

Delegitimizing al-Qaida

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Defeating an “Army Whose Men Love Death”

Deterring terrorism is no longer a provocative idea. Whereas U.S. President George W. Bush was emphatic that “unlike the Soviet Union the terrorist enemies . . . cannot be deterred,” the emerging consensus among both academics and policy practitioners today is that under certain conditions deterrence theory can be applied to terrorists and terrorism.¹ Scholars have begun to propose, test, and refine a variety of theories for influencing terrorist behavior, and core elements of these new approaches have found their way into U.S. strategic doctrine, evident in the 2010 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, the 2010 Department of Defense *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, and the 2011 *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*.² Thus, despite some initial skepticism, the logic of coercion is being used to shape the behavior of terrorists, insurgents, and other violent nonstate actors.

As a subfield of research, deterring terrorism incorporates at least two separate branches of theory. The first branch explores ways in which states can use threats of military retaliation to coerce individual extremists, terrorist leaders

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1. George W. Bush, Commencement Address, United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, May 27, 2007.

2. Theory far outpaces empiricism, however. For the empirical work, see, among others, Robert W. Anthony, “Deterrence and the 9-11 Terrorists” (Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, May 2003); Robert Trager and Dessislava Zagorcheva, “Deterring Terrorism: It Can Be Done,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 87–123; Gary L. Geipel, “Urban Terrorists in Continental Europe after 1970: Implications for Deterrence and Defeat of Violent Nonstate Actors,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (December 2007), pp. 439–467; Alex S. Wilner, “Targeted Killings in Afghanistan: Measuring Coercion and Deterrence in Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (April 2010), pp. 307–329; John P. Sawyer and Amy Pate, “Empirical Assessment: Case Studies of Historical Efforts to Influence Violent Extremist Organizations” (Washington, D.C.: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2012); Thomas Rid, “Deterrence beyond the State: The Israeli Experience,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (April 2012), pp. 124–147; and Andreas Wenger and Alex S. Wilner, eds., *Deterring Terrorism: Theory and Practice* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012).

and groups, and their societal and state supporters. The idea is to target what terrorists value. Herein, the costs of supporting or facilitating terrorism are raised to a level where actors choose to change their behavior rather than risk punishment. The second branch of theory builds on deterrence by denial. Theories in this branch explore ways in which actors manipulate the benefit side of adversarial cost-benefit calculations; whereas punishment raises the costs, denial lowers the anticipated benefits. Although theories of denial were developed during the Cold War, they were largely overshadowed by the threat of nuclear confrontation and thus relegated to conventional military engagements.³ But in thinking about counterterrorism, scholars have exhumed, bur-nished, and given new import to theories of denial.⁴ The objective of denial is to diminish the perceived benefits of participating in terrorism by preventing terrorists from achieving their tactical and strategic goals, by weakening their ability to act in their preferred ways, and by denying them the fruits of their labor. The idea is to target what terrorists want, rather than what they value.

Missing from these two theoretical investigations is a discussion of how delegitimization might also be used to manipulate and shape militant behavior. Delegitimization suggests that states and substate actors can use the religious or ideological rationale that informs terrorist behavior to influence behavior. The goal is to “reduce the challenger’s probability of achieving his goals by attacking the legitimacy of the beliefs that inform his behavior”⁵—

3. Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense: Toward a Theory of National Security* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961); John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Michael S. Gerson, “Conventional Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age,” *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (September 2009), pp. 32–48.

4. For the literature on denial in counterterrorism, see, for example, James M. Smith and Brent J. Talbot, “Terrorism and Deterrence by Denial,” in Paul R. Viotti, Michael A. Opheim, and Nicholas Bowen, eds., *Terrorism and Homeland Security* (New York: CRC Press, 2008), pp. 53–68; S. Paul Kapur, “Deterring Nuclear Terrorists,” in T.V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Complex Deterrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 109–132; James M. Smith, “Strategic Analysis, WMD Terrorism, and Deterrence by Denial,” in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, pp. 159–179; Fred Wehling, “A Toxic Cloud of Mystery: Lessons from Iraq for Deterring CBRN Terrorism,” in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, pp. 273–300; John Gearson, “Deterring Conventional Terrorism: From Punishment to Denial and Resilience,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (April 2012), pp. 171–198; Andrew R. Morral and Brian A. Jackson, *Understanding the Role of Deterrence in Counterterrorism Security* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2009); David P. Auerswald, “Deterring Nonstate WMD Attacks,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 121, No. 4 (Winter 2006/07), pp. 543–568; and Trager and Zagorcheva, “Deterring Terrorism.”

5. Alex S. Wilner, “Deterring the Undeterrable: Coercion, Denial, and Delegitimization in Counterterrorism,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2011), p. 26. For the handful of studies that touch upon the concept of delegitimization in deterrence, see Joseph Leggold, “Hypotheses on Vulnerability: Are Terrorists and Drug Dealers Coercible?” in Lawrence Freedman, ed., *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 144–146; Jerry Mark Long, “Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction” (Washington, D.C.: Defense Threat Reduction Agency Advanced Systems and Concepts Office, November 2006); Jeffrey S. Lantis, “Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between The-

that is, targeting what terrorists believe rather than what they value or want. Terrorism is not simply violence, but violence with purpose and meaning. Terrorists utilize particular forms of violence that comport with specific ideological or socioreligious beliefs, values, and narratives. Targeting these narratives may—theoretically speaking—alter behavior: strengthening opinions and positions that contradict the legitimization of terrorism may influence individuals and groups contemplating particular forms of violence, along with the socioreligious communities that facilitate their efforts. Delegitimization borrows generously from deterrence theory: its purpose is to target the rationales and justifications that inform terrorist preferences in a way that alters the behavior of active and would-be participants. But instead of defenders promising pain or denying objectives, behavior is manipulated by targeting the rationales that motivate and guide an adversary.

The notion of delegitimization has received little rigorous scholarly attention and remains underdeveloped, understudied, and misunderstood. Unlike punishment and denial, it does not easily fit state-centric models of decision-making and coercion, which usually emphasize interests over beliefs. Further, Jeffrey Knopf writes that “it is not clear that this approach represents an alternative to punishment and denial as a way to produce deterrence; it seems rather to be a particular way of blending the two.”⁶ Knopf’s criticism, however, is meant to spur further theoretical development rather than dismiss the approach altogether. “This is not a reason to reject this approach out of hand,” he continues, “it points to the need for additional thinking and, if possible, empirical research about how to implement a delegitimization strategy.”⁷ This article proposes to fill this gap by further developing the concept of delegitimization in counterterrorism studies and empirically applying it to the case of al-Qaida.

Without question, al-Qaida has endured a series of recent blows, suffering extensive disruption of its network and the deaths of key leaders and ideologues. Yet despite significant setbacks, the jihadist threat remains. For decades, the self-styled “army whose men love death” has carefully elaborated a

ory and Practice,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (December 2009), pp. 476–478; Brian Michael Jenkins, “Internet Terror Recruitment and Tradecraft: How Can We Address an Evolving Tool while Protecting Free Speech?” testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Risk Assessment of the Committee on Homeland Security, 111th Cong., 2nd sess., May 26, 2010; Shmuel Bar, “God, Nation, and Deterrence: The Impact of Religion on Deterrence,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (November 2011), pp. 428–452; and Alex S. Wilner, “Apocalypse Soon? Deterring Nuclear Iran and Its Terrorist Proxies,” *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (February 2012), pp. 18–40, especially pp. 31–34.

6. Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Terrorism and the Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research,” in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, p. 33.

7. Jeffrey W. Knopf, “The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (April 2010), pp. 18–19.

robust, public narrative that will long outlive Osama bin Laden. That narrative continues to attract recruits and send them forth to battle, and a critical metric by which to assess the ongoing vitality of al-Qaida is to look at the ongoing viability of the message. The situation in Syria today is a case in point. The country has seen the establishment of its own indigenous al-Qaida-related group in Jabhat al-Nusra and its media arm, drawing into its ranks returning veterans of the jihad in Iraq.⁸ Perhaps more important, however, than the enlistment of Syrians in a national uprising is the appeal of the message to a transnational mujahideen that is ready to resort to any battlefield worldwide. For instance, one significant new group fighting alongside Jabhat al-Nusra is the Army of Muhajireen and Supporters, a militant faction comprising foreign fighters and led by Abu Omar, a Chechen.⁹

Another indicator of that appeal is a new Facebook page (among many that have appeared) titled "Strangers in the Syrian Revolution." The Arabic page profiles the many foreigners who have come to Syria and eulogizes those from other countries who have died in the jihad. Inter alia, it offers a visual narrative of life among the mujahideen as one of prayer, battle, death, and a powerful communal experience. One such page shows several fighters smiling as they prepare a meal, with this caption: "If rulers could but grasp just how great the joy of the *muhajir* (a religious emigrant) is in his *hijra* (religious migration) and his life in the land of jihad, they would compete with the *muhajirun* (religious emigrants) for it. Even in their food and its preparation, you can perceive their jihad, and they are joyful in the blessing of God upon them."¹⁰ Moreover, the list of the foreign fighters who have achieved martyrdom is striking. Of the more than 200 who died from May to August 2013, for instance, the fallen came from almost every country in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as from Europe, Canada, and predominately Muslim areas in the former Soviet Union.¹¹

8. See Jabhat al-Nusra, "Statement of Bay'a," <http://occident2.blogspot.com/?2013/04/text-of-jabhat-al-nusras-amir-abu.html> The statement of Jabhat al-Nusra's general commander, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, makes clear that Jabhat al-Nusra's ultimate goal is political, to "effect the return of God's governance (*sultan*) to the land and the encouragement of the umma to implement the sharia."

9. *Muhajireen* indicates those who emigrated from elsewhere for some religious purpose. The singular form *muhajir* often appears as a laudatory descriptive. See the Jamestown Foundation profile of the Army of Muhajireen and Supporters: Murad Batal al-Shishani, "'Obligated to Unite under One Banner': A Profile of Syria's Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa'l-Ansar," *Terrorism Monitor*, April 19, 2013, pp. 4-5, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40749&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=684&no_cache=1; and Bill Roggio, "Chechen Commander Forms 'Army of Emigrants,' Integrates Syrian Groups," *Long War Journal*, March 28, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/03/chechen_jihadist_for.php.

10. <https://www.facebook.com/Strangers.sy5>.

11. By August 2013, the countries contributing the greatest number of martyrs included Saudi Arabia (always styled "country of the two holy sites") with sixty-six, Libya (thirty-two), Tunisia

Al-Qaida's narrative has proved to be remarkably successful for the organization in at least four ways: (1) as a recruitment tool for new jihadists; (2) in identity formation for adherents; (3) as public apologia and hermeneutic; and (4) as a weapon of war—the so-called media jihad. Now, in the wake of the upheaval of the Arab Spring, al-Qaida and its adherents have redeployed the narrative, promising a new social order to replace the region's anciens régimes. In fact, al-Qaida sees the chaos in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia (as well as further abroad, in Mali, Somalia, and Nigeria) as an exploitable opportunity to shape the future political, religious, and social Arab landscape. For instance, frequent jihadist blogger Shaykh Abu Sa'd al-Amili observes: "The revolution of the peoples is very similar to the flood that cannot be stopped until it sweeps away all that is in its path. . . . What is required of us is to leave this flood to run its course . . . [then] try to arrange matters."¹²

This article proposes that the United States and its friends and allies can use al-Qaida's own narrative against it. The aim is to delegitimize that narrative, targeting and degrading the ideological motivation that guides support for and participation in terrorism. We structure our argument accordingly. First, with reference to events unfolding in the Arab world, we examine the ways in which al-Qaida has developed a robust, epic story and then explore how that story functions among its adherents. Second, using al-Qaida's narrative and doctrinal formulations as the cue, we delineate the fundamental "narratological wars" of al-Qaida, those wars in which it engages because it believes its national survival is at stake. Third, we suggest steps to exploit that knowledge, as part of a strategy of delegitimization, proposing a theoretical and practical model for delegitimizing al-Qaida.

The Contours and Function of al-Qaida's Metanarrative

Al-Qaida uses its metanarrative in four distinctive ways: (1) to describe and, thus, conflate contemporary battlefields and warriors with ancient ones (narra-

(twenty-seven), and Jordan (twenty-five). We derived these numbers from eulogy posts listed on the "Strangers in the Syrian Revolution" Facebook page, but we did not screen for possible double postings. A striking twist on the migration theme appears in the spring 2013 edition of *Inspire*, al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) English-language publication, which was devoted to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. "A Mujahid's Wish," the concluding article by "Tamerlan 2," describes those who had gone overseas to fight. According to the article, many now wish to return to "mom's kitchen" to terrorize American society. See "A Mujahid's Wish," *Inspire*, No. 11 (Spring 2013), pp. 36–37.

12. Abu Sa'd al-Amili, "Enter upon Them through the Gate," <http://www.jihadica.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/doc-12-shaykh-al-amili-udkhul-alayhim-al-bab.pdf>.

tive and identity); (2) to attract individuals to its cause and organization (narrative and recruitment); (3) to justify, legitimize, and sanitize the violence it employs (narrative and public ethic); and (4) to establish a lens with which to interpret and internalize contemporary sociopolitical events (narrative and interpretation).

NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

Al-Qaida's metanarrative functions as an all-encompassing instrument intended to establish a new identity for its adherents, situating them in a transnational and transhistorical realm. A sacred past is not simply recalled but made present, and key events of Islamic history are made immediately accessible.¹³ Gone are nation-states.¹⁴ Instead, the jihadist now moves in a world that bifurcates the houses of war and peace.¹⁵ In this imagined configuration, the new "frontier" area becomes *ribat*, a place to which the true believer mobilizes to defend the patrimony.¹⁶ Thus, in "The Noble Knight Dismounts," Ayman al-

13. Mircea Eliade, scholar of comparative religions, once observed, "For religious man, time . . . is neither homogenous nor continuous. . . . By its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, 'in the beginning'. . . . In other words, the participants in the festival meet in it the first appearance of sacred time, as it appeared *ab origine, in illo tempore*." See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 68–70. For the jihadist, contemporary battles "reactualize" historic ones. For instance, Abu Dujanah al-Khorasani made this observation in an interview with a jihadist magazine: "When you hear one of your jihadist-experienced brothers mentioning his martyred brothers while he is talking about his jihadist life, you will feel he is not speaking about matters that happened a short period ago; you will feel him retelling the Badr and al-Qadisiyya battles." See "'Talai Khorasan' Magazine Interviews Abu-Dujanah al-Khorasani on Jihad," World News Connection (WNC) Open Source Center Summary, October 15, 2009. Supporters of the Free Syrian Army and jihadists alike described the battle for the key military airport of Kuwayris outside Aleppo as "Qadisiyya 2." See, for example, the Facebook page dedicated to it as Battle of Qadisiyya for the Military Airport at Kuwayris, <https://www.facebook.com/SadaCentre/posts/252302734906582>. Discussing Sayyid Qutb and his use of the "perpetual antagonism" of the Crusades, Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon remark in an especially apt phrase that the analogy is "unconfined by specifics of time and place." See Benjamin and Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 66. See also their helpful discussion of Qutb as ideological heir to Ibn Taymiyya's thought, pp. 63–68.

14. Egypt is an exception, discussed below.

15. The distinction derives from classical Islam and describes those areas where Islam holds sway (the house, or realm, of peace) and those where it does not (the house of war). For a succinct discussion, see Jerry Mark Long, "Ribat, al-Qaida, and the Challenge for U.S. Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 31–47. Alternatively, al-Qaida sometimes styles the distinction as that between the *umma*, the Islamic community, and Kisra and Qaisar (or Rum), evoking the historical enmity between believers and the Persians and Byzantines.

16. The concept is explored in *ibid.* Furthermore, Assaf Moghadam observes, "Unlike traditional suicide attacks, globalized suicide operations frequently occur in areas that—by any objective standard—are not identified by all parties as zones of conflict." Understanding al-Qaida's depiction of sacred geography explains how the jihadist can have a global concept of zones of combat. See Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom: Al-Qaida, Salafi Jihad, and the Spread of Suicide Attacks," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Winter 2009/10), p. 74.

Zawahiri could address the “*umma* of migration (*hijra*) and *ribat*” that followed Osama bin Laden’s death to encourage the Arab Spring intifadas in progress.¹⁷ Similarly, for the uprising against Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Zawahiri recalls the great battles of Syrian history, summoning the “lions” in the land of “*ribat* and *jihad*” to eradicate the cancer of oppression. Marking the frontier are the *thughur* (sing.: *thaghr*)—that is, the strategic chokepoints that must be held against enemy encroachment. So Abu Nasir al-Wuhayshi, leader of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has given *bay’a* (a formal pledge of loyalty) to Zawahiri, promising the support of his soldiers in the “*thaghr* of the Arabian Peninsula”; Somalia has become a “great *thaghr* of the *thughur*”; Mohammed Merah sought “any *thaghr* among the *thughur*” to defend Islam, first in Afghanistan, then ultimately finding it in France.¹⁸

Similarly, the names of states have changed, generally taking on historical referents. “Khurasan,” the historic term for a region comprising territory in present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has displaced Afghanistan. The Gulf States are simply “the Peninsula.” Xinjiang Province in Western China has morphed into “Eastern Turkestan.” Algeria has disappeared, becoming part of the Maghreb, and Spain, tellingly, has recovered its proper name, “al-Andalus.” And repeatedly in the Arab Spring, Egypt has come to be known among jihadist bloggers as “*ard* (land) *al-Kinana*,” referencing an ancient Arabian tribe. Bin Laden numbered among those who so designated Egypt. In his final video, he encouraged “the knights of the land of Kinana” to continue their revolution but to be aware that they stood at a dangerous crossroads in history.¹⁹

As nation-states have morphed into a sacred geography, the individual jihadist has changed as well, among his fictive kin. Name alterations, sometimes to a *nom de guerre*, are common. Frequent al-Qaida spokesman and media adviser Adam Ghadan took the name “Azzam al-Amriki” (Azzam the American). Merah took (or was given) the name “Yusuf al-Faransi,” and his

17. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Noble Knight Dismounts,” <https://archive.org/details/RethaaAlKhalil>.

18. On Wuhayshi’s pledge, see Abu Nasir al-Wuhayshi, “Letter to Prince Ayman Zawahiri,” <https://nokbah.com/~w3/?p=562>. The pledge of al-Shabaab can be found at https://archive.org/details/bayah_sahab. Bill Roggio discusses both pledges. See Roggio, “AQAP Leader Pledges Oath of Allegiance,” *Long War Journal*, July 26, 2011, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/07/aqap_leader_pledges.php; and Roggio, “Somalia’s Shabaab Vows Allegiance,” *Long War Journal*, June 17, 2011, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/06/somalias_shabaab_vow.php. Mohammed Merah, the French-Algerian who killed several soldiers and Jewish civilians in Toulouse and Montauban, France, in 2012, is described in “Yusuf al-Faransi as I Knew Him,” <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?476608>.

19. Osama bin Laden, “A Message of the Martyr of Islam to the Muslim Umma,” transcript, https://archive.org/details/osod_m31?start=0.5. The references to *ard al-Kinana* occur in a number of places.

mentor, the name “Abu al-Qa’qa’ al-Andalusi.”²⁰ Often, the selected nom de guerre draws explicitly on Islamic history. Such is the case with “Abu Dujana al-Khurasani,” nom de guerre for al-Qaida double-agent Humam al-Balawi, the Jordanian medical doctor who carried out the 2009 suicide mission in Khost, Afghanistan, against a Central Intelligence Agency detachment (killing six CIA operatives). By assuming the name “Abu-Dujana,” al-Balawi explicitly identified with one of the most capable warrior-companions of Muhammad, the martyred hero of the battle of Uhud.²¹ And by adopting the patronym “al-Khurasani,” this contemporary Abu Dujana identified with the current conflict in Afghanistan and its battle with the infidels. It is little wonder that al-Balawi would describe himself as having been “born again” in Afghanistan. More recently, Kenneth Sorenson, a Danish convert to Islam, traveled to Cairo with his wife and four young children to learn Arabic and prepare for jihad. After fighting in Libya alongside the anti-Qaddafi forces in 2011, he enlisted with the Muhajireen Brigades in Syria, where he died in battle. Before his death in March 2013, he had taken a new name as well as a new faith: Abu Aisha al-Denmarki.²²

As the jihadist enlists, he becomes part of a strongly demarcated in-group, for which several names proliferate in the discourse: the *tali’a* (vanguard), the *ansar* (supporters), the *qafila* (caravan [of martyrs]), and so on. Additionally, his fellow warriors will append glowing descriptors to his name to identify him as one of their own: *muhajir*, *murabit* (one who does frontier duty), and of course, *mujahid* (one who participates in jihad). Al-Qaida promises the enlistee jihadist that he will take part in the most significant warfare since the time of the Prophet, and should he die, he will take new titles: for example, *batl* (hero), *asad* (lion), and *shaheed* (a martyr/witness). The mujahideen face their deaths with a powerful inducement: paradise will be theirs, and they will be celebrated, one could say, in cyber gardens of timeless remembrance on earth. Appropriately, the cyber venues that celebrate battle and martyrdom carry titles such as that of the AQAP online magazine, *Sada al-Malahim* (Echo of the Heroic Epics) or that of the magazine describing the battle for Afghanistan, *Tala’i Khurasan* (Vanguards of Khurasan).

20. See “Yusuf al-Faransi as I Knew Him.” The otherwise-unknown “al-Andalusi,” an obvious pseudonym, describes himself as Merah’s “guide” (*muwajjih*), and served as an intermediary to Jund al-Khilafa.

21. See Muhammad at al-Adina, *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. 7: *The Foundation of the Community*, trans. M.V. McDonald (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp. 116–138; and ibn Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, Vol. 3, trans. Trevor le Gassick (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1998), pp. 20–25.

22. These biographical details are available at http://anusalsham.blogspot.com/2013/03/blog-post_1161.html.

It is little surprise, then, that al-Qaida would emphasize this opening for profound identity change in the Arab Spring. Writing for AQAP's English-language *Inspire* magazine, Samir Khan, later killed in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen, employed this appeal in calling to young Egyptians: "You, the Egyptian, are standing amidst one of the most prime moments your country has ever gone through. . . . Where do you go from here? You have to decide what your identity is. This will help determine your future course of action. Do you define yourself according to your culture or your religion? Finding out where your loyalty lies is the most important struggle in your identity search."²³ For the socially dislocated, this is an appealing promise of identity, place, and the healing of anomie.

NARRATIVE AND RECRUITMENT

As Khan's challenge indicates, the narrative also serves al-Qaida as a recruitment tool. In this role, al-Qaida appeals to would-be jihadists based on both Islam and culture. The Islamic appeals cite local exigencies and transnational needs. The same list of provocations, necessitating action, recurs frequently: crusader imperialism; the occupation of the Islamic patrimony; the use of cluster munitions against women, children, and elderly believers; the use of torture against the mujahideen in Western prisons; and Western attempts to "hijack" the revolutions of the (putative) Islamist-led Arab Spring. Al-Qaida carefully reinforces the narrative by connecting it with the cultural mores of shame and honor—whether traditional Bedouin Arab values or Pashtunwali (the unwritten code of conduct of the Pashtuns) in Afghanistan and Pakistan. For instance, in one of several videos released posthumously, Abu Dujana admits that jihadist media productions are "setting an ambush" to compel vacillating Muslims to join the caravan.²⁴ A real man would unhesitatingly participate in jihad. A man who would not go forth in the cause of Allah is a "counterfeit" male whose gender is known only by his birth certificate.

Yusuf al-Shihari, writing for AQAP's *Sada al-Malahim*, makes a similar cultural appeal. After describing the Western "crimes" committed against the believers in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, al-Shihari makes his entreaty personal. He describes having visited with a female American researcher. Recalling the 1990–91 Gulf War, she taunted him, "If it weren't for us whores (*ahiraat*), Mecca and Medina would have fallen."²⁵ How, then, could a young

23. "The Egyptian," *Inspire*, No. 5 (March 2011), p. 45.

24. Abu Dujana, "Ayuha al-mutaraddid: inha fareda" [Oh, vacillating one: This is an obligation], Arabic transcription, April 2010, <http://www.archive.org/details/AyhALMtrddAnhaFaredah>.

25. Yusuf al-Shihari, "Infar! Fa inta al-'amal" [Mobilize! For you are the hope], *Sada*, No. 10 (August 2009), p. 15, <http://www.archive.org/details/Sada-almala7em>.

man endure such shame, simply sitting idle while others have gone to battle? In the midst of the Arab Spring, Zawahiri has continued a similar line of entreaty, neatly conflating a broadside against Egypt's ruling military council with an appeal for social justice. It is not rational (*la yu'qil*), he declares, to sell gas at reduced rates to Israel, while millions in Egypt's slums live on less than a dollar a day. He appeals, therefore, for a popular campaign to uproot injustice.²⁶

With these uprisings, al-Qaida has continued to address a fundamental stumbling block to enlistment: simple fear of death. A corner has been turned, one al-Qaida publication argues, because "mental/spiritual barriers" (*al-huwajiz al-ma'nawiyya*) are being broken, having started with Afghanistan. Writing in late 2011, Abu Yahya al-Libi, one of al-Qaida's foremost ideologues, who was killed in a drone strike in June 2012, continues the trope and returns to a favored al-Qaida metaphor: "You have destroyed the barrier of fear, by God's favor, and have banished the true weakness, which is love of this world and hatred of death." He concludes with a taunt to the West: "The battle will continue. . . . for our youth love death as your soldiers love wine. . . . They have divorced this world. They don't give it even a glance because it has no value to them."²⁷

NARRATIVE AND PUBLIC ETHIC

Al-Qaida's metanarrative functions as a public apology, explaining why particular actions are morally mandated. At its most basic level, al-Qaida appropriates the axiom *amr bil-ma'ruf wa naha an al-munkar* (command that which is recognized/approved; forbid that which is to be reprehended). At points, the ethical posture resembles a deontology with a vengeance, as in the World Trade Center attack in 2001 or the attacks on Christian churches in Egypt, Iraq, and Nigeria. In such instances, al-Qaida propounds that it is simply following a clear command of God to battle the infidels. At other times, the ethic functions in a consequentialist way, as when the innocent (especially Muslims) are killed as al-Qaida prosecutes its strategic military objectives. In this case, al-Qaida argues that, despite the unfortunate loss of life, it must pursue a particular course to secure a larger strategic objective. This ethical move is seen in the

26. For an example of this recurring theme, see Zawahiri's multipart video series, Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt." The website Jihadology has provided links to the series as well as other al-Qaida messages. See <http://jihadology.net/category/individuals/ideologues/dr-ayman-al-zawahiri/>.

