



ITAC *Presents*

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Al Qaeda: Propaganda and Media Strategy

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Summary

Islam has been riven throughout its history by the periodic attempts of radical fundamentalists to impose their own interpretation of Islamic law through militant jihad. Al Qaeda's religious "war against unbelief" is yet another attempt, but it too will fail unless it is successful in winning the support of the Muslim *ummah*. This is the main objective of its propaganda and media strategy.

Al Qaeda places great importance on winning the battle of ideas and sees its media strategy as crucial and complementary to its operational campaign. The output of its propaganda wing, the Global Islamic Media Front, and the efforts of its leaders and chief propagandist, Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been innovative and adept in using 21st century information and communications technologies to maximize the psychological impact of its terrorist acts.

Al Qaeda's long-term strategic and intermediate goals are the substance of its propaganda, which dwells more heavily on its interpretation of world events and militant jihad as the agent for change, than its eschatological vision for the future. Propaganda and perception management techniques are used to promote its radical revisionist agenda by maximizing the psychological impact of its acts of violence in order to generate particular responses in the target audiences.

Propaganda materials have developed from ideological "talking head" interviews given to the Western press from the 1990s onwards, to operational training videos and rap lyrics which celebrate the demise of infidels. They are disseminated through the broadcast and print media, or over the Internet, to three broad target audiences: the adversary, supporters and the Muslim *ummah*. The Internet is predominantly used as a medium to communicate with and radicalize its own supporters.

Increasing volumes of audio and video tapes have been produced since 9/11 by Al Qaeda's production company, al-Sahab. The majority have been channeled through al-Jazeera, the Qatari-owned

satellite television channel, which Al Qaeda favours as being sufficiently reliable and unbiased to air its messages. They are also posted on a proliferating number of jihadist websites, often in English, French and German translation.

Pent-up demand in the Arab world for uncensored information is being met by a number of state controlled pan-Arab media and satellite television networks. Some relaxation of control has meant that these channels have now become instruments in the battle for Muslim minds. The media environment in the Arab world remains tolerant of Islamic terrorism and may have contributed to its increasing incidence.

The fear of *fitna* or chaos within the Muslim *ummah* has so far undermined the will of traditional scholars to contest the legitimacy of Al Qaeda's radical message. While radicals readily brand Muslims who disagree with them as apostates, mainstream scholars do not respond in kind because to do so is *takfir* or heresy. This information asymmetry has favoured radicals, but new initiatives in the West are being launched to confront Al Qaeda's persuasive propaganda.

Subtle shifts in Al Qaeda's propaganda indicate that internal changes are taking place. A greater emphasis on the legitimacy of operations, particularly with regard to tactics and targeting, may be an attempt to bring militant jihadism into the mainstream in order to garner support; alternatively, it may signal a divergence between the leadership and the radical Salafist scholars whose rulings are shaping the development of the movement and the legal framework within which jihadis operate.

Introduction

Al Qaeda has long recognized that it must engage the enemy on several fronts simultaneously, and that its media strategy is both crucial and complementary to its operational activities in achieving its strategic objectives. "The media represents two-thirds of the battle" (Ayman al-Zawahiri). Security authorities, on the other hand, have warned that in the "long and deep struggle" against Al Qaeda's "poisonous propaganda", discrediting its legitimacy and forestalling further radicalization will involve "our ability to marginalize the radical Islamic message before the masses adopt it." Persuading the masses to adopt its radical, revisionist interpretation of Islam is precisely the purpose of Al Qaeda's propaganda and media strategy.

How should we understand Al Qaeda's declared war against so called "apostate" Muslim regimes and "the West"? Is it anti-American imperialism cloaked in a religious guise, or is it really a religious war which subsumes political goals? Usama bin Laden, Al Qaeda's charismatic leader, always refers to the struggle as one against "global unbelief," but much of his propaganda speaks of revenge and humiliation. Critics, including Olivier Roy, view bin Laden's reinvigoration of religious jihad as a means to achieve political ends, citing his selective use of verses from the Qur'an and traditions as incompatible with the teachings of the Prophet and of the "tolerant" Islam accepted by the majority of Muslims. Al Qaeda's radical program includes both religious and political elements.

The "rationale" which leads Al Qaeda to conclude that terrorism is a viable and justified strategy for achieving its objectives is likely to be reflected in the propaganda material it produces to persuade others of the same, that is, its supporters, the wider Muslim constituency, and all those whom it has identified as its enemies. Examining the content of its propaganda, and the media strategy which determines to whom and by what channels it is disseminated, should therefore provide insights into the organization's thinking for purposes of adopting effective counter terrorism strategies.

Within the framework of bin Laden's radical revisionist interpretation of world events as a final and existential confrontation between Islam and the West, jihad as both a defensive and offensive tactic in the face of aggression has an internal logic which is rational to Al Qaeda, if not to its critics. Similarly, a perverse logic also operates in the selection of its targets and victims, none of which are "innocent" in Al Qaeda's terms. Bin Laden's attempts, in particular, to justify the high proportion of Muslim deaths which have resulted from its jihadi operations have been neither cogent nor convincing, and have alienated even Muslim supporters. In broad terms, the two key objectives of Al Qaeda's media and propaganda campaign are to use the impact of terrorism to maximize damage to the enemy, both in physical and psychological terms; and to build popularity among the Muslim masses in order to win their support.

The legal interpretation of religious principles is the crux of the debate between radical and non-radical Muslims, because it is that which determines the permissibility of particular behaviours. Al Qaeda must convince its supporters that its rules of engagement in terrorism are legitimate because for the believer, failure to perform all his religious duties, or doing that which is forbidden, will condemn him to hell. This explains the importance bin Laden attaches to demonstrating compliance with Islamic law and why the issue of legitimacy is prominent in Al Qaeda's propaganda.

Interest in the media communiqués and televised appearances of Usama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, gathered momentum in 1998 following bin Laden's declaration of war against the West. In parallel, Al Qaeda, as an organization, became more visible and aggressively communicative to reach audiences not just in the West, but in the Arab world where traditionally access to information has been tightly controlled. Uniting the Muslim world behind its radical agenda was crucial to its strategic success. For its part, the West was beginning to appreciate that countering the threat from Islamic terrorism was going to require more than mere military force; a better understanding of Al Qaeda's ideology was needed. There is no better way of understanding

the enemy than to listen to what he says, though of course, due allowance must be made for polemicism — the tactic of "talking for victory". In the Muslim world, rhetoric is important and meaningful, so there is knowledge to be gained from an analysis of the full text of communiqués and the accompanying images.

This paper reviews some of the speeches and images of bin Laden and al-Zawahiri which have been published, broadcast on radio and television, and further disseminated over the Internet both in Arabic and English in audio and video tapes since 1998. In order to maximize the effects of its propaganda, Al Qaeda has been adept at tailoring both the message and the means to particular audiences, here identified as: the *adversary*; the *ummah*; and Al Qaeda *supporters*. The paper includes and is enhanced by the comments of others who have studied Al Qaeda's own words to understand its motivation and development in the context of effective counterterrorism strategies. Excerpts cited in this paper have been taken predominantly from texts of interviews, letters, audio and video tapes translated and contained within "Messages to the World", edited by Bruce Lawrence, translated by James Howarth, Verso 2005.

