this drama, nobody else. Needless to say, this contributed immensely to skyrocketing al-Qaida’s popularity and making its brand name the strongest on the market.

The ensuing US attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq further elevated al-Qaida’s status to almost mythical proportions. Not only did these invasions serve as “evidence” that al-Qaida’s rhetoric about the aggressive Western world was true. The invasions also demonstrated the power of al-Qaida to provoke the sole remaining super power to drain its military and human resources in endless and costly occupation. The invasion of Afghanistan also had the effect of weakening many of al-Qaida’s potential competitors, who had regional agendas and had opposed an attack on the United States. These groups lost their sanctuaries in Afghanistan and their remnants gravitated towards al-Qaida.

## Al-Qaida’s global outreach

Let us now turn to al-Qaida’s third selling point, namely its global outreach. Hardly any terrorist group of today is truly multinational with branches all over the world. Most violent extremist groups are diehard nationalist extremists who would never accept foreigners in their ranks. Al-Qaida is an exception. From its very inception, al-Qaida has been a multinational and multiethnic enterprise, even if Arabs, especially Saudis and Egyptians, have always dominated the upper echelons of the organisation. The fact that membership in al-Qaida is open to virtually everyone, irrespective of ethnicity and nationality, is a key selling point for al-Qaida, because it strengthens the credibility of its pan-Islamic rhetoric. It greatly expands the recruitment base for the organisation. As long as one is willing to accept its extremist ideology, anyone can, in principle, become an al-Qaida member. Hence, al-Qaida has succeeded in recruiting Muslim followers from Mauritania to Indonesia. Furthermore, a substantial number of Western converts have played a role in al-Qaida, the American Adam Gadahn being the most famous example.

However, al-Qaida’s global outreach goes beyond its appeal to Muslims of every shade and origin. The organisation has also worked consistently over the past two decades to establish cooperative networks with other groups of Muslim extremists in many parts of the world, from South-East Asia to Northern Africa. Some of these groups have merged with al-Qaida, such as the *Islamic Jihad Group* in Egypt. Others have renamed their organisations in order to become “al-Qaida’s branches” such as the Algerian *Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat*, and yet others maintain close collaborative relationships, such as the Taliban movement in Afghanistan and the Pakistani tribal areas. This vast array of cooperative relationships underscores how important such alliances are to al-Qaida. It is precisely this ability to find reliable local partners that is al-Qaida’s strength *and* weakness. In the past, al-Qaida succeeded in finding local partners by offering training facilities, military expertise, and financial support. In more recent years, the organisation has also offered media services, and increasingly also its brand name, to local groups willing to work with al-Qaida. Al-Qaida’s ability to sustain cooperative relationships with local partners and insert itself as a relevant actor in local and regional contexts is key to its survival.

A final aspect of al-Qaida’s image building is its exploitation of the Internet.<sup>2</sup> I believe that al-Qaida’s appeal owes a great deal to its shrewd media strategies. The importance of “the jihadi

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<sup>2</sup> FFI’s publications on Jihadism and the Internet include: Brynjar Lia, “Al-Qaeda online: understanding jihadist internet infrastructure”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 2 Dec 2005, [www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00075/Al-Qaeda\\_online\\_und\\_75416a.pdf](http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00075/Al-Qaeda_online_und_75416a.pdf); Brynjar Lia, “Jihadi Web Media Production: Characteristics, Trends, and Future

web” for al-Qaida’s widespread appeal cannot be overstated. The organisation has demonstrated an ability to exploit the potential of the Internet for a wide variety of purposes. Al-Qaida and its numerous online sympathisers are producing enormous amounts of material on the Internet. The scope of this material is far too extensive and variegated to be discussed in this short presentation. Let me only say that al-Qaida’s Internet resources include thousands of audiovisual products, tens of thousands of audio-files, and probably millions of written documents. They span a wide range of genres, all designed to cater for the needs of jihadi sympathisers, recruits, operatives, and not the least, the recruiters.

## Al-Qaida’s weaknesses

Let me conclude this presentation by offering a few thoughts on al-Qaida’s current and future weaknesses, especially in terms of its appeal. A major weakness of groups such as al-Qaida is that it is always difficult to justify the killing of civilians. You will recall that there were mass demonstrations in Jordan and Morocco against al-Qaida following terrorist attacks by al-Qaida-related groups. A number of leading militant ideologues, from Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi in Jordan, to Sayyid Imam al-Sharif in Egypt, have severely censured al-Qaida for its acts of violence. Such criticism does not go unheeded. Ayman al-Zawahiri felt compelled to respond to al-Sharif’s criticism in a 200-page document that was posted on the Internet this year. Al-Zawahiri even described the document as being the most painful text he had ever written.