27. On "moral/spiritual barriers," see al-Amili, "Enter upon Them through the Gate." See also Abu Yahya, "Eid al-Adha Sermon for the Year 1432," December 2011, <https://archive.org/details/N5bh21>.

development of the doctrine *al-tatarrus*. The term comes from the Arabic for “shield,” indicating those instances when attacking an enemy position entails unavoidable injury or death to the innocent. Such would occur when Muslims are in proximity to an otherwise “legitimate” target or when they have been used as human shields.²⁸ Additionally, al-Qaida extends its ethical reasoning by making repeated use of the doctrine *al-wala’ wal-bara’*. Roughly translated, the term means “friendship and innocence.”²⁹ In jihadist parlance, the terms has come to mean loyalty to the true believers and repudiation of any moral obligations to outsiders who have put themselves beyond the pale by their own perfidy.³⁰

Al-Qaida, however, has more recently shown pronounced caution on the doctrine of *tatarrus* and even retrenchment (if not moral recriminations), recognizing its particular vulnerability on this point.³¹ This is especially noteworthy, because al-Qaida recognizes that public approbation of its narrative is paramount. Al-Qaida saw, for instance, the negative press that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former leader of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), gained for his brutal activity in Iraq and the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, Jordan, where sixty people (mostly Muslims) were killed. Al-Qaida will consider changing its *modus operandi* where specific acts may achieve tactical success but lose strategic legitimacy. It wants to avoid what Jarret Brachman and William McCants term the “Shayma effect,” after Egyptian Islamic Jihad’s botched assassination attempt on Egyptian Prime Minister Atif Sidqi in November 1993.³² In the event, a

28. See Abu Yahya, “The Use of [Human] Shields in Modern Jihad,” January 2006, <http://archive.org/details/tatross>. WNC provided a translation: see “Website Posts Abu-Yahya al-Libi’s Research on Human Shields in Jihad,” WNC, May 2008. See also Jack Barcaly, “Al-Tatarrus: Al-Qaeda’s Justification for Killing Muslim Civilians,” *Terrorism Monitor*, September 5, 2010, pp. 6–9.

29. The doctrine derives primarily from Quran 9:1-4. For a study of the Quranic use of the term, see Uri Rubin, “Bara’a: A Study of Some Quranic Passages,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, Vol. 5 (1984), pp. 13–32. For an examination of contemporary employment of the term, see Joas Wagemakers, “Framing the ‘Threat to Islam’: Al-Wala’ wa al-Bara’ in Salafi Discourse,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 1–22.

30. See Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” No. 2 and No. 5. “You Are Responsible” appeared in two parts in June 2011. See as-Sahab, “You Are Responsible,” http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/al-qc481_idah-for-incitement-and-publishing-you-are-held-responsible-only-for-yourself-parts-1-2.pdf.

31. At this point, we must disagree with Moghadam’s otherwise excellent article, “Motives for Martyrdom.” Moghadam writes, “Salafi jihadists defend the killing of Muslims by claiming that the ends justify the means. . . . Salafi jihadists also seem to believe that Muslims are expendable,” citing a statement by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in support. See Moghadam, “Motives for Martyrdom,” pp. 77–78. This is not the case, however. Pragmatic thinkers in al-Qaida understand that making Muslims “expendable” vitiates their strategic goals. For a review of al-Qaida’s more nuanced jurisprudential thinking on weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in particular, see Jerry Mark Long, “Does Al Qaeda Have a Strategic Culture?” in Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Jeffrey A. Larsen, ed., *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 201–218.

32. See Jarret M. Brachman and William McCants, “Stealing al-Qaida’s Playbook” (West Point,

young school girl named Shayma was killed, and—as Zawahiri later noted in his *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*—caused a propaganda debacle for Egyptian Islamists. In brief, al-Qaida is not blinded by zeal. It will formulate plans that are carefully calibrated to exploit perceived weaknesses of the enemy and that will resonate with Islamic audiences.³³

This rethinking is especially apparent in the Arab Spring. For instance, Zawahiri has warned Islamists in Egypt not to strike “the impermissible,” to include non-Muslims.³⁴ Instead, he continues, Muslims must observe sharia limitations. “We must distinguish nonhostile Christians,” he writes, “for we do not want war with them and can, in fact live peacefully with them in *watan wahid* (one nation).” And with his penchant for poetry, Zawahiri even cites verses that celebrate the kindness of Jesus Christ:

Jesus, your path is that of mercy and love
In the two worlds, both protection and peace
Oh [you are the] balm for the pains of all mankind.³⁵

Similarly, the al-Sahab message, “You Are Responsible,” urges the same caution with respect to *tatarrus*. This is not simply to avoid defamation in the Western media, the unnamed author writes. Rather, this comports with religious commands, recognizing “morals and sharia limitations.” How unlike the West, it continues, which will “kill scores of Muslims to get to one so-called terrorist.”³⁶

The key point is that al-Qaida posits its attacks as essential because of a prior attack by the West and an ongoing existential threat, thus extending Abdullah Azzam’s well-known doctrine of *fard ‘ayn*, the individual mandate to carry out jihad.³⁷ Indeed, in advancing the doctrine, al-Qaida consistently maintains the nonproportionality of its responses. That is, al-Qaida argues that its defensive actions are orders of magnitude less harmful than the unwarranted provocation. Thus, bin Laden declared the few thousand killed in the September 11, 2001, attacks to be incommensurate with the millions the United States has killed, from Hiroshima to the Iraq sanctions following the 1990–01 Gulf War.

N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point [CTC], February 2006), pp. 11–12; and Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 75–76. Brachman and McCants discuss *Knights under the Banner* in “Stealing al-Qaida’s Playbook.”

33. For other examples of al-Qaida’s own analysis and its commitment to fight an “intelligent” war, see Long, “Strategic Culture, Al-Qaida, and Weapons of Mass Destruction.”

34. Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” No. 2.

35. *Ibid.*

36. As-Sahab, “You Are Responsible,” part 2.

37. This Palestinian theologian cum jihadist and mentor to bin Laden emphasized in two key works, *Defense of the Muslim Lands* and *Join the Caravan*, that Islam is under siege and that every individual must take up arms. He did so against the backdrop of the Soviet-Afghan war. Azzam was assassinated in 1989 in a car bombing; responsibility for the attack remains unclear.

Al-Qaida extends its self-exoneration to events such as the bombings of Christian churches in Baghdad and Alexandria, Egypt, in late 2010, arguing that these were simply responses to prior depredations of the West against Muslims.³⁸ Similarly, a spokesman for the Tariq bin Ziyad Detachment of the Jund al-Khilafa Battalion defended the actions of Merah in Toulouse.³⁹ What the West saw as the unconscionable actions of a possibly deranged assailant were instead the work of a modest, sensitive man who loved God and whose soul was stirred because of the oppression (*thulm*) that Muslims worldwide have experienced, particularly in Palestine. After the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, *Inspire* magazine took a similar tack: "All jihadi attacks on the West came as a belated reaction to the tremendous western oppression throughout the last century."⁴⁰ And so the familiar pattern: exculpate the attackers, arguing that their actions were defensive, proportionate, and carried out against cruel unbelievers according to God's will and the sharia. The United States, by contrast, has killed "tens of thousands of innocents" and, with its "hostile arrogance, barbarism, and crimes against humanity," has brought a "stain on its *thaub* [garment or robe] which will remain forever."⁴¹

NARRATIVE AND INTERPRETATION

Al-Qaida puts forward its narrative as a hermeneutic. That is, the story is not merely a set of static doctrines, an Islamic catechism telling adherents what to believe. Rather, it is a dynamic framework directing adherents in what to perceive. Al-Qaida's narrative instructs adherents on how to interpret everything from international affairs, to losses of key leaders, to the Arab Spring.

38. See Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt," No. 2, where Zawahiri displaces blame for attacks on Christians in Alexandria, arguing that the discord was stirred up by the late Pope Shenouda III.

39. This recently established group styles itself a "battalion" (*katiba*) with affiliated "detachments" (sing., *sariya*). Sketchy information indicates that it operates in Central Asia and on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Tariq bin Ziyad Detachment takes its name from the Muslim commander who crossed into the Iberian Peninsula in 711 C.E. The name appears to have been adopted in reference to the Toulouse attacks, as it had not appeared previously. The internet claim of responsibility for the attacks can be found at www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?p=3250982. For further information about the organization, see Haydar al-Khorasani, "Jund al-Khilafah Official Interviewed" (Bethesda, Md.: SITE Intelligence Group, November 2011).

40. Abu Ziyad al-Muhajir, "The Inevitable," *Inspire*, No. 11 (Spring 2013), p. 21, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/inspire-magazine-issue-11.pdf>. The lead (unsigned) editorial in the issue makes the same argument, paraphrasing Osama bin Laden: "America, you should understand this simple equation, as you kill you will be killed. . . . You will never enjoy peace until we live it practically in Palestine and all the infidel forces leave the peninsula of Muhammad and all other Muslim lands." See *Inspire*, No. 11 (Spring 2013), p. 3.

41. Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Taliban), "Statement on the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11," <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?450318> (Arabic); and http://www.globalterroralert.com/inteldocument/flashpoint_taliban911-0911.pdf (English).

In framing international affairs, al-Qaida, in *The West and the Dark Tunnel*, its videological magnum opus produced in 2009, gives extensive coverage to the West's massive economic downturn of 2008–09, arguing that it resulted from the success of the September 11 attacks and the judgment of God on the infidels, an interpretation that it has continued to reiterate. Not surprisingly, al-Qaida constantly reminds believers of the inveterate hostility of the imperial powers toward all Muslims, even when their actions seem benign. A clear example is al-Qaida's response to U.S. President Barack Obama's Middle East visit in June 2009, in which he gave a major policy speech, "A New Beginning," at Cairo University.⁴² In fact, Obama's visit initially represented a public relations nightmare for al-Qaida, because reaction to his speech, in prospect and afterword, was immediate and generally positive across the Islamic world.⁴³

Al-Qaida recognized the threat. In a series of obviously orchestrated messages, the jihadists responded. What is apparent in these responses is that al-Qaida not only wished to debate the United States but, more especially, to convince various publics that Obama's visit was part of an insidious strategy. Zawahiri stood at the forefront of the hermeneutic counterattack.⁴⁴ He could not dismiss the power of Obama's rhetoric or the critical symbolism of his first state visit to the Middle East. Indeed, an indication of al-Qaida's counter-strategy is that Zawahiri released his statement two days before the president spoke. Tellingly, Zawahiri appealed to the Egypt of great men: Saladin, Baybars, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Khalid Islambuli, and others, urging them to refuse Obama any welcome. What the president had failed to win on the field of battle he was now coming to gain by subterfuge. Most important, Zawahiri emphasized that, speeches aside, the West's "bloody messages" had already arrived, messages that "PR campaigns, theatrical visits, and fancy rhetoric" could not eclipse. Zawahiri offered examples: candidate Obama's visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, during which he wore a yarmulke; his escalation of the war in Afghanistan; his support for Israel's war against Gaza; his refusal to apply the Geneva Conventions to Muslim prisoners; and his

42. President Barack Obama, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009. A transcript can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

43. See, for instance, "Al-Azhar yamtadih Obama" [Al-Azhar praises Obama], al-Jazeera, June 4, 2009, Al-Jazeera.net; Iyad Madani, "Yes, You Can, Mr. President," *Khaleej Times Online*, June 3, 2009, Khaleejtimes.com; and the unsigned editorial "Writer Says Muslims Listened to Obama," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat Online*, WNC, June 8, 2009.

44. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Jalladu msr wa 'umala' amreeka yarhabun b-aubama" [The executioners of Egypt and agents of America welcome Obama]. The Arabic text is available at <http://worldanalysis.net/modules/news/article.php?storyid=716>; for an English translation, see "Al-Sahab Releases Ayman al-Zawahiri Audio Statement," WNC, June 2009.

affirmation of al-Quds (Jerusalem) as the eternal, indivisible capital of Israel. Zawahiri, perhaps, later felt some vindication. When Arabs were asked about the Cairo speech two years after it was given, polling data found that their initial optimism had plummeted: 90 percent of Egyptian respondents reported that Obama had failed to live up to the promises made in the speech; 99 percent of Lebanese respondents said the same.⁴⁵

Similarly, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) sought to blunt any diplomatic advantage President Obama might gain from his June–July 2013 trip to Africa. This was not a one-off event, Shaykh Ahmed al-Jijeli of AQIM argued. Rather, the president’s visit was part of an overarching policy of penetration (*taghalghul*) of the continent, which began under President Bill Clinton. Obama, of African descent, was merely serving his “white masters”—the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Halliburton,⁴⁶ Exxon, and Facebook. Al-Jijeli continued, saying that Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency specialist who leaked sensitive details concerning U.S. surveillance, had “thrown back the fig leaf,” showing the United States to be no different from other oppressive dictatorships.⁴⁷

Jihadist writers have continued the hermeneutic pushback during the Arab Spring, to include Syria.⁴⁸ Numerous al-Qaida spokesmen have described Iraq as a victory and Afghanistan as a victory close at hand. Thus, Ibrahim Rubaysh of AQAP in his “Harvest of the Revolutions” could “announce the good news to the nation of Islam of the approach of victory and the appearance of signs of an opening in this year [such] that it is appropriate to designate this the ‘year of blessing.’” Despite its nuclear weapons and battleships, he maintained, the United States had suffered defeat in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had witnessed “the collapse (*inhiyaar*) of [its] civilization.”⁴⁹ In similar fashion, in February 2012 Somalia’s al-Shabaab officially gave *bay’a* to Zawahiri, offering its con-

45. Undoubtedly, the sharp decline is primarily the result of Arabs’ perceptions of U.S. inaction on promises made. See Zogby International, *Arab Attitudes 2011*, Arab American Institute Foundation, <http://www.aaiusa.org/reports/arab-attitudes-2011>.

46. Halliburton is the oilfield services company of which Dick Cheney had been chief executive officer before becoming vice president. Its onetime subsidiary KBR provided substantial contract services during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

47. Ahmed al-Jijeli, “Obama, Victim and Oppressor.” Both Arabic and English versions are available at <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/30/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-article-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-shaykh-a%E1%B8%A5mad-abu-abd-al-ilah-al-jijili-obama-the-victim-and-the-executioner>.

48. For instance, Zawahiri’s “Message of Hope” series broadened its scope to include Syria as well as Egypt. See Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” No. 11. This video appeared in late 2012 and was subtitled, “Cairo and Damascus: The Two Gates to Bayt al-Maqdis [i.e., Jerusalem].”

49. Ibrahim Rubaysh, “Hasad al-thaurat” [Harvest of the revolutions], <https://nokbah.com/~w3/?p=2396>.

gratulations on the defeat of the Crusaders in Iraq and Afghanistan, and adding that the “American Era had ended.”⁵⁰

With respect to the deaths of al-Qaida leaders and foot soldiers, the al-Qaida hermeneutic has glossed them as an outcome both expected and devoutly to be wished, which one would expect from an organization that styles itself “an army whose men love death.” This became especially important with the loss of bin Laden in May 2011. The official al-Qaida announcement, “Statement of the Heroic Epic of Pride,” argued that his death was not an irreversible loss.⁵¹ Rather, “this generation views the killing of its leaders as advantageous, strengthening loyalty to religion.” Indeed, “the University of Faith, Quran, and Jihad” (of which bin Laden is said to have been a “graduate”) has “not shut its doors.”⁵² And in his Eid sermon released in December 2011, Abu Yahya surveyed the significant losses of the year, then reminded his listeners that the early Islamic community suffered the loss of Muhammad and then faced the Ridda Wars—but afterward defeated Persia and Byzantium.⁵³ Men die. The message and the mission remain: Allah still rules.

Al-Qaida has also employed that hermeneutic to interpret the Arab Spring. Here, al-Qaida’s objectives seem to be threefold: to take credit for what has unfolded, to argue that the revolutions represent an uprising of the entire Islamic community and not singular or isolated events, and to declare that these represent a catastrophe for the West. Thus, Abu Ubaydah, member of the *shura* council of AQIM, in an interview with al-Andalus Media, tells his readers that these unprecedented events mark a “calamity” (*fajī'a*) and “huge setback” (*naksah 'athemah*) for the “crusaders,” brought about in large part by the jihadist vanguard that first called for revolt.⁵⁴ Zawahiri, in his “Dawn of Imminent Victory,” holds that the revolutions are a defeat that “turned America’s calculations head over heels,” the work of the umma and not smaller groups.⁵⁵ And in his December 2011 sermon, Abu Yahya takes the grand retrospective view, stating that the revolutions are the work of the entire umma, causing

50. Al-Shabaab, “Good Tidings from the Shaykhs Abu Zubayr and Ayman Zawahiri,” https://archive.org/details/bayah_sahab.

51. “Statement on the Heroic Epic of Pride and the Martyrdom of Shaykh Osama bin Ladin,” <http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=06051102>.

52. Ibid.

53. Abu Yahya, “Eid al-Adha Sermon for the Year 1432.” The Ridda Wars were a brief period of conflict with Arabian tribes that had sworn fealty to Muhammad but then revolted shortly after his death.

54. “Interview with Abu Ubaydah,” Al-Andalus Media, <http://www.muslm.org/vb/showthread.php?443499>.

55. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Dawn of Imminent Victory,” http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/al-qc481_idah-the-dawn-of-imminent-victory-ten-years-since-the-blessed-tuesday-raids.pdf.

the United States to stumble and toppling the “pharaohs of this age,” a battle that is delivering the people from slavery to men and establishing the justice of Islam.⁵⁶

The “Narratological Wars” of al-Qaida

Al-Qaida has thus developed a comprehensive narrative that reminds adherents that they are engaged in categorical and mortal combat. It assuages their consciences, declaring that their jihad is ethically warranted. It functions as a hermeneutic, directing believers in how to perceive events throughout the world, and it reassures them of what lies beyond the mere sensory realm. Al-Qaida does not, however, leave this carefully orchestrated account in the *madrassa*. Rather, it has fashioned an overarching narrative that it sends forth to war, much as Winston Churchill is said to have marshaled the English language during World War II.

In an undated letter to Taliban leader Mullah Omar, bin Laden observed that “90 percent of the preparation for war is effective use of the media.”⁵⁷ By “media,” he meant publications, whether in print or via the cyber world. “Media,” however, has also come to function as a metonymy, indicating the larger war of ideas, doctrines, and cultural values. The jihadist literature is replete with references to these battles and their importance. Typical is “America and the Media War,” which argues that politicians and generals alike agree on the importance of “ideational and propaganda warfare.”⁵⁸ Irrespective of the truth or falsity of the ideas presented, the key issue, our author avers, is to influence the point of view of the other. Moreover, al-Qaida understands that both sides are engaged in a pitched battle, that the West is using psychological warfare, and that believers must be wary of it.⁵⁹ Indeed, al-Qaida has called for what may be translated as “information operations” (*ghazwa ma’lumatiyya*) and “electronic warfare” (*harb electroniyya*).⁶⁰ Zawahiri has continued the emphasis, distinguishing “the jihad of the spear” and the “the jihad of the *bayan*” (message, declaration). Of the two, he writes, the second is the greater necessity, and it is the “knights of the media jihad,” the “clandestine mujahideen,”

56. Abu Yahya, “Eid al-Adha Sermon for the Year 1432.”

57. Osama bin Laden, letter to Mullah Muhammed Umar, Harmony #: AFGP 2002-600321 (West Point, N.Y.: CTC, 2002), <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letter-to-mullah-muhammed-umar-from-bin-laden-original-language-2>. Interestingly, the anonymous author of *The Story of the Arab Afghans from the Time of Arrival in Afghanistan until Their Departure with the Taliban* considered bin Laden to be “maniacally obsessed with the international media,” a disaster, he believed, for the Taliban. See *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 10, 2004. A copy is available from the authors.

58. “America and the Media War,” *Vanguards of Khurasan*, No. 15, pp. 38–40.

59. See al-Amili, “Enter upon Them through the Gate.”

60. See, for instance, as-Sahab, “You Are Responsible,” part 2.

who are conducting it.⁶¹ Thus a variety of declarations, jihadist multilingual videos, and cyber magazines have proliferated.

One should note the important implication. As a weapon of war, the narrative is not intended merely to inspire the troops. It does that, certainly, but al-Qaida has a larger purpose: to convince various Arab and Muslim audiences to understand local, national, and world affairs in a particular way. Al-Qaida deliberately counterposes rival interpretations of Western policies and actions. Every statement and, especially, every action of the West will be re-explained by al-Qaida. If one examines only al-Qaida's narratological struggle with Arab governments, Western governments, and mainstream *ulama* (Islamic scholars) but ignores the various publics to which it plays in this international drama, the critical point is lost. The analytic focus should instead be on the witnesses to the struggle, because, more than governments or even Islamic institutions, it is this constituency that al-Qaida seeks to influence. In this regard, we describe two critical battles, battles beyond the kinetic: one with religious leaders and the other with the West, which we term a "war of apologetics." The latter has taken on critical salience for al-Qaida in light of the Arab Spring. In both cases, al-Qaida has sent forth its narrative to engage the enemy and to do so before a watching world.

THE "ISLAMIC MAGISTERIUM" WAR

Al-Qaida is in a battle with the mainstream *ulama* for sole, legitimate authority to interpret the faith and to answer the question, Who speaks for Islam? Al-Qaida has styled itself a kind of Islamic magisterium, with its own "Index" and recommended reading list. Although the majority of its messages may be claims of credit for specific attacks or declarations of eschatological victory, a number of statements reflect a struggle with other Islamic scholars. Into this category falls bin Laden's "Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine." After adducing horrific scenes from the recently concluded 2008–09 Gaza War, bin Laden segued to the threat of "evil scholars." In that context, he urged believers to turn from the leadership of "Arab Zionists" (e.g., Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak) to those leaders grounded in the sharia. Believers must understand that the "welfare" (*salaama*) of the truth supersedes that of individuals or even nations. The real war is with "evil" scholars and leaders who have sought to put to death correct sharia names, substituting terms such as "violence" (*anf*) for "jihad in God's path," and "the other" for unbelievers and apostates.⁶²

61. These terms appear frequently. One notable publication is Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Do Not Grow Weak," <http://www.as-ansar.com/vb/archive/index.php/t-46301.html>.

62. See Osama bin Laden, "Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine," <https://nokbah.com/~w3/?p=1927>.

Similarly, after the March 2010 Mardin Conference, a gathering of moderate Islamic academics and theologians concerned with jihadist ideas, al-Qaida moved to rebut the declaration issued at the end of the conference. Anwar al-Awlaki and Adam Ghadan were prominent among the interlocutors. In the event, al-Qaida was especially concerned, because the declaration speaks against key jihadist doctrines: the houses of war and peace, *takfir*,⁶³ and *al-wala' wal-bara'*. Al-Qaida insisted that it alone has the accurate jurisprudential position to interpret these concepts, not those compromising scholars who offer a benign Islam “fit only for sheep.”⁶⁴

Perhaps the most salient such salvo in the battle with the ulama comes from the pen of Abu Yahya. The occasion was publication of “Co-existence with the Other” (*Al-ta'ayush ma'a al-akhar*) a three-page essay by Mauritanian cleric Sheikh Muhammad al-Hassan, a salafist scholar educated in Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ The sheikh advanced the noncontroversial idea (at least in the West) that there are shared foundational principles in humanity (*al-mabadi'*, *al-insaniyya*, and *al-mushtaraka*). On this basis and others, the sheikh urged in a dispassionate way for the necessity of coexistence, an argument that sent Abu Yahya into theological paroxysms. Three months later, the al-Qaida ideologue offered his treatise “Resisting the Kuffar,” a “brief comment,” as he termed it, that totaled twenty-two pages of dense reasoning and historical reference.⁶⁶ The disparity in length of the two articles is the first measure of Abu Yahya's concern with the notion of coexistence.

Further evidence appears in the extended grammatical excursus Abu Yahya offers. Even the title of the sheikh's article offended. As Abu Yahya points out, the sheikh's term for “coexistence,” *al-ta'ayush*, is a gerund from a measure VI verb, a reflexive form of the measure III verb, implying reciprocity. This may

63. *Takfir* is a jurisprudential move whereby a putative believer is declared a *kafir*, an infidel. This doctrine, however, has generated debate among jihadists who recognize that it can be misused and that it could vitiate their message among larger publics. Recently, for instance, Syria's Jaysh al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar explicitly rejected it. See Murad Batal al-Shishani's profile of the group and its rejection of the doctrine in al-Shishani, “Obligated to Unite Under One Banner.”

64. Anwar al-Awlaki, “The New Mardin Declaration: An Attempt at Justifying the New World Order,” *Inspire* (October 2010); and Adam Ghadan, “Arabs and Muslims between the Conferences of Abandonment and the Appointed Obligation of Jihad,” http://www.archive.org/details/motamarat_takhdil. Shaykh Abd al-Wahhab al-Turayri provides a proponent's view of the conference in al-Turayri, “The Mardin Conference—Understanding Ibn Taymiyyah's Fatwa,” June 29, 2010, <http://muslimmatters.org/2010/06/29/the-mardin-conference-%E2%80%93-a-detailed-account/>.