The history of Islam is one of sectarianism and splits, of periodic but unsuccessful attempts by radical fundamentalists to return the faith to the purity and militant missionary zeal of its early years. According to Abu Musab al-Suri, an Al Qaeda strategist, "past jihads failed because those fighting them did not win popular support. The Muslim masses did not understand who the jihadis were, what they wanted to accomplish and why they used violence to achieve their goals because jihadis did not sell themselves and their movement effectively." Arresting and reversing Islam's progress toward the religion of peaceful tolerance practiced by the majority of Muslims today is the objective of Al Qaeda's propaganda and media strategy.

Prevailing Ideologies and Global Events

Researchers who have looked at the origins of terrorist campaigns (i.e. the determinate factors which lead groups to engage in a strategy of violence) have identified a number of important factors which are common to them all: their membership; immediate local and historical environment; the group's internal sociology; the wider global environment; and the belief that their strategies are likely to be successful. The demise of terrorist groups and failure to achieve their declared objectives should not be dismissed as evidence of their irrationality with respect to the effectiveness of violence. For the group, if not for its adversary, the decision is always explicable and rational in its own terms. Therefore, our ability to acquire an understanding of those terms and the perceptions upon which they are based will be key to explaining terrorists' motivations, actions and behaviour.

Terrorism is not new. It is an established phenomenon which, according to Rapoport's work, comes in waves that reflect a prevailing ideology. In other words, whatever the local factors or group specifics, the global environment is important, directly or indirectly, in initiating a new wave. Rapoport identified four waves: the anarchism of the late 1890s; anti-colonialism after World War II; the leftist wave of the 1970s; and the religious wave which has replaced Marxism as the leading radical ideology today in the Arab world. Global events such as the industrial revolution or the collapse of empires at the end of World War I may produce an environment of change and instability in which radicalism can flourish, but Sedgwick argues that what usually matters most is a recent actual or apparent example of the successful use of violence as a strategy. The "contagion" effect translates into the way a particular event or set of events can inspire and initiate a new terrorist wave based on an emerging ideology.

The apparent success of a small group of Islamist warriors (mujahideen) in expelling Soviet military forces from Afghanistan qualifies as just such an event which shifted Al Qaeda's strategy away from

unsuccessful nationalist campaigns aimed at the overthrow of apostate Muslim rulers (the "near enemy"), towards global jihadism:

"...we believe that those who fought in Afghanistan did more than their share of duty. They knew that they were fighting with scarce supplies — very few RPGs, very few anti-tank mines, and very few Kalashnikovs — yet they managed to destroy the myth of the largest military machine ever known to mankind and utterly annihilated the idea of the so-called superpowers. We believe that America is much weaker than Russia, and we have learned from our brother who fought in the jihad in Somalia of the incredible weakness and cowardice of the American soldier. Not even eighty of them had been killed and they fled in total darkness in the middle of the night, unable to see a thing."
(Usama bin Laden, December 1998)

The perception that a small group of mujahideen defeated the "best of the West" is itself a propaganda coup. Nevertheless, jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan was the first occasion when militants from around the world united in a common cause, to expel the infidel from a Muslim land and establish Dar al-Islam in Afghanistan. Buoyed by their success against a superior force, which propaganda portrayed as a sign of divine help for jihad in defence of Islam, the "Afghan Arabs" dispersed around the world to continue the struggle in other Muslim lands, notably Bosnia and Chechnya.

"And the people used to ask us: "How will you defeat the Soviet Empire?" And at that time, the Soviet Empire was a mighty power that scared the whole world — NATO used to shake in fear in front of the Soviet Empire..... Today there is no more Soviet Empire... only Russia is left. So the one God, who sustained us ...to defeat the Soviet Empire, is capable of sustaining us again and of allowing us to defeat America on the same land, and with the same sayings. So we believe that the defeat of America is something achievable, with the permission of God — and it is easier for us ...than the defeat of the Soviet Empire previously. "
(Usama bin Laden, October 2001)

Other powerful catalysts, which also feature prominently in Al Qaeda's propaganda, were:

- a) the failure of Islamist nationalist uprisings in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, which bin Laden and al-Zawahiri attributed to Western support to the corrupt rulers of these Muslim regimes and ultimately
- b) the rejection by the Saudi royal family in 1991 of bin Laden's offer to raise a force of mujahideen to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in favour of permitting an American military presence to defile the "land of the two holy sites".

"...the greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad is the occupation of Saudi Arabia, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of revelation, source of the Prophetic mission, and home of the noble Ka'ba where Muslims direct their prayers. Despite this it was occupied by the armies of the Christians, the Americans and their allies."
(Usama bin Laden, 1996)

This statement, which became known as the "Ladenese Epistle" was addressed not only to Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula but across the world; it called for a boycott of American goods, as well as jihad against what he styled the "Judeo-Crusader Alliance".

Propaganda

Propaganda, a word frequently associated with bias or falsity, refers to the dissemination of doctrines or practices. A simple definition used here is "publicity intended to spread ideas or information that will persuade or convince people". The purpose of propaganda is to create a particular "reality" an ideological lens through which events are to be seen and interpreted.

The Ideological Content of Al Qaeda's Propaganda

Radical ideology is both a necessary ingredient and a justification for terrorism. Bin Laden is not an original thinker: the ideology which underpins his narrative of world events has deep historical roots which have incubated over centuries and represent a distillation of the ideas of a number of Islamic ideologues and scholars, including Ibn Tamiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and Abdallah Azzam. Ayman al-Zawahiri, an early Qutb disciple and leader of Tanzim al-Jihad, the most lethal of the Egyptian jihadist groups, has also been influential. Bin Laden claims that his speeches are important primary sources for parties seeking to understand Al Qaeda's ideological and political statements.

All radical ideologies tend to condemn the current socio-political or religious system as illegitimate in some way. They then offer an alternative and a means of achieving it. Since ideology is more a determinant of what a group stands for than what it stands against, the differences between radical ideologies are most apparent in their long-term strategic goals. While analysts such as Roy contend that Al Qaeda is using religious elements, such as the reinvigoration of jihad, as a means to achieve political ends, bin Laden claims that the struggle against corrupt Muslim rulers is a manifestation of a far wider conflict:

"between global unbelief, with the apostates today under the leadership of America, on one side, and the Islamic ummah and its brigades of mujahidin on the other."

"In this war against unbelief, the weakening of the United States and any other secular regimes which govern by man-made law, in contravention to God's law, is a necessary step towards achieving its other objectives."

(Usama bin Laden, December 2004)

Drawing from Sayyid Qutb, who declared that the mission of jihad was "to destroy the kingdom of man to establish the kingdom of heaven on earth", bin Laden's eschatological vision is of a pure Islamic realm governed by a restored Caliphate — a transcendent political entity which would unite

and govern the world Muslim community as it did for centuries before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. A key step towards this goal is the establishment of Islamic regimes in majority Muslim states. These ideological objectives are both religious and political. The militant position has been summarized as follows:

"Our political agenda... is that of the saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him), "I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour, until Allah is worshipped alone" ... this is what determines our political goal. We fight in the way of Allah, until the law of Allah is implemented, and the first step is to expel the enemy, then establish the Islamic state, then we set forth to conquer the lands of Muslims to return them back to us, then after that, we fight the kuffar (disbelievers) until they accept one of the three. I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour"; this is our political agenda". (Abu Musab-al Zarqawi, 2005)

Radical Islam is often referred to as Salafism, a Sunni ideology which is deeply embedded in the Arab world and attracts a "majority or significant portion" of the Muslim population in the Middle East and North Africa. From the fundamental principles of Salafism, radicalism draws its motivation and legitimacy, and it largely shares the same goals. Salafis attribute Islam's decline to the failure of the faithful to practice their religion in the manner and with the purity of the Prophet and his Companions, the Salaf. They advocate a return to those ways. But Islamic radicalism has both peaceful and militant strands which despite a shared strategic vision, diverge over means — the legitimacy and targets of jihad.

