

## The search for a jihadi identity in Europe

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Talking about radicalization of young Muslims in Europe, the French Islamologue, Olivier Roy, has argued that we tend to “over-ideologize al-Qaida in order to understand its attractiveness”. He claims that “none of the arrested terrorists or suspects had Zawahiri or other books in their house”. I politely disagree. My research on jihadism in Europe strongly suggests that leading activists did indeed care very much about ideology and were keen consumers of ideological tracts, including the works of al-Zawahiri.

Presupposing that ideology matters, Europe’s jihadis face a number of dilemmas related to identity, enemy perceptions and activism strategies. Surrounded by infidels, and living far away from jihadi battlefields, militants in Europe are struggling to define their roles and identity vis-à-vis their counterparts in the Muslim world, and especially al-Qaida. Symptomatically, apart from a few semi-organized groups focused on propaganda and support activities, there exists no clearly defined Europe-wide jihadi organization offering programs, visions and strategies for jihadism in Europe.

In this presentation, I argue that jihadism in Europe has undergone three distinct phases of evolution. Initially, during the mid- or late 1990s, different local and internationalist jihadi trends and identities co-existed in relative harmony. The second phase, lasting roughly from the late 1990s until 2003, was characterised by ideological conflicts and disarray during which Europe’s jihadis were torn between what we may term “classical” and “global jihadism”. The third phase, triggered chiefly by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, witnessed a new generation of jihadis in Europe who increasingly adopted al-Qaida’s global jihadi identity.

During these three phases, it seems clear that ideological discourses on “security treaties”, or a “Covenant of Security”, between Muslims and non-Muslims seemed to play an important role in the radicalization of the new generation. There have been recurring discussions about security treaties on extremist and jihadi websites, and captured terrorists possessed texts dealing with the topic.

Dilemmas of living and performing jihad in the lands of unbelievers have been addressed by classical jihadi theorists such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Sayyid Qutb, and contemporary ideologues such as the al-Qaida leadership and the Saudi sheikhs Nasir Bin Hamad al-Fahd, and Abd al-Aziz al-Jarbu, as well as Londonistan preachers Abu Hamza and Abu Basir al-Tartusi, in texts downloaded and read by active terrorists in Europe (e.g. Madrid & Glasgow).

During the 1990s, London’s most prominent jihadi ideologues<sup>1</sup>, Abu Qatada and Abu Hamza, described themselves and their followers as *the mujahid salafi movement*, which they contrasted with the “deviant sects” of moderate Islamists and official Islam, the “apostate” rulers in the Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> There were militant subcultures, radical mosques and ideological mentors in other European countries as well (Milan, Madrid, Paris, Hamburg, etc.), but the jihadi community in London stood out as being the most vigorous and influential.

world, and the original unbelievers. During this period, the apostate rulers were portrayed as the main enemy, followed by the deviants and the unbelievers.

Abu Hamza's sermons offer a detailed window into the ideological landscape of European jihadism. In one of his most famous video-taped sermons, he lectures *Supporters of Shariah* and visitors from France, Germany and Sweden about how to live an Islamic life in infidel lands. In this sermon, Hamza compares jihadis in Europe to the first Muslims preparing for jihad in Medina, and also to Sayyid Qutb's Islamic vanguard, as they are surrounded by an "ocean of disbelief". He explains that Muslims are not allowed to stay unless they are forced to, how they must distance themselves physically from the unbelievers, safeguard their families and children from pagan influences, support mujahidin abroad, prepare for jihad and join jihad as soon as possible. He adds that jihadis in Europe are obliged to engage in da'wa, but stresses that jihad is more important and effective in order to achieve Islamization. As for the conduct of violent operations in Europe, Hamza elusively claims that in general it is legitimate to rob and kill unbelievers for any reason. Hamza refers to the existence of a Covenant, or security pact, between Muslims and Europeans as "crap".

However, most jihadi ideologues have acknowledged that Muslims may enter treaties with non-Muslims under given circumstances. Some, such as the UK-based Syrian preachers Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Omar Bakri Mohammed, have told their followers that British Muslims were prohibited from harming wealth and people in the UK according to a mutual Covenant of Security.<sup>2</sup> In January 2005 (coinciding with increased UK counter-terrorism in the wake of the Madrid attacks) Bakri communicated to his followers in *al-Muhajiroun*, *al-Ghuraba* and the *Savior Sect* (via the Internet service *Pal Talk*) that British warfare in the Muslim world and persecution of UK Muslims had broken the Covenant. Tartusi, on the other hand, continued fiercely to condemn operations in the West by people possessing citizenship and permits of stay (such as the London bombers).

Editors<sup>3</sup> of the jihadi translation service *al-Tibyan* (from which jihadi terrorists in Europe downloaded texts in English), have characterized treaties or "Covenants in Islam" as a "crucial topic", summing up the agreed upon understanding of such treaties as follows: "Muslims are allowed to enter into covenant agreement(s) with their enemies when they are weak, and only under the following conditions:

- The length of any covenant should not be for more than ten years under any circumstances.
- Muslims are obliged to use the time of covenant to prepare and strengthen themselves to resume jihad as soon as possible.
- Once Muslims' state of weakness has changed, they are obliged to call off the covenant, inform their enemies of their decision to call the covenant off, and resume Jihad.
- Covenant agreement(s) is/are automatically cancelled if the enemies attack any Muslim or Muslim land anywhere".