65. Muhammad al-Hassan, “Co-existence with the Other,” <http://www.islamtoday.net/nawafeth/artshow-40-9582.htm>.

66. Abu Yahya al-Libi, “Bal mudafa'a al-kuffar fareda shar'ia” [Resisting the kuffar is a sharia obligation], Worldwide Islamic Media Front, September 2007, <http://www.tawhed.ws/dl?i=1502091x>.

seem merely the deady boring arcana of technical linguistics, but it was decidedly not boring to Abu Yahya. For him, the sheikh's use of a measure VI verb implied equality of parties, parity between Islam and various other ideologies, and the nonsingularity of the truth of Islam. By using terms such as "the other" in place of "infidel," the sheikh had undertaken to "correct" God and had "buried" true Islamic doctrines under false ideas such as democracy and human rights. Abu Yahya alliteratively terms the sheikh's doctrine the "'subjugate' (*al-tatwi*) and 'dilute' (*al-tamyi*) school." Such a school is nothing less than "a virus," "a major disaster," "a pollution of Islam at its very sources." The "catastrophe" of this three-page document had forced Abu Yahya to drink "cups of grief." It may seem to Western analysts that this is overwrought hyperbole, but it must be seen from al-Qaida's perspective: a measure of the magnitude of al-Qaida's battle with the ulama to be viewed as the sole, legitimate interpreter of correct Islam.

That concern for a proper understanding of Islam has become more pronounced with the Arab Spring. In his final message, bin Laden sought to assert the criticality of a correct understanding of Islam for the success of the revolutions. He cautioned of a dangerous crossroads that admitted of "no meeting along the path between . . . the people of truth" and "the people of deception (*tadleel*)," warning that governmental leaders had "paralyzed the brains" of the umma by manipulating religious institutions. The only way to save the various revolutions was to have another, a "revolution (*thaura*) of attentiveness and a correcting of understandings."⁶⁷ Similarly, Zawahiri has cited Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, in calling for the "battle of the Quran" (*ma'raka al-mashaf*), in which the rulings of the Quran alone form the basis of government. To complete this "critical case," he writes, it is necessary to liberate al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's leading religious institution, from governmental control—an institution whose leadership al-Qaida has long regarded as comprising mere lackeys.⁶⁸

THE WAR OF APOLOGETICS

Al-Qaida's second battle is more important than its battle with the mainstream ulama. It is the war with the West, but undertaken before Arab and Islamic publics. In the event, the Arab Spring has given this battle special salience. Indeed, this has become al-Qaida's existential struggle. On one level, al-Qaida's battle has been for physical survival in the face of a kinetic war. From the beginning, the jihadists have recognized the superior firepower of the

67. Osama bin Laden, "Message to the Muslim Umma." A copy is available from the authors.

68. Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt," No. 6.

West. Their hope in that regard has been for the effectiveness of their guerrilla warfare, coupled with *subr* (patience), a frequently recurring word in the discourse. But as this is the army whose men love death, the struggle must be seen on another level: that for the relevance, viability, and reception of its message in the marketplace of ideas, with the hope that Arab and Islamic publics would embrace it. Its luminaries will fall—as did the Prophet and his early companions and the “blood-drenched bin Laden” (Zawahiri’s economic phrase)—but the message of God must not.

Prior to the Arab Spring, the war of narratives was straightforward enough, at least from al-Qaida’s point of view. In contradistinction to the moral depredations of the Crusader West, al-Qaida asserted a new moral order. In place of colluders such as “Hosni Barak” (the pun is Abu Yahya’s), al-Qaida held forth the idea of a revived caliphal state, uncorrupted by the West. Amid these promises, al-Qaida could confidently re-narrate the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, 1979–89, as a stunning triumph for the mujahideen, events that validated its overall message. “The Afghan jihad,” Abdullah Azzam declared before his death in 1989, “has created in the souls of the umma full trust in Almighty God . . . [which trust] is the greatest power on earth.”⁶⁹

The Arab Spring changed al-Qaida’s task dramatically. To be sure, al-Qaida’s leadership welcomed (or, better, was compelled to welcome) the uprisings, as have the collective statements of franchise groups such as AQIM, AQAP, Islamic State of Iraq (ISI),⁷⁰ and now al-Shabaab, as well as the Taliban and the jihadist blogosphere more broadly. Yet the revolutions across the Arab world have challenged these groups’ respective and cumulative abilities to re-narrate what has unfolded. Al-Qaida had neither planned nor caused these events, despite claims that its “vanguard” (*tali’a*, Sayyid Qutb’s term of choice) had somehow led the way. Abu Ubaydah, one among a number of jihadists, sought to put a bold face on the situation. Asked in an interview if there was a causal role between al-Qaida’s jihad and the “intifadas,” he replied gamely that, although there were a number of international factors, the mujahideen

69. Abdullah Azzam, quoted in as-Sahab, “You Are Responsible,” part 1.

70. Since April 2013, ISI has styled itself “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [al-Sham, in Arabic]” (ISIS), claiming to include al-Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al-Nusra rejected the claim of a merger and Zawahiri intervened in the dispute, supporting al-Nusra. ISIS, in turn, rejected the intervention. In early February 2014, al-Qaida issued a categorical statement disavowing any link to ISIS. As of this writing, ISIS has been engaged in violent, internecine struggle with al-Nusra, other jihadist groups, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). See Thomas Jocelyn’s summary of the dispute, “Islamic State of Iraq’s Leader Defies Zawahiri,” *Long War Journal*, June 15, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/06/islamic_state_of_ira_3.php. For a summary of al-Qaida’s disavowal, see Aaron Zelin, “Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” February 4, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham>. The Arabic text of al-Qaida’s disavowal may be found at <http://www.hanein.info/vb/showthread.php?t=349952>.

were the first to call for revolt and that their jihad had limited the effectiveness of the “American-Crusader role” in the region.⁷¹

More especially, al-Qaida has not been able to direct the flow of the process or the results. The dynamism of the Arab Spring has extended far beyond the ability of al-Qaida central, its franchises, or rank-and-file Islamists to direct. Indicative of al-Qaida’s marked incapacity to manipulate events are the various terms that the organization has used to describe the revolutions.⁷² “Tsunami of change,” “winds of change,” “a dangerous crossroads,” and “a flood and fire” that consumes all in its path have been employed, terms that indicate al-Qaida’s understanding of the volatile and unpredictable nature of the popular forces that have been unleashed.

Yet for all that, al-Qaida has recognized the imperative to re-narrate events and propound its own vision throughout the region at this critical juncture when the “revolution thieves” (the phrase of Abu Ubaydah) will attempt to reverse the gains. This is the time, Zawahiri has said, when the “door for *da’wa* (announcement of the message)” has been opened, but only God knows for how long.⁷³ As Ibrahim Rubaysh framed it in his December 2011 “Harvest of Revolutions,” in the midst of the “sweetness” (*halaawah*) of the toppling of tyrants, the revolutions could be stolen. The real war has now begun, Rubaysh avers, and that is to establish governments with which God, not the West, will be pleased.⁷⁴

At its heart, al-Qaida’s position is that the choice that faces post-Arab Spring nations is one that is both binary and fundamental. Among the first to articulate this choice was the Islamic State of Iraq. Writing to encourage Egyptian protestors only two weeks after the demonstrations in Tahrir Square began, ISI warned, “Don’t make an exchange of that which is good for that which is inferior. Beware of deceptive, *jahili* (ignorant) programs such as malignant ‘secularism’ or patriotic and unbelieving ‘democracy’ or stinking idolatrous nationalism (*qaumiyya*).”⁷⁵ Similarly, Abu Yahya warned in Qutbian terms that

71. “Interview with Abu Ubaydah.”

72. Al-Qaida has used several terms that have been translated as “revolution.” These include *thaurat* (sing., *thaura*) indicating agitation, outburst, uprising; *intifadat* (sing., *intifada*), a shaking, shaking off, tremor, or uprising; and *inqilab*, an upheaval or coup d’état. Zawahiri, with a penchant for medical tropes, has referred to surgical excision, as of a cancer.

73. Zawahiri, “Do Not Grow Weak.” Elsewhere, Zawahiri warns that the uprising in Egypt could go the way of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, or even Egypt following the Free Officers coup in 1952. See Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” No. 5.

74. See Rubaysh, “Hasad al-thaurat.”

75. ISI Ministry of War, “To Our Muslim Family in Beloved Egypt,” <http://jihadology.net/2011/02/08/al-fajr-media-presents-a-new-statement-from-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-al-qa%E2%80%99idah-to-our-muslim-family-in-beloved-egypt/>. The ISI document itself carries the quotes around secularism and democracy.

Muslims must choose between a government under God or a government of *jahiliyya* (i.e., of pre-Islamic ignorance).⁷⁶

What would “a government under God” look like? Al-Qaida frames the answer in explicitly religious terms. The sharia would be the sole source of legislation. God would be the legislator, and people would be set free from worshipping other people. Orthodox ulama (not state lackeys) would take a pivotal role, as would men of Islamic gravitas, and *shuras* would be established. It is important to emphasize, however, that the jihadist documents also highlight the ethical/social justice aspects of their vision. Notably, little is said about *hudud* punishments, at least in mainstream pronouncements.⁷⁷ Instead, al-Qaida propounds a social order in which education is advanced for all, economic disparities are leveled, and the epidemic of drugs is stemmed.⁷⁸ The people would enjoy adequate housing, to include workable, indoor toilets. Although the vision is emphatically not that of a Western-style democracy, the people are assured they could elect their own, Islamically correct leaders. Moreover, this vision for a new order is not for Muslims alone. Nonhostile Christians would be welcomed in the *dar al-Islam*.

So what of the West and democracy? Not surprisingly, al-Qaida advances the same critique of the West and its intentions that it has since bin Laden’s hallmark 1998 fatwa. The neo-Crusaders are pursuing an agenda to benefit themselves and the “Zionists,” cynically supporting or abandoning their “agents” in the region as befits their strategic goals. And today, while the revolutions of the Arab Spring proceed, the West stands quietly behind the curtain (the metaphor is Zawahiri’s), waiting to steal the revolution by promoting secular democracy with an Islamic coloration. An embrace of democracy would mean elimination of the rule of Islam, however, and those who would attempt to bury a purely Islamic identity are “plowing the sea” and inciting a *fitna* (discord) that will never abate.⁷⁹

Muslims must perceive that democracy is itself a religion, and its idol is “the will of the majority.”⁸⁰ Here, Zawahiri advances what he hopes will be the telling critique in this war of narratives. Once again, he formulates an argument that is an epistemic analysis.⁸¹ To do so, Zawahiri lays out the fundamental dif-

76. Yahya, “Eid al-Adha Sermon for the Year 1432.”

77. The so-called *hudud* punishments, enforced in Saudi Arabia, include amputation of the hand as penalty for theft and beheading for the most serious crimes. Ansar al-Sharia, the AQAP-affiliated group in Yemen, has carried out such penalties, including the 2012 execution of American teacher Joel Shrum.

78. Social justice is the leitmotif of each of Zawahiri’s “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt.” See especially No. 5.

79. Ibid.

80. Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” No. 4.

81. Zawahiri, “Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt,” especially No. 1 and No. 5.

ference between *shura* and democracy. *Shura*, he declares, is a collaboration based on an authoritative recourse, a final authority (*marji'iyya*): that of the sharia. This, in turn, makes God's law the ultimate guarantor of fundamental human rights. Contrast that with democracy, a man-made doctrine that is "not tied to any fixed religious or ethical value." Consequently, anything may be permitted, even if degrading, if the majority should wish it. It is a system (and here is Zawahiri's damning neologism) that is nothing more than "normlessness" (*al-lami'yariyya*). Ultimately, human rights have no security at all under democracy, an argument that Sayyid Qutb made a half century earlier in his most important work, *Milestones*. This argument cannot be dismissed out of hand, given its strong resonance in the region.⁸²

Of particular interest, Zawahiri has made Egypt central in this contest; it is the prize that must be won. That he would issue a dense and rambling eleven-part series of historical and political polemics ("Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt") underscores the point. Of course, this emphasis on a single state would seem to contradict his and others' fulminations against *qaumiyya* (ethnonationalism) and *wataniyya* (attachment to the fatherland; patriotism), which are anathema to al-Qaida. The move is eminently pragmatic, however, reflecting an understanding of facts on the ground in this, the largest Arab country and the home of al-Azhar. Thus, while Zawahiri accuses the West of having destroyed the caliphate, which created "50 torn pieces" occupied with *wataniyya*, he also reveals his recognition of the reality of nation-states and his predilection for his own natal state of Egypt. In words strongly reminiscent (ironically) of Gamal Abdul Nasser's *Philosophy of the Revolution*, Zawahiri describes Egypt's "critical location" and says that Egypt should resume its leadership of the "Islamic and Arab world, and [become] victor of the oppressed."⁸³ In al-Qaida's calculations, the failure of its narrative in Egypt would be a serious setback indeed.

Delegitimization in Theory: A Clash of Narratives

Al-Qaida knows that it faces a danger much greater than drone strikes: its message risks being discredited or ignored. Some observers have averred either that al-Qaida primarily seeks spectacular effects in its operations or that it

82. Looking only at Egypt, some 60 percent of respondents believe their laws should "strictly follow the Quran." See Pew Research Center, *Global Attitudes Project* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2012/05/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Project-Egypt-Report-FINAL-May-8-2012-2PM-ET.pdf>. At the same time, 67 percent believe that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government."