Moreover, among militants, there are also divisions. *Takfiris* subscribe to a doctrine legitimizing a fully-fledged jihad against apostate rulers as a priority on the basis that their heresy has led other Muslims astray. Others, for whom war and strife between Muslims is unlawful and specifically prohibited in Islam, believe the immediate enemy should be *dar al-harb* and the *kuffar*. Al Qaeda's brand of jihadism has roots in both and draws on Mohammed Abdel Wahhab's 18th-century revival of Tamiyya's

doctrine. Its early focus on uniting the Muslim *ummah* in a global movement against the West gave way to a need to retain operational capability through a network of in-country Islamist movements primarily motivated by their opposition to local apostate rulers. While only a minority of Salafis subscribe to Al Qaeda's brand of militant Salafi/Wahhabism, they believe:

"the abandonment of jihad due to the love of the world and the abhorrence of death is the cause of Muslim societies' misfortunes the consequence of which is that tyrants have gained dominance over the Muslims in every aspect and in every land."

Jihad is a controversial issue within Islam. While conservative moderates acknowledge the existence of a duty of jihad, they find in traditional Islamic jurisprudence (*shari'ah*) legal justification to put the imperative of jihad in abeyance. Others use linguistic analysis to support their claim that jihad means "to strive" rather than "holy war" and does not necessarily have a militant connotation. Militants, however, dismiss the Prophet Muhammad's distinction between the "greater jihad" (the struggle within one's soul) and the "lesser jihad" (physical strife or fighting with unbelievers) as an invention of the *hadith*.

For radical militants of Al Qaeda's stamp, violent, global jihad is the cornerstone of their ideology. Sayyid Qutb defined jihad as a call to unremitting warfare against the forces of unbelief in order to "open the nations for Islam". Al Qaeda propaganda justifies global jihadism through the selective use of verses from the Qur'an and traditions, and owes much to Ibn Tamiyya's controversial interpretation of jihad which was discredited by his own contemporary jurists in the 14th century:

"the first obligation (after the profession of Faith) is to repel the enemy aggressors who assault both sanctity and security ... and the individual or community that participates in it finds itself between two blissful outcomes: victory and triumph or martyrdom and Paradise".
(Ibn Tamiyyah)

"So, everyone not performing jihad today is forsaking a duty, just like the one who eats during the days of Ramadhan without excuse. . . . Nay, the state of the person who abandons jihad is more severe" (Abdullah-Azzam)

The tactical means by which the ultimate goals of radical ideologies are to be attained are usually not determined by ideology. In particular cases, however, an implicitly violent ideology or religious conviction can affect the decision to resort to militancy. While violence as a means to an end rather than an end in itself holds true of most terrorist groups, the doctrine of jihad to which Al Qaeda subscribes emphasizes the act and the actor regardless of the outcome. Jihad as a profession of faith has a redemptive quality and is worthy in its own right. When sanctioned by religious authority, terrorist violence may be perceived as a cathartic and empowering process expurgating past humiliations suffered at the hands of infidels. Sedgwick calls this "existential bellicosity".

It is not surprising then that, while ideologically jihad is portrayed as a religious duty and demonstration of faith, bin Laden's justification for jihad as a tactic of terrorism is laced with references to deterrence and revenge:

"As I looked at those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the oppressor in kind by destroying towers in America, so that it would have a taste of its own medicine and would be prevented from killing our women and children. On this day, [Israeli invasion of Lebanon, 1982] I became sure that the oppression and intentional murder of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy."
(Usama bin Laden, October 29, 2004)

The historic phenomenon that animates global jihadism is Arab humiliation at the power imbalance between the Islamic world and the West, which has been a reoccurring grievance over seven hundred years. This deep-seated and festering sore lies at the heart of Al Qaeda's radical ideology, although it is couched in religious terms. Al Qaeda's propaganda portrays the current socio-political system as one that oppresses and discriminates against Muslims,

who are the victims of an international world order dominated by the West — the aggressor and enemy of Islam.

"What the United States is tasting today is nothing compared to what we have tasted for decades. Our ummah has known this humiliation and contempt for over eighty years. Its sons are killed, its blood is spilled, its holy sites are attacked, and it is not governed according to Allah's command. Despite this, no one cares."
(Usama bin Laden, November 2001)

Local grievances and perceived injustices are cited as evidence of this and are harnessed to build Muslim solidarity and win recruits for jihad against infidels and apostates, whose oppression, licentiousness and depravity are considered inimical to Islam:

"So I urge my Muslim brothers to read the Qu'ran and to read the exegesis of these verses. God's book contains many warnings about befriending the infidels. ...I say that the world has agreed to devour the Islamic world. The Crusader world has agreed to devour us, and nations have rallied together against us. And all we have left to cope with them, besides God Almighty, is the young men who have not been weighed down by the filth of the world."
(Usama bin Laden, December 1998)

Propaganda: The Objectives

Al Qaeda's long-term strategic goals are constructed upon a number of intermediate or second-tier instrumental goals that define its plans, explain its behaviour and provide the substance of its propaganda materials. These goals contain both political and religious elements:

- a) Religious Elements:
 - emulation of the practices of those who lived at the time of the Prophet
 - acceptance of jihad as a personal (rather than collective) obligation in defence of Muslim lands, with the promise of victory through divine help, or martyrdom and the rewards of Paradise.

- b) Political Elements:
 - Restoration of the caliphate, in order to politically unite countries with a Muslim majority within an Islamic realm and provide a form of government for the global Muslim community which will guarantee the primacy of religion in social and state affairs;
 - to achieve this end, the removal of the dictators who currently govern secular Muslim states (the "near enemy");
 - an end to the international order led by the West, and to its influence over the territory of Islam;
 - militant jihad against those who occupy the lands of Islam — especially the USA and its allies in Iraq, but also including countries such as Israel, Russia, India, China, Indonesia and the Philippines (the "far enemy");
 - elimination of the state of Israel;
 - avenging oppression of the Muslims by the enemy and redressing the power imbalance.

Managing Perceptions

The content of propaganda is intended to shape the target audience's view of "reality", but managing that view is an exercise in emotional persuasion, exploiting certain conditions to make the audience more receptive. Al Qaeda's propaganda wing, the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), understands very well that the effect of its propaganda will depend upon the content, the presentation of the material, and the means by which it is transmitted.

Terrorism introduces complexity and uncertainty into conflict. Propagandists capitalize on the psychological impacts of terrorist violence to generate or influence particular responses from different target audiences. If propagandists are successful in persuading others to accept their preferred "reality" — through deception and distortion if necessary — all manner of benefits can accrue, which can offset the

imbalance of power in an asymmetric war. Operational defeats can be turned into victories, and victories can be made to seem more than they are; the values and principles of the adversary can be called into question, and the moral high ground can be won or denied to others.