Such schisms are not new to al-Qaida. In fact, recently declassified documents reveal that there has been far more internal dissent in al-Qaida than has hitherto been acknowledged.<sup>3</sup> These internal tensions started right after al-Qaida’s foundation, and have been a recurrent feature of the organisation. In recent years, issues such as the repeated massacres of Shia Muslim civilians in Iraq by al-Qaida’s Iraqi branch, have been a particularly controversial issue inside al-Qaida. Last year, there were also quite contradictory statements by al-Zawahiri and bin Laden regarding al-Qaida’s future course of action vis-à-vis Pakistan following the Lal-Masjid showdown during the summer of 2007.

Another inherent weakness of al-Qaida is that it does not seem able or willing to prepare for a future transition to politics. Al-Qaida’s appeal is totally dependent on the continuation of violence. Its brandname is simultaneous car bomb attacks with suicide bombers, not state building and party politics. Bin Laden has said that al-Qaida’s victory is simply to inflict pain and economic losses on the enemy, and undermine its political resolve. But this also means that al-Qaida’s appeal will diminish quickly wherever the population grow tired of violence that does not lead anywhere. At some point, al-Qaida’s image will inevitably fade; just as all extremist ideologies have a limited life span, so too does al-Qaida’s extremist interpretation of Islam. Some time in the future, al-Qaida will loose its attraction among the youth, and to pose as a jihadist will no longer be “cool”.

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Implications”, conference paper, Berlin, 26 February 2007, [www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00092/Jihadi\\_Web\\_Media\\_Pro\\_92100a.pdf](http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00092/Jihadi_Web_Media_Pro_92100a.pdf); Brynjar Lia and Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi Strategic Studies: The Alleged Al Qaeda Policy Study Preceding the Madrid Bombings”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27, 4 (Sept/Oct 2007), pp. 355-375; Hanna Rogan, “Al-Qaeda’s online media strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007”, *FFI Research Report* No.2007/02729, <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2007/02729.pdf>; Hanna Rogan, “Abu Reuter and the E-Jihad: Virtual Battlefronts from Iraq to the Horn of Africa” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 8, no. 2, (Summer/Fall 2007), pp. 89-96, [www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00097/Abu\\_Reuter\\_and\\_the\\_E\\_97496a.pdf](http://www.mil.no/multimedia/archive/00097/Abu_Reuter_and_the_E_97496a.pdf); Hanna Rogan, “Jihadism Online: A study of how al-Qaida and radical Islamist groups use the Internet for terrorist purpose”, *FFI Research Report* No. 2006/00915, <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2006/00915.pdf>; and Anne Stenersen, “The Internet: A virtual training camp?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no.2 (2008 forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa’ida from 1989-2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), Report, 2007), <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/aq3.asp>.

It may be that the lack of political vision from within al-Qaida will doom the organisation to decline before it loses its captivating image. Already, we find that opinion polls in Middle Eastern countries show that people only support al-Qaida because it is anti-American. Very few people would like to see Osama bin Laden as their ruler. Hence, it is not very likely that al-Qaida would be willing to negotiate seriously with the United States, nor is it likely that the US would negotiate with al-Qaida, although the issue has now been raised in Britain. However, al-Qaida's biggest problem is that several of its key regional partners in Iraq and Afghanistan are contemplating the idea of negotiating a political solution with their enemies. This spells trouble for al-Qaida. If the Taleban movement agrees to a ceasefire and enters into negotiations with the Karzai government, al-Qaida will no longer be useful to the Taleban. On the contrary, the Taleban might consider al-Qaida a major liability of which it needs to rid itself. Or alternatively, the Taleban might begin to view individual al-Qaida fighters as bargaining chips that can be handed over for a suitable price. Both outcomes are, of course, bad for al-Qaida's future.

However, for now, this is an unlikely scenario. Even if sympathy for al-Qaida appears to be on the wane and its ideological message has come under attack, the organisation will continue to enjoy a degree of support. As long as the United States and its Western allies continue to maintain a strong military, political, and economic presence in the Islamic world, al-Qaida is ensured a certain minimum level of support.

Thank you for your attention!