83. See Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt," No. 5. In the spring of 2012, Zawahiri returned to this point in "Message of Hope and Glad Tidings for Egypt," No. 9.

seeks victory at any cost. So to conclude, however, is to miss an extraordinary vulnerability—perhaps the key vulnerability—of the jihadists. Al-Qaida is in a battle before all to establish its narrative. It seeks victory with legitimacy, religiously construed. Failing this, al-Qaida understands, it loses virtually everything, in strategic terms.

Few have made this all-important, narratological battle clearer than Muhammad al-Hakaymah, one of al-Qaida's leading ideologues, who was killed in a drone strike in 2008. In the critical document, "Toward a New Strategy," al-Hakaymah described what he considered an explicitly moral battle with the iniquitous West. He then turned to a pragmatic consideration, which he understood also to be *sine qua non* for the entire jihadist enterprise:

Someone may ask, "Why shouldn't we cast fear into the hearts of the crusaders and their aides [by carrying out beheadings]? Isn't bringing villages and cities down on the heads of their inhabitants crueler than beheading? Aren't seven-ton cluster bombs and depleted uranium bombs more loathsome than beheading? Isn't murder by torture in Abu Ghraib [prison] and Bagram [prison] worse than beheading?" You may ask all these questions and more, and you have the right to do so. But it will not change the reality of the battle at all. More than half of the battle is taking place in the forum of the media. In the media battle we are in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma.⁸⁴

Al-Qaida loses when its violent excesses are devoid of narratological meaning; when its behavior is deemed offensive and illegitimate by its audience; when its terrorism is judged as mere thuggery, intimidation, and baseless murder.

Of importance is that al-Qaida values the survival of its narrative as highly—if not perhaps even more highly—as other, more traditional, material assets. What counts is not only how much territory al-Qaida controls, or how many fighters it has within its ranks, or how successful its attacks on Westerners are. What truly matters is how al-Qaida is perceived by its target audience and how well its narrative and behavior resonate with that audience.

Al-Qaida's nonmaterial goals and assets pose a problem for traditional notions of coercion and deterrence theory, which assume that rational actors engage in forward-looking calculations of maximum utility. At its core, deterrence theory involves convincing an adversary that the costs of behaving in an unwanted manner outweigh the benefits that behavior is expected to provide. Within the study of crisis, conflict, and war, deterrence has been subdivided into various iterations, each addressing specific queries and dilemmas associated with manipulating an adversary's behavior. Herein, deterrence—

84. Muhammad al-Hakaymah, "Toward a New Strategy." The authors express their gratitude to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point for granting special access to this document.

persuading another not to do something—is usually pitted against compellence—persuading another to do something.⁸⁵ Both are coercive strategies that seek to convince an actor to voluntarily change its behavior. Other areas of deterrence theory, such as extended deterrence, intra-war deterrence, and cumulative deterrence, explore the practice of deterrence within specific conflict scenarios (i.e., in alliance systems, within an ongoing war, and in iterated exchanges with a common adversary, respectively). In most cases, deterrence/compellence is achieved by threatening retaliation or probable gains—punishment or denial; but positive inducements and the promise of rewards, the “carrots” of international relations, have also been associated with and linked to coercion.⁸⁶ Each process manipulates cost-benefit calculations but does so from different positions: punishment adds to costs; denial subtracts from benefits; inducement offers alternate benefits.

Delegitimization is related to these different processes, but suggests that changes in behavior might be provided by targeting an actor’s beliefs. Al-Qaida’s actions are not based solely on material gains. Although we accept the rationality of al-Qaida and its adherents, a rationality that Marc Sageman and others have convincingly demonstrated,⁸⁷ we suggest that the sacred and noninstrumental must be taken into account in any counterstrategy.⁸⁸ Symbolic actions, both al-Qaida’s and the West’s, carry great import in jihadists’

85. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 9; and Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), p. 26.

86. See, for example, Lee E. Dutter and Ofira Seliktar, “To Martyr or Not to Martyr: Jihad Is the Question, What Policy Is the Answer?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 30, No. 5 (May 2007), pp. 437–438; Miroslav Nincic, “Getting What You Want: Positive Inducement in International Relations,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 138–183; and Yasuhiro Izumikawa, “To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July/September 2013), pp. 498–531.

87. See Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Ehud Sprinzak, “Rational Fanatics,” *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2001; David A. Lake, “Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Dialog IO*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 2002), pp. 15–29; Christopher C. Harmon, “The Myth of the Invincible Terrorist,” *Policy Review*, No. 142 (April/May 2007), <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/5881>; Martha Crenshaw, “The Logic of Terrorism: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Strategic Choice,” in Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge, 1990), pp. 7–24; Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); and Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). For counterarguments, see Max Abrahms, “Why Terrorism Does Not Work,” *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2006), pp. 42–78; Max Abrahms, “Are Terrorists Really Rational? The Palestinian Example,” *Orbis*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 533–549; and Max Abrahms, “Al-Qaida’s Scorecard: A Progress Report on al-Qaida’s Objectives,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (July/August 2006), pp. 509–529.

88. For the distinction between instrumental and sacred values, we are indebted to Scott Atran. See Atran, “Global Network Terrorism,” National Security Council briefing, White House, Washington, D.C., April 28, 2006, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/whitehouse/atransnc-042806.pdf>.

behavioral calculations. To put it crudely, al-Qaida would not, for instance, agree to exchange a few acres of land for prime real estate in midtown Manhattan if those few acres happened to be those surrounding the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Instrumental values and sacred values cannot be related as a simple quid pro quo, and they rest beside traditional notions of material assets and goals.

Al-Qaida uses rational means to pursue sacred values and transcendent ends. If the West engages it on the basis of game theory or thinks that drone strikes (i.e., punishment) or domestic defenses (i.e., denial) alone will cow its leadership into submission, it will have missed the larger picture. As Abu Yahya put it, the jihadists determine values by weighing them in the “balance scales of eternity.”⁸⁹ Strategically countering al-Qaida, therefore, must take adequate account of this very different constellation of values, values that are themselves embedded in a larger and intentionally constructed metanarrative. The West must move beyond thinking about coercion simply as either punishment or denial and recognize, instead, that this is a narratological war, a clash of metanarratives, that requires more than adding to instrumental costs or subtracting from traditional benefits.

Importantly, these values are present at different levels of abstraction. In practice, delegitimization might influence an adversary’s behavior at the individual, group, and community levels. Herein, delegitimization suggests that it is possible to raise the costs of participating in political violence by targeting the religious, normative, and cultural rationales that groups and individuals use to justify their participation in terrorism. Stripping away that justification by using the same logic, language, and related cultural inputs that are used to legitimize violence may resonate with individuals, groups, and communities contemplating involvement with al-Qaida. “If terrorists perceive their war as just, moral, and defensive,” writes Alex Wilner, “communicating views that contend otherwise will influence the behavior of would-be supporters.”⁹⁰ Individuals contemplating joining al-Qaida, or communities passively supporting its strategies and goals, might decide otherwise if they believe that its metanarrative is compromised or altogether false. Likewise, al-Qaida recruits participating in violence might be similarly compelled to leave the organization if the metanarrative upon which they base their actions is discredited. If al-Qaida’s actions no longer resonate with its stated intentions and goals—as outlined in its metanarrative—some militants may lose hope in its cause and strategy, altogether abandoning the fight. Even al-Qaida and the various groups

89. “Al-Qaida’s Abu Yahya al-Libi Discusses ‘Jihadist Methodology,’” WNC, September 12, 2007.

90. Wilner, “Deterring the Undeterrable,” p. 31.

allied to it might be swayed by threats targeting their legitimacy. Fear of narrative collapse, or of adverse reaction among active and would-be supporters, or of popular backlash among their primary audience might manipulate some militant leaders. Herein, delegitimization becomes one aspect of a “tailored” approach, in which “different deterrent options,” explains Jeffrey Lantis, are constructed “for different adversaries.”⁹¹

Scholars have proposed other related concepts, such as “deterrence by counternarrative” and “deterrence by popular backlash,” though neither has undergone serious analytical or empirical evaluation.⁹² The accompanying literature is particularly thin, and at times the terms themselves are used interchangeably. Like delegitimization, however, both concepts suggest that terrorists might be influenced by challenging their ideology or by channeling popular outrage resulting from militant activity. Counternarrative is usually applied to countering violent radicalization, terrorist recruitment, and popular support for militancy. Paul Kamolnick explains that coercive leverage might be gained by using “jurisprudential debates among jihad-realist Islamist militants” to “delegitimize al-Qaeda’s reign of terror as both unlawful and imprudent.” The target in this case is al-Qaida’s ability to attract new recruits and gain popular sympathy among its audience. By using an “Islamically-rooted legal case,” Kamolnick suggests, al-Qaida’s constituency might refrain from joining it, or be compelled to leave it.⁹³ Other scholars move beyond religious scripture. Michael Jacobson, for instance, argues that “countering the ideology that drives” extremism, and offering “a counter-narrative of stronger appeal,” might deter radicalization (or spur deradicalization) and compel some militants to “drop out.” His counternarrative would purposefully undermine militant leaders, deglamorize the life of a terrorist, and highlight the “hypocrisy of the Islamist narrative” in light of attacks that lead to Muslim and civilian suffering.⁹⁴ On the other hand, “deterrence by popular backlash”—Knopf coined

91. Lantis, “Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence,” p. 470.

92. See Knopf’s brief discussions of the topic in Knopf, “The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research,” pp. 18–19; Knopf, “Terrorism and the Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research,” pp. 32–33; and Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Use with Caution: The Value and Limits of Deterrence against Asymmetric Threats,” *World Politics Review*, June 11, 2013. On “deterrence by counternarrative,” see also Scott Helfstein et al., “White Paper Prepared for the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management: Tradeoffs and Paradoxes: Terrorism, Deterrence, and Nuclear Weapons,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (September 2009), p. 732.

93. Al-Qaida would suffer as a result: it would fail to attract new adherents; it might experience internal dissention; and it could become popularly marginalized. See Paul Kamolnick “Delegitimizing al-Qaeda: A Jihad-Realist Approach” (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012), pp. 6, 20.

94. Michael Jacobson, “Learning Counter-Narrative Lessons from Cases of Terrorist Dropouts,” in *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (Amsterdam: National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Government of The Netherlands, 2010), pp. 73, 76.

the term, channeling Lewis Dunn's preliminary work—is usually tailored toward tackling chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear terrorism. Dunn envisions deterring al-Qaida's use of WMD materials by weighing on its concerns of a "backlash among the wider Muslim audience" in response to such attacks.⁹⁵ Here, the threat of popular revulsion is put to coercive use. Popular resentment and condemnation, Scott Holfstein and colleagues add, might be purposefully cultivated. "Deterrence by counternarrative is effective," the authors conclude, if a terrorist group "decides against a given attack out of fear that their support networks will disappear." (Note the conceptual fuzziness given their use of "counternarrative," not "backlash," in describing this particular scenario.)⁹⁶ One way to conceptually clarify this emerging field of study is to think of delegitimization as a macro concept that subsumes counternarrative and popular backlash within it. An analogy might be the relationship between deterrence theory and extended deterrence or intra-war deterrence; conceptually, the former rests above the latter two, which explore unique issues of coercion but do so within the boundaries of deterrence theory.

Al-Qaida acts with calculated rationality. It gives a cogent and rational account of the world, but it predicates its construct on a metaphysic that is often misunderstood in the West. Understanding how al-Qaida builds, supports, and transmits its narrative, and understanding how that narrative guides its interpretation of history and of contemporary Western policies, is essential if the United States hopes to employ an effective coercive strategy. "To deter terrorism," argues Janice Gross Stein, "a deeper understanding of the culture that shapes strategic choices is important." She explains, "The strategic culture of those who engage in asymmetric warfare is certainly culturally predicated. . . . What this cultural interpretation of deterrence does is force a reexamination of the familiar culture of deterrence that focuses on avoiding death as the ultimate cost. . . . [W]e need to think theoretically about the deterrence of terrorism as a political strategy of influence, emotionally resonant when it is used, and implemented through a conversation that moves across cultures with different values and different needs."⁹⁷ Al-Qaida's narrative is exploitable. And if its message loses credibility, al-Qaida loses adherents—a cost to the organization and its leadership. The key point here is that the West seeks to influence individuals and organizations by manipulating that message. In strategic terms, if it can target a message, it can influence those who would have

95. Lewis Dunn, "Influencing Terrorists' WMD Acquisition and Use Calculus," in *Next Generation WMD and WME Terrorism* (Fort Belvoir, Va.: Defence Threat Reduction Agency, 2008), p. 13.

96. Helfstein et al., "Tradeoffs and Paradoxes," p. 795.

97. Janice Gross Stein, "Deterring Terrorism, Not Terrorists," in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, pp. 59, 62.

adopted it, along with those who currently employ it. The degree to which al-Qaida's message loses traction with Arab and Islamic publics is the degree to which delegitimization will have succeeded.