"Western civilization, which is backed by America, has lost its values and appeal. The immense materialistic towers, which preach Freedom, Human Rights, and Equality, were destroyed. These values were revealed as a total mockery, as was made clear when the US government interfered and banned the media outlets from airing our words... because they felt that the truth started to appear to the American people.....and they forgot everything they mentioned about free speech..."
(Usama bin Laden, October 21, 2001)

The nature of terrorism is such that the psychological repercussions are likely to outweigh the purely physical consequences of violence. This is especially the case if an effective propaganda and media strategy is in place to act as a force multiplier. A group which is fighting from an inferior position in an asymmetric war will find it advantageous to use media coverage of its acts of terror to maximize the psychological effects and create the perception of a strong and unstoppable movement. This use of the media as a force multiplier is a time-honored strategy adopted by groups which are too weak to impose their will through conventional military or political means. "The Armed Struggle becomes Armed Propaganda" is how the leader of Sinn Fein, Gerry Adams, described the critical complementarity of Sinn Fein's media strategy with the Provisional IRA's operational campaign.

Non-state groups who engage in international terrorism often practice multiple victimization: the actual victims are the means to instill fear in others, whose reactions in turn are intended to induce government decision-makers or others to respond to the terrorist act. Victims or targets may be chosen because they are iconic symbols of the adversary, as in the case of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, or they may be selected to demonstrate how vulnerable ordinary citizens

are to disruptions in their economic lives and well-being, and how impotent governments are to protect them (for example, attacks against energy facilities and transport systems). The target audience will depend upon the message to be conveyed to achieve the effect required: a terrorist group will want to project an image of strength and capability to strike fear into the heart of its adversary, and will choose a "hard" target. Alternatively, attacks on relatively "soft" targets such as oil pipelines have less effect but project a different message to a different audience. Politically astute groups such as Al Qaeda may time their actions and communiqués to capitalize on certain political events such as elections.

Shaping public perceptions and generating particular responses may entail either a distortion of the operational facts to encourage supporters and deceive the adversary; or a perversion of conceptual ideas in order to present particular strategies, tactics and goals in a preferred light. Al Qaeda's selectivity in citing only those texts and verses of the Qur'an which support its minority interpretation of violent jihad is a conceptual distortion of the teachings of Islam, intended to give greater legitimacy to its "jihadist reality". Its failure to claim responsibility for the 9/11 attacks until long after the event was an operational deception that gave rise to confusion and conspiracy theories which served Al Qaeda well, both in deflecting early criticism from the Muslim community and allowing those who did not wish to condemn the terrorist attacks to remain silent. The confusion contributed to the deepening sense of alienation within Muslim diaspora communities.

Terrorist groups are notoriously prone to factionalism and splits. Managing the perceptions of the group's own members and supporters, in order to ensure operational continuity, is a core objective. Furthermore, maintaining group identity requires ongoing education, indoctrination and demonstrable implementation of its revolutionary ideology and principles. For Al Qaeda, this entails demonstrating the legitimacy of its radical interpretation of Islam, through carefully crafted references to Islamic law, and discrediting the interpretation of traditional Muslim clerics and ideologues.

In its attempts to manage the perceptions of its supporters, adversaries and the broader Muslim community, Al Qaeda's strategy aims to:

- present the West as the aggressor in a final confrontation between East and West;
- portray global jihadism as a defensive strategy to preserve Islam;
- "awaken" the Muslim *ummah* to this confrontation in order to win broader support and recruits for Al Qaeda's global jihad;
- present the movement's capability as stronger than it actually is by maximizing the effects of victories;
- preserve legitimacy of the movement through "religious education" based on selective texts; disseminate knowledge of those *fatwas* which sanction the terrorist acts of militant jihadis and stipulate the rules of engagement;
- generate fear and sow disinformation and discord within the ranks of adversaries in order to maximize the psychological effects of violence and produce particular responses.

Post 9/11: Al Qaeda's Propaganda and Perception Management

Effects of 9/11

In 2001, world attention was riveted by the dramatic video imagery of the 9/11 attacks, which were transmitted worldwide over TV network channels and the Internet. The "propaganda of the deed" was targeted primarily at eliciting support from the *ummah* by "awakening" Muslims to the "reality" of the existential nature of the confrontation between Islam and the West, and forcing them to choose sides. Symbolism and the psychological effect on the Muslim community were the main drivers, but

the attacks were also intended to cause maximum physical and psychological damage to the enemy, and to goad it into mounting a counter-attack which would substantiate Al Qaeda's narrative of the US as aggressor.

"The first week [after the attacks on 9/11] they didn't work at all as a result of the psychological shock of the attack...American studies and analysis have mentioned that 70% of the American people are still suffering from depression and psychological trauma as a result of the incident of the two towers and the attack on the Defense Ministry, the Pentagon.

(Usama bin Laden, October 21, 2001)

"Al Qaeda spent \$500,000 on the September 11 attacks, while America lost more than \$500 billion at the lowest estimate, in the event and its aftermath....Still more serious for America was the fact that the mujahidin forced Bush to resort to an emergency budget in order to continue fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. This shows the success of our plan to bleed America to the point of bankruptcy, with God's will."

(Usama bin Laden, October 2004)

Besides physical and financial damage, the psychological impacts on the United States (and indirectly on its allies) were severe. Suddenly, the American public had been made to feel vulnerable; the attacks had removed its sense of security and undermined confidence in government and institutions. It demanded a response. For Muslims around the world, moderates as well as radicals, this challenge to the power and dominance of the USA had an electrifying impact. Many who would not normally condone terrorism felt some vindication for Muslim deaths and humiliations they had come to accept as attributable to American foreign policies. For militant jihadis and radical supporters, the 9/11 attacks were a beacon of inspiration, and media coverage provided powerful recruiting propaganda. The audacity, scale and cold-blooded brutality of the attacks were such as to cause security authorities around the world to revise their assessment of Al Qaeda's intentions and capabilities. The infidels were listening at last.

For operational reasons, it was not until much later that Al Qaeda, as an organization, acknowledged responsibility for the 9/11 attacks. This came in October 2004 in a message which explained to the American people that the injustices of their government's policies had caused the attacks:

"Can you blame someone for protecting his own? Self-defense and punishing the oppressor in kind: is this shameful terrorism? Even if it is, we have no other option. This is the message that we have tried to convey to you in words and deeds, years before September 11.

(Usama bin Laden, October 29, 2004. The warnings refer to interviews bin Laden gave to various journalists from 1996 onwards.)

The near absence of the name "Al Qaeda" in pre-2001 jihadist literature had given rise to doubts in some quarters about the existence of Al Qaeda as a formal organization. Recently published testimonies and declassified documents have confirmed that while it was in existence from the late 1980s onwards the name was for internal use rather than for propaganda purposes. Since 2002, the reverse is likely to be the case: the name Al Qaeda may be used to claim operations carried out, not by the core group, but by one of its affiliated terrorist organizations in order to enhance the psychological effect of a global Islamic alliance.

The invasion of Afghanistan by Coalition forces in order to pursue, punish and pre-empt the terrorists from committing further atrocities substantiated Al Qaeda's narrative of the West, particularly the US, as the aggressor in a Muslim land and the enemy of Islam. While it destroyed Al Qaeda's territorial base, the atomization of the core organization led to the franchising of its operational activities and a strengthening of ties with other Islamic terrorist groups to form the global Islamic jihad. The threat from militant jihadism has grown rather than diminished.