Al-Tibyan's presentation of covenants corresponds to how the concept was outlined in books by Omar Bakri and by Ayman al-Zawahiri in his recent book "The Exoneration" from 2008.

Confronting the critique of global jihadism by the former Egyptian al-Jihad leader Sayyid Imam Sharif, also known as Dr. Fadl, al-Zawahiri argues that if security contracts ever governed the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West, they had been broken by the U.S.-led War on Terror<sup>4</sup> and insults against Islam. However, quoting selected hadiths and Ibn

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<sup>2</sup> Bakri emphasized that only the state offering protection (e.g. asylum) was protected, and that it was permissible and an obligation to engage in jihad abroad.

<sup>3</sup> Presenting themselves as pupils of Abu Qatada, sheikhs in the Middle East and the Sub-Indian continent.

<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo, extraordinary rendition, etc.

Taymiyyah, al-Zawahiri maintains that it is permissible to enter into contracts with unbelievers in the real sense, or as a deception. For example, he explains how it was permissible for the 9/11 attackers to deceive the enemy by entering the U.S. as students and tourists. Furthermore, he emphasizes the collective responsibility of Europeans in violating treaties by accepting the foreign policies of their governments and the publication of the Mohammed cartoons. Quoting Taymiyyah's al-Sarim, al-Zawahiri stresses that the Prophet distinguished between non-believers who "have merely broken a contract and those who in addition have offended the Muslims". The killing of those who had insulted Islam was "specifically commanded". The meaning, as explained by al-Zawahiri, is that insulting Islam is the gravest sin (even graver than warfare against Muslims) which unconditionally demands punishment by death.

In other words, by highlighting the prescribed punishments for insulting Islam, al-Qaida's leaders have sought to prevent the potential constraining effects of covenants and exploit the potential for radicalization. Over the last couple of years, al-Qaida's leaders have increasingly focused on Europeans as enemies, and linked the ban on veils in France and the Mohammed cartoons in Denmark with European warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq. Indeed, bin Laden portrayed the publishing of the cartoons as a worse crime than "villages that collapsed over our women and children". Reaching out to the youth of Islam in Europe, many of whom were European citizens, it has been important for al-Qaida to combat ideological interpretations which may potentially have a constraining effect on its radicalization efforts and new operations in the West. In this regard, the publishing of the Mohammed cartoons must have been a gift to al-Qaida.

At the operational level, al-Qaida's focus on insults against Islam seems to have been effective. Indeed, many terrorists arrested in Europe after the publication of the cartoons justified their actions with reference to them, as well as revealing plans to kill the cartoonists in Denmark. Former members of al-Muhajiroun were reported to have left the group because of conflicts with Omar Bakri over the Covenant of Security, before they began preparing for terrorist attacks in London. According to the expert witness Rudolph Peters, Ibn Taymiyyah's writings about punishments for insulting Islam also drove Boyeri to launch his own jihad in the Netherlands, murdering the Dutch filmmaker Van Gogh on the streets of Amsterdam in 2004.

## **Conclusion**

Organizationally, jihadis in Europe are a heterogeneous and disorganised crowd, torn between different jihadi ideologies and identities. While during the 1990s, the jihadis in Europe identified mainly with local and international jihadism, and saw themselves as vanguards supporting and preparing for jihad, the new generation of jihadis in Europe adopted a more clearly defined pan-Islamist, or global jihadi identity.

The main ideologues in Europe - Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza and Omar Bakri Mohammed - were for a long time highly sceptical of global jihadism. Abu Qatada supported jihad in Algeria, in the Levant and Chechnya, Hamza supported the struggle in Algeria and in Yemen, whereas Bakri dreamt about igniting an Islamic Revolution in Pakistan. They tediously built support networks for these struggles, and all these efforts were jeopardized by the 9/11 attacks. While dutifully blessing the attacks in the media, Abu Qatada told his assistant that he had opposed them. So did many other leading members of the militant Londonistan community. The Algerian issue is another interesting example of the tensions between local and global jihad. Algerians recruited by al-Qaida to attack U.S. and Jewish targets in Europe around the turn of the millennium still preferred to harm the former colonial power in the Maghreb rather than the Crusader-Jewish alliance. For example, the so-called Frankfurt cell of the Abu Doha Network initially set out to bomb U.S. and Jewish targets for al-Qaida, but ended up attempting to bomb the Christmas market in Strasbourg.

It seems clear that Europe's participation in the U.S.-led War on Terror, and al-Qaida's intensive propaganda efforts directed at Muslim youth in the West, have been the two most important factors in the recruitment and radicalization of a new generation of jihadis in Europe. Having no experience with local jihadism, they are more open to al-Qaida's ideology, which they access freely on the jihadi Internet and during visits to training camps on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Still, they are not all fully-fledged al-Qaida members, and have varying degrees of organizational ties to al-Qaida and associated groups. Because they have been unknown to, or under-estimated by, European security services, members of this jihadi generation have managed to launch lethal attacks in Spain, the U.K., and Holland. Eager to reach out to European jihadis, al-Qaida has pro-actively sought to counter ideological discourses on security pacts that potentially could constrain valuable assets in the war behind enemy lines. In terms of identity, the new generation of jihadis echo the language of al-Qaida, using the organization's name and rhetoric in their communiqués. Even more importantly, they are very explicit that Europe and Europeans are now legitimate and prioritized enemies.