Delegitimization in Practice: Fighting a Narratological War

Delegitimization functions best if terrorism and terrorists are conceptually broken down into their parts and processes. As Paul Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins put forward in *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism*, "It is a mistake to think of influencing al Qaeda as though it were a single entity; rather, the targets of U.S. influence are the many elements of the al Qaeda system, which comprises leaders, lieutenants, financiers, logisticians and other facilitators, foot soldiers, recruiters, supporting population segments, and religious or otherwise ideological figures."⁹⁸ Deterring terrorism, then, involves influencing and manipulating separate parts of that constellation. Taken as a whole, successful coercion at various points within the terrorism system will influence the degree, level, and type of violence employed by the organization. Unlike Cold War notions of deterrence success, which were generally absolute (a conflict either began or it did not) and emphasized communicating with central decisionmakers, success in deterring terrorism occurs at the margins of violent behavior and usually targets both central and peripheral actors. Deterring all terrorism may be impossible, but deterring some terrorism may be enough to have a meaningful effect on security. This is a key point that Knopf makes in describing the "fourth wave" of deterrence theory.⁹⁹

Thinking of al-Qaida as a constellation of different actors helps analysts to identify how and where different coercive threats might be applied. For instance, some actors, including terrorist leaders, state- and government-based supporters of terrorism, and financiers, may be susceptible to various threats of punishment, such as targeted killings, sanctions, or imprisonment.¹⁰⁰ Other actors, however, such as terrorist operatives, bomb makers, or suicide bombers, may be more attuned to the odds of tactical success, the threat of likely

98. Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component in the War on al Qaeda* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2002), p. xi (emphasis in original).

99. "Although any deterrence failure," Knopf writes, "would have terrible consequences for some people, for the United States and most other countries national survival is not at stake. However undesirable, one or even a handful of deterrence failures would not vitiate the value of deterrence. . . . Although the overarching goal remains preventing all attacks if possible, preventing even some attacks is still better than preventing none." See Knopf, "The Fourth Wave in Deterrence Research," p. 4.

100. Wilner, "Targeted Killings in Afghanistan"; and Shmuel Bar, "Deterrence of Palestinian Terrorism: The Israeli Experience," in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, pp. 205–227.

failure, and other forms of tactical and strategic denial.¹⁰¹ Punishment and denial may work against al-Qaida, but as both processes target material assets and goals, neither is particularly well suited for use in countering and challenging sacred values. The logic of delegitimization fills this gap; it functions at the level of the metanarrative. And although it may be used alongside punishment and denial against the same actors within the terrorist system, it functions at a different level by degrading rationales and legitimacy, rather than promising pain or denying success.

Al-Qaida offers the world a particular story line to attract recruits and supporters, establish an identity for its adherents, and provide its operatives an ethical basis for employing terrorism. In tailoring a strategy that emphasizes countering al-Qaida's narratives and sacred values, the West seeks to strip al-Qaida of its perceived legitimacy to alter the behavior of the individuals and communities that make up its target audience. Put into practice, delegitimization has two essential components. The first is to undermine the account al-Qaida promulgates of itself, thus challenging its religious appeal and the ways in which its message resonates with different audiences. The second is to challenge the account al-Qaida propounds of Western actions. Both processes are explored below.

TARGETING AL-QAIDA'S RELIGIOUS BONA FIDES

The first component of delegitimization involves challenging the Islamic bona fides of al-Qaida in a manner that influences the behavior of its active and would-be adherents and various target audiences. Through a "systems" interpretation of terrorism, the West can use delegitimization at the individual, group, and community levels.

INDIVIDUALS. Starting at the periphery, delegitimization can sway the individual who is contemplating joining al-Qaida. These individuals may share and accept some of al-Qaida's narrative, but they have yet to commit themselves to its violent cause. They remain potential recruits, sitting on the sideline. Delegitimization would force these individuals to rethink the virtue of joining al-Qaida's ranks. Their behavior would not be influenced by threats of punishment or denial, but rather by arguments that strip al-Qaida of its socioreligious appeal. At the individual level, al-Qaida places importance on individuals joining the global Islamic umma (rather than adhering to narrower and nationally based values) and on the righteousness of its members (who are deemed Islam's heroic vanguard of martyrs). A delegitimization strategy would seek to dissuade the vacillating recruit from fully joining al-Qaida's

101. Morral and Jackson, *Understanding the Role of Deterrence in Counterterrorism Security*.

organization. Countering al-Qaida recruitment by delegitimization can be accomplished on two fronts.

First, important differences exist between the goals of nationally based militant groups and al-Qaida's international objectives. Would-be recruits should be made aware of these differences. Given that al-Qaida likes to expound on a common, overarching, and unifying goal, the disparity between the local and the supranational matters and should be amplified. As Robert Trager and Dessislava Zagorcheva illustrate in their study of the Southern Philippines, fracturing local jihadis from al-Qaida's global network can lead to coercive results.¹⁰² Even as al-Qaida leaders propound the overriding importance of the global umma, local groups advocate in the opposite direction. At the individual level, these differences might be enough to sway potential recruits from joining al-Qaida's fold. Bin Laden is hardly atypical when he rails against a "reprehensible clannish attachment to homeland and individuals" (*ta'assub madhmum il-watan wal-rijal*); the central al-Qaida leadership has routinely done the same.¹⁰³ There is, however, at least a consistent latent—and often overt—tendency among al-Qaida franchises to put local and national concerns at the forefront, as do the Turkestan Islamic Party for the Uighurs, AQIM for Algerians and Moroccans, Jabhat al-Nusra for Syrians, and even AQAP for Yemenis. Although AQAP's Wuhayshi has warned of a retrograde *fitna* in the Arab Peninsula that leads to *'asabiyya jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic, ignorant clannishness), he cannot resist closing his essay "What Is [Our] Duty with Respect to the Sharia?" with those hadith that make Yemen's role prominent.¹⁰⁴ And in repeated interviews, al-Awlaki highlighted atrocities specifically against his countrymen, surveying various Yemeni provinces, as befits a true son of his nation. A well-formed delegitimization strategy should relentlessly underscore these differences. The West should describe national groups, in the language of social network theory, as "free riders" who tout supranational language but are really absorbed with local concerns. On the other hand, al-Qaida's articulation of a caliphate should be presented as remote and idealistic, a plan at once impractical, likely hyperauthoritarian, and dismissive of legitimate local concerns.

Second, al-Qaida presents its militants as heroes; the United States should do the opposite. Stripping away the majestic veneer and establishing al-Qaida supporters as mere criminals rather than "lions" might sway potential recruits. As Jenkins suggests, "[D]issuading individuals from joining al Qaeda's ver-

102. Trager and Zagorcheva, "Deterring Terrorism," pp. 111–120.

103. See bin Laden, "Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine."

104. Abu Basir al-Wuhayshi, "Ma al-wajib naHwa al-shari'a?" [What is [our] duty with respect to the sharia?], *Sada al-Malahim*, No. 10, pp. 6–7. Numbers 1–13 of the magazine are available at <https://archive.org/details/MagalahSadaAlMalahemAdd1To13>.

sion of jihad” can be accomplished by treating “would-be terrorists as ordinary criminals” and by seeding the message that “[t]hey will receive no applause. They will disgrace their families and their communities. They will be labeled fools. There will be no glory.”¹⁰⁵ The operative is not a *shaheed* but an ignorant blasphemer. His death in battle does not guard Islam but rather discredits it internationally.

GROUPS. Second, delegitimization can be applied at the group level. The goal here is to shape, manipulate, and influence an organization’s behavior. Consider that al-Qaida cannot act in any manner it wishes. Sharia dictates its behavior. Al-Qaida must use violence that relates appropriately to its meta-narrative and is deemed acceptable by its audience. In one of his “Abbottabad letters,” bin Laden explains: “Here is the critical issue we must give attention to. If we carry out operations without having given careful regard to the impact they can have on the sympathy of the greater part of the umma for the mujahideen, that will result in winning some battles but losing the war.”¹⁰⁶ Underlying bin Laden’s concern is the doctrine of *tatarrus* as it relates to the use of political violence. With *tatarrus*, al-Qaida had hoped to legitimize its violent behavior among the wider Arab and Muslim audience, but the opposite has often been the result. As illustrated, Zarqawi damaged al-Qaida’s meta-narrative with his excessive brutality in Iraq and Jordan. Both bin Laden and Zawahiri understood that al-Qaida was in a war for hearts and minds, an existential battle it could not afford to lose. AQI’s carelessly brutal attacks were off-message, failed to properly resonate with al-Qaida’s narrative, and alienated its broader base.

Delegitimization in this case would capitalize on public anger over al-Qaida’s violence (as backlash does), build on arguments that attack al-Qaida’s religious interpretation of various Islamic tenets, and exploit al-Qaida’s fear of being discredited and ridiculed among Arabs and Muslims. For instance, moderate religious scholars’ repudiations of al-Qaida’s interpretation of *tatarrus*, *takfir*, and jihad should be widely disseminated. The accusation that al-Qaida espouses *takfir* doctrine is especially sensitive, presumably because the organization realizes that Islamic audiences view it in an especially pejorative sense. For instance, Mustafa al-Yazid (aka Saeed al-Masri), one of al-Qaida’s founders, repudiated the term. Anwar al-Awlaki employed it, however, and the differences should be highlighted.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, when and

105. Jenkins to the House Homeland Security Committee.

106. Osama bin Laden, Abbottabad letter No.19, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/letters-from-abbottabad-bin-laden-sidelined>. This quote is taken from the Arabic original at the bottom of p. 4.

107. The disquiet among al-Qaida thinkers is evidence of serious concern that the doctrine could get out of hand or be used simply to settle personal grievances. Thus, this is a doctrine that can be attacked as volatile, bringing division among well-intentioned Muslims and evidence of religious

where al-Qaida and its affiliates hand down *hudud* punishments in areas under their control—as they did recently in Syria, Yemen, and northern Mali—efforts should be made to highlight that these are draconian measures of Kangaroo courts that pervert sharia law.¹⁰⁸ And finally, that al-Qaida kills thousands of innocent Muslim civilians in its operations should be extensively publicized, both by Muslim-majority countries and by the West.

Al-Qaida's narrative is meant to offer an ethical and religious rationale for its violence. Challenging it effectively may alter public perceptions of al-Qaida's legitimacy, which may in turn influence al-Qaida itself. Accordingly, a tailored approach that properly utilizes each of these themes might press al-Qaida to reexamine its interpretations of Islamic law—as Zawahiri has done concerning *tatarrus* in the wake of brutal attacks on Egyptian Copts¹⁰⁹—and chastise its affiliates for their violent excesses—as Zawahiri did with Zarqawi's AQI. Al-Qaida is sure to continue to attempt to coordinate terrorism, but even small victories such as these may be enough to force it to recalculate the ferocity and nature of some of its attacks.

COMMUNITIES. Finally, delegitimization can influence the behavior of al-Qaida's social supporters and its broader Arab and Muslim audience. Terrorist organizations usually represent a specific sociopolitical, cultural, or national community and strive to address grievances that are shared by members of that community. They derive strength from that broader community in the form of new recruits, financial, logistical, and material backing, and ideological support. Influencing this peripheral ring of support would help to impede terrorist activity by stripping groups of the means and resources they need. Delegitimization, in this case, would force societal supporters to have disquieting second thoughts concerning the virtue, legitimacy, religious necessity, and need of their assistance. In al-Qaida's case, the goal is to influence those Arab and Islamic publics, especially the youth and coming generations, who are witnesses to the struggle, and who are making or will make decisions about al-Qaida and its siren call. Importantly, little will be accomplished by threatening these publics with punishment for backing al-Qaida. Indeed,

hubris. The Jamestown Foundation discusses the caution that two leading jihadists, Attiyah Allah al-Libi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, have urged. See James Brandon, "Jordan's Jihad Scholar al-Maqdisi Is Freed from Prison," *Terrorism Monitor*, April 3, 2008, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=4828; and Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Al-Qaeda Ideologue Attiya Allah al-Libi Releases New Booklet," *Terrorism Monitor*, August 12, 2010, pp. 5–6, http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_008_78.pdf.

108. The video of the beheading of several men in Syria in June 2013 is one such case. Although details remain murky about the identities of both the victims and the jihadist group responsible, this is clearly an exploitable event. See Ruth Sherlock, "Priest 'Beheaded' in Syria Video Actually 'Shot Dead,'" *Telegraph*, 1 July 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10153954/Priest-beheaded-in-Syria-video-actually-shot-dead.html>.

109. See Zawahiri, "Message of Hope and Glad Tiding for Egypt," No. 2.

widespread threats are likely to backfire. Instead, coercive success, in the form of public disdain for and rejection of al-Qaida, will result by slowly eviscerating the credibility of the jihadists' story.