Legitimacy

The jihadis who carried out the 9/11 attacks did not appear to hold themselves accountable to any

earthly authority, but relied on direct, unmediated authority from God. After 9/11, this gave way to greater emphasis on obtaining the sanction of *ulema* for acts of violence. The importance of legal opinions (*fatwas*) for motivating terrorism is more than the cynical use of religious terminology for political propaganda purposes: a believing Muslim would consider an act of terror morally repugnant, legally prohibited, and punishable in the hereafter, if not covered by clear guidelines and the legal and moral justifications of Islamic jurists. Before engaging the *kuffar* in battle, for example, Muslims must call on them to accept Islam and the offer must be rejected. Recognition that winning new recruits and greater support from the Muslim *ummah* has resulted in Al Qaeda's more recent propaganda emphasizing the importance of Islamic law with respect to the rules of engagement. Militant jihad as an offensive tactic in defending Islam against its external enemies, martyrdom operations and the targeting or collateral deaths of innocent civilians.

Pressed to justify the slaughter of "innocents" (civilians, women and children), bin Laden has been neither cogent nor consistent in his responses; he essentially takes the position that the slaughter of innocents is not terrorism, but merely a minor reparation for the countless crimes and murders committed against Islam and Muslims since the end of the 600-year-old Ottoman Empire in 1923. Insofar as Muslim deaths are concerned, he notes: "The Islamic shari'ah says Muslims should not live in the land of the infidel for long."

"They say that the killing of innocents is wrong and invalid, and for proof, they say that the Prophet forbade the killing of children and women, and that is true...but this forbidding of killing children and innocents is not set in stone, and there are other writings that uphold it. God's saying: And if you punish [your enemy]...then punish them with the like of that with which you were afflicted...Ibn Tamiyyah ...and many others... say that if the disbelievers were to kill our children and women, then we should not feel ashamed to do the same to them, mainly to deter them from trying to kill our children and women again."

(Usama bin Laden, October 7, 2001)

Warnings and Truce

Al Qaeda is mindful of Islamic law governing the necessity to give warnings. Since the 9/11 attacks, it has issued a stream of videos claiming responsibility for atrocities and warning of more attacks unless the West changes its policies on Iraq, Afghanistan and a range of other issues.

"We warned Australia beforehand not to take part in the war in Afghanistan, as well as about its disgraceful attempts to separate East Timor, but it ignored the warning until it woke up to the sound of explosions in Bali. Its government then falsely contended that Australians had not been targeted." (Usama bin Laden, November 2002)

Al Qaeda is also required to observe the conditions for peace which apply to enemies who are not subject to Islamic rule: bin Laden's offer of a ceasefire (*hudnah*) was a matter of expediency. It echoed the Hudaibiyya Treaty, which the Prophet concluded with the Quraish tribe in Mecca and which was to last for approximately ten years, the maximum possible with an enemy against whom a jihad was being waged. It was invoked by al-Azhar in Egypt to justify the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty of 1979, and later by Yasser Arafat to downplay his acceptance of the Oslo Accords with Israel. Al Qaeda's offer of a truce to the Western world was a means by which it could maintain the fiction of being the defender against the aggressor; any action it chose to interpret as an attack by the adversary on itself or its associates, or even Muslims more generally, would be a *casus belli* which would oblige Muslim militants to renew the jihad. In that sense, the offer of *hudnah* was a propaganda ploy designed to sow dissent among adversaries.

Deception

Despite a rigid doctrinal purity, Al Qaeda has shown pragmatic flexibility when expedient for operational purposes or to win Muslim support. The unique contribution of Al Qaeda to global Salafi jihadism was to take jihad beyond local struggles to Western infidels. When forced by defeat in Afghanistan to rely upon national and regional movements

whose ideology and motives were similar, but not identical to its own, Al Qaeda shifted its focus to retain operational capacity. This opportunism or willingness to dissemble was illustrated by bin Laden's relationship with the Saudi regime. Until 2004, Al Qaeda consistently claimed that the United States and its Western allies, rather than the House of Saud, were its main enemy on the Arabian Peninsula, and that the object of its campaign was to end the American military occupation. This "deception" was later abandoned in a blistering indictment of the Saudi regime contained in a message posted on the website of the Global Islamic Media Front and circulated widely in English translation:

"Now that this is clear, the solution to improve the situation is what has been made clear by God's law, and that is to remove the ruler. Even if he refuses to go, it is obligatory to depose him through force of arms."

The message focuses on the apostasy of Muslim rulers and the need to remove them and the government in Riyadh which had entered into a global alliance with "Crusader unbelief".

Apostasy

Bin Laden dismissed Crown Prince Abdallah's attempts to increase citizens' participation in government through the establishment of a National Centre for Dialogue, the Majlis al-Hilwar al-Watani, on grounds that reform should be carried out according to God's law, from which man-made laws were a deviation:

"they claim that it [Majlis al-Hiwar al-Watani] has improved things by letting people play the game of elections, as in Yemen, Jordan or Egypt... regardless of the fact that it is forbidden to abide by polytheistic laws...and if the dialogue has to be done through the sword and the gun, as the Minister of Defence put it...how can any sane person, seeing the apostate ruler and his soldiers armed to the teeth, claim that he wants reform through peaceful solution."

Influencing Policies

By creating fear and uncertainty, terrorists try to use media publicity to exert pressure on governments to gain concessions to their demands or amendments to governments' domestic or foreign policies. It is apparent that acts of terror, or evidence of the preparation of such acts, can have a major psychological effect on potential victims. A Dutch court that recently considered pre-recorded martyr's videos in the Azzouz case said that martyrdom operations were intended "to strike fear into the Dutch people". The calculus behind Al Qaeda's attacks on US forces in the Middle East, the American embassies in East Africa and the Madrid railway station in March 2005 was clear. In Spain, the effect of media coverage and the fears of the people forced a change of government and the withdrawal of Spanish forces from Iraq. An Islamic website stated in December 2003:

"We think that the Spanish government could not tolerate more than two, maximum three blows, after which it will have to withdraw as a result of popular pressure. If its troops still remain in Iraq after those blows, then the victory of the Socialist Party is almost secured, and the withdrawal of the Spanish forces will be on its electoral programme."

Bin Laden attempted to influence the outcome of the 2004 Presidential election in the US by suggesting in a videotape, sent on October 29, 2004, to Al-Jazeera that a change of US policy could forestall a further attack:

"You should remember that every action has a reaction...One of the most significant things I have read about their torments [victims in twin towers] before falling was that they said: "We were wrong when we let the White House inflict unchecked its aggressive foreign policy on the poor people." They were saying "People of America, call those who caused our murder to account."
(Usama bin Laden, October 29, 2004)

"In conclusion, I say to you in truth that your security lies not in the hands of Kerry, Bush or Al Qaeda. It lies in your own hands, and whichever state does not encroach upon our security thereby ensures it own. God is our master; you have none."
(Usama bin Laden, October 29, 2004)

Al Qaeda's Media Strategy

"We realized from our defense and fighting against the American enemy that, in combat, they mainly depend on psychological warfare. This is in light of the huge media machine they have."

If the purpose of propaganda is to spread ideas or information that will persuade or convince people, a complementary media strategy is one which manages the dissemination of those ideas efficiently and effectively. Together, they constitute a far-reaching and powerful means of managing perceptions to generate particular responses. Al Qaeda has relied heavily on the power of media images of attacks and the repercussions, to command the world's attention. Manipulation of the media has become a key element of modern conflict. Al Qaeda sympathizers claim that it has been so successful in its propaganda activities, that in this aspect of the asymmetric war with the West, it has the upper hand.