Attacking the religious bona fides of al-Qaida, however, is emphatically not the province of Western governments, but of moderate Islamic institutions and thinkers themselves, wherever they reside.¹¹⁰ Al-Qaida is certainly aware of moderates who consider their work as inimical to its cause. Al-Hassan's proposal of coexistence, we suggested above, was regarded by Abu Yahya al-Libi as catastrophic to al-Qaida's goals. So is the present work of the Saudi scholar Salman al-Auda of *Islam Today* and his "disastrous" idea of "innate friendship" (*al-wala' al-fitri*) with non-Muslims.¹¹¹ Even Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his rivals in Hamas threaten al-Qaida's discourse, because they emphasize national aims almost exclusively over the doctrine of a transnational umma. Particularly important—and admittedly controversial—is the work of Yusuf Qaradawi,¹¹² the internationally recognized Egyptian Sunni scholar. On the one hand, Qaradawi has authorized ongoing warfare against Israelis. On the other, the extremely popular and able polemicist has condemned the September 11 attacks and al-Qaida's doctrine of jihad as a "mad declaration of war upon the world."¹¹³ Moreover, his message is not hidden under a bushel: an estimated 60 million viewers see his weekly *Shariah and Life* program on al-Jazeera.¹¹⁴ Further, conferences such as that which produced the 2010 Mardin Declaration are of marked importance.¹¹⁵ As indicated above, the conference undercut critical jihadist doctrines. More especially, the conference insisted on a nuanced reading of the ideas of al-Qaida's expropriated patron saint, Ibn Taymiyya, giving a thick account of his historical context, then applying his thinking to a changed, contemporary international situation. The conference caused barely a blip on the radar screen of the Western press, but that was not the case with al-Qaida. Al-Awlaki's hyperventilating reply came to twelve pages, matched against the

110. Moghadam, "Motives for Martyrdom," p. 77, makes this point, as does Kamolnick, "Delegitimizing Al-Qaeda," p. 22.

111. Both writers are attacked in al-Libi, "Bal mudafa'a al-kuffar fareda shar'ia."

112. For further information on Qaradawi, see Joseph Lombard and Aref Ali Nayef, eds., *The 500 Most Influential Muslims 2010*, www.rissc.jo/docs/0A-FullVersion-LowRes.pdf.

113. See the summary of Qaradawi's *The Jurisprudence of Jihad* in Marc Lynch, "Qaradawi's Revisions," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2009, http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/?posts/2009/07/09/qaradawis_revisions.

114. Alexander Smoltczyk, "Islam's Spiritual 'Dear Abby,'" *Spiegel*, February 2, 2011.

115. An illuminating gloss is that of conferee Shaykh Abd al-Wahhab al-Turayri, "Sijal mu'tamar mardin" [Conflict [surrounding] the Mardin conference], April 17, 2010, <http://islamtoday.net/nawafeth/artshow-42-131198.htm>. An English version can be found at <http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-416-3601.htm>. Al-Turayri offers a nuanced and historically situated account of ibn Tamiyyah's Mardin fatwa, contra the jihadists' misuse.

four pages of the declaration. In addition, al-Qaida's video rebuttal, featuring Ghadan, extended to almost fifty minutes. In substance and concern, the ripostes are similar to Abu Yahya's fulsome reply to al-Hassan's "Co-existence." This double-teaming treatment follows the pattern of the al-Qaida response to President Obama's visits to Cairo and Africa. Clearly, jihadists had special concern about the effect these developments might have on its Islamic audience.

Additionally, former jihadists who have recanted their views can be an important factor. The most prominent among them is Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, better known as Dr. Fadl, cofounder of Islamic Jihad in Egypt who now sits in prison. This leading ideologue, whose work as a medical doctor and theoretician has made Zawahiri's appear sophomoric, issued a communiqué, "A Document for Right Guidance in Jihadi Action in Egypt and the World." In it, Dr. Fadl declaims against the unwarranted spilling of blood, warning young people not to be deceived by the "heroes of the internet." Moreover, he brings especially harsh criticism to bear on the September 11 attacks, saying they had invoked God's anger and were a betrayal of the Americans who had hosted the hijackers involved. Dr. Fadl cites the hadith that holds that the man guilty of such betrayal will get a "banner up the anus."¹¹⁶ One could argue that prison contrition invalidates such writing, but two points argue against that conclusion. One is Fadl's own seemingly credible assertion to *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* that the "Document" was not coerced. The other is Zawahiri's vigorous, hand-wringing response that it was coerced and therefore invalid. That, however, raises the question: Why waste one's breath rebutting that which is patently invalid? In either case, coerced or not, it is obvious that Zawahiri appreciates Dr. Fadl's recriminations as potentially posing major damage to al-Qaida doctrine.

By publicizing these doctrinal divisions and recantations, the West taps into and exploits a pronounced rejection of al-Qaida's narrative from within the Muslim community. Doing so may influence al-Qaida's wider audience by forcing members to revisit lively debates and question al-Qaida's legitimacy.

DELEGITIMIZING AL-QAIDA'S PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST

The second component of delegitimization is to challenge the active, perennial efforts al-Qaida makes to discredit the West. Al-Qaida does this by offering its own account of the motivations behind Western actions and policies. To refer again to *The West and the Dark Tunnel*, the intent was, first, to discount the

116. For discussion of "A Document for Right Guidance," see "Egyptian Islamic Group 'Theoretician,'" *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, WNC, May 16, 2007; Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008; and Diah Rashwan, "Egypt's Contrite Commander," *Foreign Policy*, February 19, 2008.

Western apologetic that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were benevolent and meant to democratize the region, then to apply the al-Qaida hermeneutic in a rigorous and thorough way, arguing that the real policies aimed to advance an economic imperialism. The video contrasts, for instance, the BAE-Saudi al-Yamama deal and the hidden million-dollar bribes with the integrity of devout Muslims who are willing to sacrifice their lives,¹¹⁷ thus becoming part of the “red carpet of martyrs” as they exalt God’s word and protect their co-religionists. *The Dark Tunnel* is only one of many such videos that counterpose selfless jihadist acts with the supposed self-seeking avarice of the West. For al-Qaida, taking this approach is a pragmatic way to carry on its media jihad, for as consistent polling data show, attitudes among various Arab and Islamic publics are shaped primarily by Western policies, not Western values.¹¹⁸ It is those policies that al-Qaida has carefully, and at times masterfully, exploited as part of its overarching narrative. Smart policies, with a “moral validity apparent to others,” can work to vitiate al-Qaida’s hermeneutic.¹¹⁹

This component thus involves reconsidering or altering those Western policies, where appropriate, that al-Qaida uses to legitimate its narrative and, more especially, to delegitimize Western actions. The goal, in this case, is to manipulate al-Qaida’s peripheral movement: the individuals who have yet to dedicate themselves to supporting the organization. Although the litany of Western actions that al-Qaida has routinely exploited may seem well worn,

117. The al-Yamama agreement, under which the British have sold aircraft to the Saudis, was negotiated in 1985, and sales have been ongoing. For David Leigh and Rob Evans’s extensive investigative coverage of corruption, see Leigh and Evans, “The BAE Files,” *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/bae>.

118. See, for instance, James Zogby, “Arab Voices: Listening and Moving beyond Myths,” *Huffington Post*, October 23, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-zogby/arab-voices-listening-and_b_772817.html. See also Brookings Institution and Zogby International, *2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2011), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2011/11/21-arab-public-opinion-telhami>. John Esposito makes a similar argument. See Esposito, “It’s the Policy, Stupid,” *Harvard International Review*, May 2, 2007. Often, al-Qaida simply echoes public discourse. This was the case in 2003, when the Bush administration announced that Iraqi reconstruction contracts would be awarded to the “coalition of the willing.” One day after the announcement was reported, the London-based *Al-Quds al-Arabi* editorialized: “[W]e warned that US aggression against Iraq was aimed at achieving two important goals, to loot Iraq’s economy and wealth and to serve Israeli interests. . . . Yesterday the US president, George Bush, announced that bids for contracts in Iraqi reconstruction will first be given to US companies, then other companies affiliated to allied countries which sent their forces to Iraq. . . . The US decision will create harsh divisions in the Western world and will increase the world’s hatred for the current arrogant US administration.” See “Press Frowns at Iraq Contracts Policy,” *BBC News*, December 12, 2003.

119. “Smart policies” is a phrase inspired by the work of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Commission on Smart Power, cochaired by Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye Jr. See Richard L. Armitage et al., *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2007), http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/071106_csissmartpowerreport.pdf. The phrase “moral validity” is from Davis and Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism*, p. 25.

that hardly diminishes the importance of the issues. These include the use of drones strikes,¹²⁰ coercive interrogation techniques,¹²¹ the Western regional footprint,¹²² the combination of Israeli settlements and lack of progress in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks,¹²³ and extended detention without trial of suspected al-Qaida members. We emphasize that citation of these issues is not original to our work. Moreover, any alteration in policies would invoke important practical and political constraints and, therefore, may not be easy to implement. Further, some policies—for instance, selective use of drone strikes for high-value targets in inaccessible areas—should continue, but only after a prudent cost-benefit analysis of those Western initiatives that al-Qaida and its franchises leverage toward their own goals. Tactical benefits can entail less obvious costs, as adversaries seek to delegitimize the West. The employment of smartly tailored policies, on the other hand, while winning no converts from among al-Qaida’s hard core, can gain the West strategic credibility with others whose enlistment in al-Qaida’s cause it seeks to dissuade.

Conclusion

Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling closes his classic work, *Arms and Influence*, with a new 2005 afterword. In it, he posits, “There is much discussion these days of whether or not ‘deterrence’ has had its day and no longer has much of a role in America’s security. There is no Soviet Union to deter; the Russians are more worried about Chechnya than about the United States; the Chinese seem no more interested in military risks over Taiwan than [Soviet leader Nikita] Khrushchev was over Berlin; and terrorists cannot be deterred anyway—we don’t know what they value that we might threaten, or who or where it is.”¹²⁴ Nevertheless, it is possible to gain an understanding, at least with re-

120. For a summary of the congressional testimony of Farea al-Muslimi, a pro-American Yemeni activist, see Conor Freidensdorf, “This Yemeni Man Loves America, Hates al-Qaeda, and Says Drone Strikes Make Them Stronger,” *Atlantic*, April 24, 2013. Al-Muslimi’s full testimony is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mD6w4f6OQUU>.

121. Among others that could be cited, see Scott Horton’s interview with Matthew Alexander, the Air Force major who wrote *How to Break a Terrorist*. Horton, “The American Public Has a Right to Know,” *The Stream* blog, *Harpers Magazine*, December 18, 2008, <http://harpers.org/blog/2008/12/the-american-public-has-a-right-to-know-that-they-do-not-have-to-choose-between-torture-and-terror-six-questions-for-matthew-alexander-author-of-how-to-break-a-terrorist/>.

122. A telling and prescient reflection on the U.S. military presence is that of the Egyptian journalist Mohamed Heikal. For Heikal’s thoughts, with context, see Jerry Mark Long, *Saddam’s War of Words* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), pp. 181–184.

123. Polling indicates that Arabs’ greatest disappointment with the Obama administration centers on this issue. See Brookings Institution and Zogby International, *2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll*.

124. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 301. In 2012, however, Schelling reminded us that the historical development of traditional deterrence theory was precariously slow. “During the Cold War,” he writes, “the U.S. government was scandalously slow to learn, or at least to put into operation, the rudiments of deterrence. We

spect to al-Qaida, of what terrorists “value that we might threaten.” It is generally not their lives or possessions, which traditional deterrence theory and practice could reasonably hold at risk. As the army whose men love death, these are believers who have given up both in an exchange with God, gaining the promise of paradise in the bargain (Quran 9:111). Yet the message al-Qaida communicates, and the legitimacy al-Qaida hopes will inhere in it, is another matter.

Already, scholars have proposed theoretical advancements for applying the logic of punishment and denial to terrorism. Empirical evaluations have followed suit. In al-Qaida’s particular case, however, its metanarrative makes clear that something else besides traditional goals and aspirations are at play. Al-Qaida is competing for hearts and minds; failure represents an existential threat. Punishment and denial strategies, standing alone, will prove ill-suited to exploiting the fears and goals that accompany al-Qaida’s metaphysical objectives. Instead, the West must develop and learn to apply the logic and theory of delegitimization. Although delegitimization is far removed from traditional coercion, it shares a common goal: alter and influence adversarial behavior. It does so, we suggest, not solely by weighing costs and benefits, but by considering the beliefs, ideals, and narratives that guide and shape behavior. Tapping into these beliefs and advancing alternative interpretations of what constitutes legitimate conduct will challenge and change behavior.

Two conflicts are being waged in the Middle East and beyond. Each has its logic and its weapons. The more obvious is the asymmetrical war that pits drones and Special Operations forces against roadside bombs and suicide bombers. Both sides struggle for positional advantage or to (re)gain territory. Both forces must concern themselves with the mundane but critical issues of resupply and logistical support. The second conflict—the one that often goes unseen—is that of ideas. On the one side are notions of constitutional liberalism, individual rights, and a respect for religious pluralism, even in a religiously oriented state. On the other is a categorical, all-encompassing, and noncompromising jihadist vision that calls for a renewed caliphate and the implementation of a rigorous and sometimes draconian religious law. That vision informs the metanarrative that al-Qaida promulgates, as it seeks to gain acceptance in Arab and Islamic communities. Delegitimization, we propose, is the strategy of choice to deploy in this second conflict, especially in this season of the Arab Spring.

must hope that learning how to deter terrorists may go more smoothly and more rapidly.” See Schelling, foreword, in Wenger and Wilner, *Deterring Terrorism*, pp. vii–viii.