The Channels and the Technology

'Just a Cranky Guy in a Cave'

The importance of modern communications technologies in promulgating Al Qaeda's radical ideology and winning support has been encapsulated by the comment "if bin Laden didn't have access to global media, satellite communications and the Internet, he'd just be a cranky guy in a cave". Al Qaeda's innovative use of these information technologies has not only enabled it to survive as an organization after losing its territorial base in Afghanistan, but to continue its declared war by waging a propaganda campaign through the world's broadcast and print media and on an increasing number of Internet websites and blogs. These channels provide publicity for its extremist ideology under the guise of promoting public dialogue. The sophistication of Al Qaeda's media strategy, with

regard to the message and the means, has grown with its transition from group to movement and has been crucial in complementing Al Qaeda's operational campaign.

Throughout the 1990s, bin Laden's messages reached the West through a number of interviews given to Western journalists. At the end of 1998, however, there was a profound shift in Al Qaeda's media strategy, following its decision to use the Al-Jazeera television network as a channel for broadcasting its message to the "near enemy" — the Arab and Muslim world on which it had hitherto had little effect. Henceforth, bin Laden's long monologues would go out first in the Arab media over satellite television in an untranslated and largely unmediated broadcast, then Al-Jazeera would provide the video to CNN and other stations. The importance Al Qaeda attaches to media coverage of its activities means that it uses only those channels which meet certain conditions. An Al Qaeda spokesman explained:

"Sheikh Usama knows that the media war is not less important than the military war against America. That's why Al Qaeda has many media wars. The Sheikh has made Al Qaeda's media strategy something that all TV stations look for. There are certain criteria for the stations to be able to air our videos, foremost of which is that it has not taken a previous stand against the mujahideen. That maybe explains why we prefer Al-Jazeera to the rest."

In 1998, Al-Jazeera's commitment to report stories that were newsworthy, regardless of ideological orientation, was in sharp contrast to the official Arab media and therefore a natural conduit for bin Laden's efforts to reach a global audience. In the opinion of Yosri Fouda, Al-Jazeera, even though owned and controlled by the Qatari royal family, is considered more free than most of the pan-Arab, state-controlled, satellite TV channels, and is popular "due to a perception among Arabs that it tries to tell them what is going on". While it is the best known satellite TV station, there are many other channels — Saudi MBC, Lebanon's LBC-al Hayat, Abu Dhabi TV, Dubai-based Al-Arabiya — that are beginning to spark debate and controversy and serve as the

primary conduit for non-state groups wanting to broadcast their message to the general population.

The Middle East is characterized by a lack of access to uncensored information. Al-Jazeera is only the most prominent of an increasing number of state-controlled, Middle Eastern satellite channels which have developed over the past ten years in response to a pent-up demand for information. With the emergence of a greater degree of freedom, information and communications technologies are effectively becoming weapons in the battle for Muslim hearts and minds as different parties vie for air-time and influence.

Nevertheless, despite this injection of critical thought into traditional Islamic societies, the media environment in the Arab world remains tolerant of Islamic terrorism. Indeed, a link has been made between the greater publicity given to Al Qaeda by the pan-Arab media, satellite channels and the increasing incidence of Islamic terrorism. At present, it is not possible to analyse in detail the implications of this link because of problems with metrics and time-series data, but its significance is telling not lost on the authorities/regimes? Like the other Arab channels, Al-Jazeera still portrays bin Laden and other senior Al Qaeda leaders more as heroes than as terrorists who are responsible for mass murder. While this portrayal may be the price of obtaining exclusive broadcasting privileges, state-controlled channels serve the interests of their governments, and "he who pays the piper calls the tune". The interests of Middle East authoritarian regimes do not always coincide with those of the West, especially when Sunni extremism is seen as useful in buttressing conservatism and checking the ambitions of resurgent Shia.

After 9/11, the means and methods of communication expanded considerably. A growing number of messages began reaching the world by fax, over the Internet at Al Qaeda's website (al_nida.com), and in a series of audio and video tapes and CDs, most of which are broadcast on Arab television channels and are then posted directly on the Internet in Arabic or at a later date in translation. Other communiqués appear in the print media such as the London-based Arab newspaper Asharq Alawsat.

In 2001, Al Qaeda formed a special media production division, called al-Sahab Institute for Media Production, to produce the first of its CDs. It is now the major conduit for statements which issue from Al Qaeda's leaders. It has an extensive video library to draw upon for its releases which have significantly increased in number this year, seemingly as part of a new offensive focused on the Muslim mainstream. IntelCenter, a Virginia-based company that tracks statements by jihadists, calculates that al-Sahab produced over 50 videotapes in 2006, more than tripling its 2005 output.

The Internet is a major conduit for Al Qaeda's propaganda. A number of studies have testified to its influence in radicalizing young Muslims around the world. Broadcast interviews and videos provided to the media by al-Sahab have been posted on jihadist websites, and are required viewing at Al Qaeda training camps and in the sitting rooms of radicals around the world. The Internet is predominantly used to communicate Al Qaeda's strategic vision and to transfer knowledge, both religious and operational, to a specific group, supporters. On occasion, however, it has been used to target a broader audience; for example, bin Laden's letter to the Americans posted on the Al alah website on October 14, 2002, in Arabic and later published in English in *The London Observer* on 24 November. The letter is a wide-ranging summary of what bin Laden believes to be the misdeeds of the United States and is a moral and cultural denunciation of American society.

The Internet plays a unique role in providing a "virtual togetherness" in which like-minded radicals can share and reinforce their jihadist "reality". Propaganda materials shape their perceptions and feed their interactions through websites, blogs and chat rooms. As its latest recruitment tool, Al Qaeda has launched an Internet broadcasting channel run by its propaganda wing, the Global Islamic Media Front. The channel, Sawt al-Khalifa (Voice of the Caliphate), has been heavily advertised in password-protected jihadist websites across the world. It shows footage of Usama bin Laden's speeches, attacks on American and British troops in Iraq and Afghanistan,

and mujaheddin operations in Chechnya and central Asia. The radical preacher Omar Bakri Mohammed, a Muslim cleric banned from Britain for inciting violence, has been able to set up a "cyber-mosque" in order to continue his activities.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has produced several films containing portraits and interviews of militants such as *Wabsaya al-Abtal (Wills of the Heroes)* and *Shuhada al-Muwajahat (Martyrs of the Confrontations)*. In many parts of the Muslim world, jihad is being experienced vicariously: decapitation videos have become more popular than pornography, at least in jihadi circles. Groups associated with Al Qaeda also have their own websites and video production units, and counterterrorism raids have uncovered "studios" where executions are recorded for later distribution. Computers, video cameras, editing equipment and high-speed Internet connections are now essential items of equipment in the terrorists' arsenal.

Presentation

The substance and form of the video materials which are inputs into the religious and political indoctrination of new recruits are under pressure to change to accommodate the needs of emerging self-radicalizing groups. Those producing audio and video CDs are having to work harder to gain and retain the interest of a younger generation of sympathizers and potential recruits. The old format featured bin Laden sitting on a wall giving a lengthy speech is no longer so effective. "The young of today will not listen to him. They will get bored."

Some Internet sites have recently offered animated videos, comedy clips and Top 10 video lists of the most devastating terror attacks. They often target children with an array of online games, cartoons and even bedtime stories. Adolescents and young adults are targeted with music videos like *Dirty Kuffar* (infidel), produced by a British rapper named Sheik Terra. The video appearance last year of "Azzam al Amriki", or Azzam the American with al-Zawahiri, may have been just such an attempt to ring the changes. This young convert from California, whose real name is

said to be Adam Gadahan, demonstrated a flair for the metaphor of pop cultures by transforming Andy Warhol's slogan "everyone is a star" into "everyone is Mohammed Atta".

Operational videos aiming to provide practical information and training have long been circulated over the Internet, as Islamists discovered that it was the perfect tool for demonstrating the art of bomb-making as well as screening executions. Days before the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, al-Sahab released a barrage of videos, including retrospective images of bin Laden seated with some of the suicide bombers in a documentary described as the "making of September 11", and one of al-Zawahiri, whose video appearances far outnumber those of bin Laden.

Al-Sahab's videotapes are fairly polished productions, often with English subtitles, animation effects and studio settings. Its production operation probably does not have a fixed studio location, but may consist of a number of cameramen and editors who use programs like Final Cut Pro on laptops. Whereas in the past, "talking-head" propaganda material was common, it is now much more animated and sophisticated. On a videotape produced in April 2006, al-Sahab documented three separate IED attacks against American convoys in Kunar province in eastern Afghanistan. Militants are shown mixing the explosives for the IEDs, molding them into devices with detonators, then documenting the actual attacks. After explosions devastate the Humvees, the cameraman continues to film, showing the US Army medevac helicopters arriving to evacuate the dead and wounded. Al-Sahab releases now feature everything from the taped suicide messages of martyrs to images of gun battles and bombings spearheaded by Al Qaeda and others.

The Target Audiences

The content of Al Qaeda's propaganda is multidirectional and intended to affect one or all of its three prime audiences:

- a) *the adversary* — variously referred to as Crusaders, Zionists and the West, of which the United States is considered the leader. It also includes all unbelievers (*kuffar* or infidels), atheists and polytheists in the US, Europe, Russia, India, China, Indonesia, and elsewhere, as well as the apostate secular Muslim regimes, of which Egypt, Jordan and Syria are the most significant;
- b) *the ummah* — the world community of Muslims, encompassing not just the orthodox and moderate, but those who identify themselves as Muslims purely for cultural reasons;
- c) *supporters* — of global jihadism, those Muslim radicals committed to the global jihadist movement and prepared to provide support in some operational or administrative capacity (for example, as suicide bombers or in facilitating travel and sanctuary for jihadis).

While some propaganda messages are broadly intended for all three audiences, others will be tailored to a particular audience. The messages, the channels by which they are conveyed, and the language used therefore differ. Speeches by Al Qaeda representatives posted on the web are now being given with English, French, and German subtitles, a development especially important to diaspora Muslims who speak no Arabic. Often the substance of a speech delivered in Arabic but made available in English differs significantly in order to serve particular requirements and separate two distinct markets for propaganda. While the Internet is the prime channel for providing propagandist materials to supporters, the wider Muslim and Western audiences are primarily targeted through the print media and broadcasts on radio and satellite TV channels.

Apart from political and ideological rhetoric and references to the historical struggle between Islam and the West, Al Qaeda's propaganda messages tend to focus on:

- explaining and justifying their rules of engagement, including targeting and tactics (defensive and offensive jihad); warnings of the intention to attack; the rules for the cessation of hostilities (a truce or *hudnah*);
- admonishing the Muslim *ummah* on matters of faith and their obligations;
- articulating the legitimacy of its strategy.

Some messages may have contained hidden instructions to operatives to prepare for and carry out attacks.

The Images and Symbols of Power

Bin Laden has charisma and a flair for self-promotion. He has appealed to Muslims worldwide as a man of piety, who has renounced a privileged position and used his organizational skills and financial resources in the service of Allah. It has been said that he has "the unprecedented genius to manipulate the interpretation of the Qur'an and turn some of the most popular verses into vehicles of evil and diabolic intention." But his appeal as far as the Muslim masses are concerned, derives not from what he stands for (the establishment of Taliban-style theocracies extending from Indonesia to Morocco), but what he stands against:

"At a time when the forces of globalization, coupled with economic determinism, seemed to have submerged the role of the individual charismatic leader of men beneath far more powerful, impersonal forces, bin Laden has cleverly cast himself (admittedly and inadvertently with our assistance) as a David against the American Goliath: one man standing up to the world's remaining superpower and able to challenge its might and directly threaten its citizens."

(Bruce Hoffman, November 2001)

Bin Laden acts and is treated by the news networks as though he were a legitimate spokesman or representative of Islam, even though he has no such mandate from the vast majority of Muslims, who neither support global jihadism nor agree with his interpretation of the doctrine of jihad. Al Qaeda's media strategy has been to foster bin Laden's image as an Islamic statesman and leader of a holy war, in order to unite the disparate strands of Islamic fervour into a global force against "unbelief". Since 2003, he has occasionally appeared in video tapes in the silk robes more common to an Islamic statesman than the religious-military apparel which Gilles Keppel dubbed "the textile manifestation of fundamentalism". He also makes constant references to Allah in his speeches to suggest that he and his work are instruments of divine will.

Muslims who have little scholastic knowledge of their faith and its texts are vulnerable to such simplistic propaganda techniques. This is especially so when, like many of those in the diaspora, they are unable to speak or read Arabic. They are vulnerable to propaganda techniques which present the parlous state of Muslim societies, past and present, as the consequence of an eternal struggle between East and West; and they are ready to see themselves as victims of oppression and injustice. The simplistic fundamentalist message, "there is no solution without jihad", in defence of Islam, appeals to young Muslims in search of an identity. They are encouraged to marginalize, if not despise, traditional Islamic scholars who do not share bin Laden's radical revisionism.

Charismatic leaders are a key element in the endeavour to bring Muslims to jihad; it is of note then that over the last two years, the less-charismatic Ayman al-Zawahiri has appeared over sixteen times in videos, compared to bin Laden's two appearances.

Propaganda and the Resurgence of Al Qaeda

Despite severe setbacks, Al Qaeda commands a greater following now than before its defeat in Afghanistan in 2001. Experts disagree about the extent to which Al Qaeda and its leaders continue to exercise an influence over the operational activities of associated groups and homegrown terrorists, but there is now a consensus that the hard-core leadership is resilient and once again gathering strength.

An assumption that its operational control had been diminished by the development of franchised networks and the activities of homegrown terrorist cells, in Europe at least, which were believed to act autonomously, is still current. But UK evidence now indicates that Al Qaeda has established a permanent camp in Pakistan and is training homegrown radicals as "foot soldiers" on an extensive and growing scale. Undeniable links between major terrorist plotters and senior Al Qaeda figures based in the tribal areas of Pakistan have been uncovered, which contrasts with the assertion popular until recently that Al Qaeda had metamorphosed into an ideology that inspires but no longer directs terrorists. The Al Qaeda network is probably best described now as a hub-and-spoke command and control structure.

An indicator of Al Qaeda's renewed vitality lies in its growing propaganda operation. While it has long been understood that propaganda is a key to its success, its output has been increasing at a significant rate. Al-Sahab released more than 20 audio and video tapes by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri in 2006, despite their fugitive status. Differences in tone and visual images indicate that changes are taking place, but the significance is less clear. In the past, the group's leaders were generally depicted as soldiers in battle, often filmed outdoors with weapons in the background. More recent communiqués, however, show Al Qaeda leaders in the comfort of a living room or an office, set against bookshelves lined with religious texts. The group has also taken to using Western terminology and quoting Western authors and famous speeches, in what seems to be an effort to reach those with Western sensibilities. There can be no doubt that this approach has been advised by those who are accustomed to Western culture.

Some analysts have interpreted these changes to mean that Al Qaeda is a militant group in transition. At the least, its leaders may now have accepted the importance of the role of proselytizers and propagandists, and are focusing their efforts on ideology over direct action, while at the same time franchising Al Qaeda's brand name and principles to smaller groups acting independently. Heffelfinger's assessment is representative:

"Al Qaeda has been turning itself from an active organization into a propaganda organization... they now appear to be focused on putting out disinformation and projecting the strength of the mujahedeen. They're no longer the group that is organizing the mujahedeen but are acting more as advisers to others."

However, while bin Laden may not be using a satellite phone to order attacks directly, this does not mean that he and al-Zawahiri no longer retain any operational command and control, especially with regard to attacks against iconic targets. The alleged plot in August 2006 to blow up 10 airliners flying from London to the US with liquid explosives had all the hallmarks of a "spectacular" Al Qaeda attack. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri seem to remain in broad ideological and strategic control of the movement they helped to build. At the least, when they speak, followers listen.

There has been a suspicion for some time that audio and videotapes may contain operational messages. For example, on 2003 10 19, bin Laden called for action against Spain because of the presence of its troops in Iraq. Six months later, terrorists killed 191 commuters in Madrid; according to American intelligence officials, Al Qaeda's role in those attacks was greater than initially thought in the aftermath of the bombings. Similarly, in the Spring of 2004, bin Laden offered a truce to European countries willing to pull out of the coalition in Iraq. On July 7, 2005, almost exactly a year after his truce offer expired, a homegrown terrorist cell with links to Al Qaeda carried out attacks against London's transport system. In December 2004, bin Laden called for attacks on

Saudi oil facilities. In February 2006, Al Qaeda attacked the Abqaiq plant in Saudi Arabia, one of the most important oil production facilities in the world.

Evidence for Al Qaeda's continuing operational involvement and influence can be seen in its strengthening links with militant groups across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. A high-profile media announcement last year by Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, leader of Algeria's Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) referred to a formal pledge of allegiance to "Al Qaeda of Jihad" as being the only organization qualified to gather together the mujahideen. Partnering with an organization that has actively tried to overthrow an apostate regime lends legitimacy to Al Qaeda and contributes to its objective of mobilizing global Muslim support for its agenda. The GSPC has recently changed its name to "Al Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb", and its new political agenda of international terrorism and integration into the worldwide jihad also supports Al Qaeda's narrative of a global conflict between "true" Muslims and the "Zionist-Crusader Alliance". This merger is likely to have implications for Al Qaeda's evolving ideology, and therefore for its propaganda activities.

Conclusion

There has been no shortage of apologists for Islamic terrorism: moral equivalence arguments abound which cite the "anger of Muslims" as an explanation, if not justification, for the murder of non-combatants in a war which Al Qaeda first declared against the West in 1998. The West's failure to confront and counter Al Qaeda's propagandists' "reality" has meant that in this particular aspect of the asymmetric war, it is the West which is fighting from a position of inferiority. A perception in the Muslim world that the West is an aggressor will be sufficient justification for some to support global jihadism as an offensive tactic in defence of Islam.

Whether or not the West sees it as such, this is a religious war, because Al Qaeda and like-minded Islamic extremists have so defined it, and its propaganda clearly aims to discredit and marginalize traditional Islamic authorities. Religious doctrine may be influenced and changed in a number of ways, but as far as Sunni Islam is concerned, only one is relevant: periodic backlashes of radical fundamentalism which have attempted to reverse Islam's path towards peaceful tolerance and return it to the missionary militancy of its early days. None of these attempts have truly succeeded for the reasons given by al-Suri. Al Qaeda's radical revisionism too will fail, unless its propaganda and media strategy can win it greater support from the Muslim community.

Like earlier Islamic revolutionaries, bin Laden is promoting a 14th-century ideology which holds little appeal for the majority of Muslims, who have no wish to live under a repressive theocratic dictatorship of the kind he espouses. Unlike them, however, he has been able to take advantage of 21st-century information technologies to disseminate his ideas globally.

The subtle shifts in Al Qaeda's propaganda are likely to be reflecting internal changes within the movement as well as those in the local and global environment. The atomization of Al Qaeda into smaller, more localized cells of homegrown terrorists is one change which has been accompanied by the growing importance of the Internet, websites and

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blogs in the self-radicalization of recruits for jihad. Al Qaeda's online library, the Tawhed, which contains influential and widely read texts by Islamic scholars, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, is also having an impact. These materials, together with online forums and chat rooms, have been increasingly significant in shaping the thinking of the next generation of Islamist militants.

Another change is the increasing emphasis on the legitimacy of tactics and targeting, a reflection of concern within the *ummah* over Al Qaeda operations in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia which have killed many Muslims. This is strictly forbidden by the Qur'an and has reduced support from the Muslim community. The Middle East attacks and the targeting of Shia in Iraq were attributable to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was thought to be challenging bin Laden for the leadership of Al Qaeda before he was killed by security forces in 2005. Managing the negative views of Muslim deaths has become a part of the propaganda function.

There are indications that a more fundamental change is evident in the increasing influence of Salafi scholars to whom jihadis look for ideological authority before taking action. While they do not hold themselves accountable to their constituency, they do recognize the need to win its support. Militant Salafi scholars are concerned to bring salvation to the global Muslim community by ending the current situation in which Muslims are living under apostate laws and political systems. For them, jihad is not an end in itself, but part of the debate about the meaning and implementing of the Shari'a and how to create societies through jihad under their particular interpretation of the law. This may lead them to endorse or disapprove violent jihad as practised by Al Qaeda leaders.

These and other issues have been the subject of a recent study conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point suggesting that, while Usamabin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are charismatic leaders, they are not strategic thinkers who are influencing the movement's intellectual development, nor are they providing "the deeper arguments that are bringing people into the

movement" (Bruce Hoffman). The suggestion is that while they now function as chief propagandists whose task is to attract Muslims to jihad, it is radical Salafi scholars who are emerging as the authoritative voices which are shaping the broader goals for the movement and the legal framework within which the battle will be waged. The real question, then, is whether the rulings of these radical *ulema* and opinion-makers are likely to advance the leadership's case for militant jihad among mainstream Muslims, or whether they indicate that these internal debates are leading to divergence. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada, and Abu Basir have been identified as the key scholars whose *fatwas* legitimize terrorism, determine its tactical underpinnings, and play a pivotal role in recruitment.

Global jihadism may ultimately prove to be yet another fanatical backlash which disappears under the weight of Islamic orthodoxy. In the meantime, the fear of *fitna* or chaos within the Muslim *ummah* has so far undermined the will of traditional scholars to contest the legitimacy of Al Qaeda's radical message. While radicals willingly brand their adversaries as apostates, orthodox and moderate Muslims do not respond in kind because to do so is *takfir* or heresy, and it contradicts the deep-rooted value that Islam places on unity among believers.

The information asymmetry in favour of radicals means they are gaining ground in many societies and winning the battle of ideas — a battle in which traditional Islamic scholars and the West must engage in order to counter disinformation and check the growing radicalization of Muslim youth. The recent establishment of a propaganda unit in the UK's Cabinet Office is one of a number of initiatives aiming to place more emphasis on influencing opinions in the Muslim world in the face of increasing volumes of jihadist propaganda. To do so requires a knowledge of what motivates, feeds and sanctions militant jihadism and its subtexts. Understanding the underpinnings of jihadists' agitation-propaganda is vital to shaping an appropriate response to the threat from Islamic terrorism without giving unwitting credence to Al Qaeda's claims. ■