Exploiting Weakness in the Far Enemy Ideology

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Introduction

Despite our gains in removing al Qaeda from Afghanistan, and dismantling much of its organizational structure, many terrorism experts argue that the United States remains in a dangerous, and perhaps more difficult, security situation.[1] While certainly the fractured state of our key nemesis makes tracking intentions and thwarting individual or small-group action more difficult, we must not fail to recognize the potential advantages of its dispersal and act on them.

Since their routing from Afghanistan, al Qaeda has been deprived of its physical space, training camps, and the ability to openly assemble in large mass. Without these assets, al Qaeda is less able to maintain its preeminence in the jihadist world, and create cohesion around the strategy of targeting the "far enemy" (the United States) first, in order to topple the "near enemy" (Middle Eastern "apostate" governments). Al Qaeda's current attempts to keep the radical jihadist world unified and active via the Internet face significant vulnerabilities.

The aim of this paper is to point out areas where we may take advantage of al Qaeda's fractured state, and encourage the demise of its "Target America First," or far enemy, ideology. To do so we must more closely assess al Qaeda's role as key broker of far enemy ideology and become expert on the internal cleavages and areas of vulnerability that could be exploited. Two will be discussed here:

1. "Soft spots" in Target America First ideology where it experiences resistance from both moderate and radical Muslim groups; and
2. Cracks in the ideological internalization process resulting from reliance on the Internet to replace a physical training ground.

In order to exploit al Qaeda's ideological weak spots we must think clearly about which of our foreign policy alternatives will deepen the rifts in the radical Muslim world, and avoid those that would weld together its competing elements. Specifically, we must steer clear of policies that would move us from the ideological position of far enemy to the personal revenge position of near enemy. Primary among these is torture, whether directly or by proxy agents, as interrogation policy.

Asset No. 1: Resistance to Target America Ideology

While the danger in underestimating bin Laden's "Target America" appeal is apparent, it may be equally dangerous to overstate it. An overblown notion of bin Laden's sway threatens to mask important divisions within moderate and radical circles that can be used to our advantage. Assuming wide-spread solidarity with al Qaeda in the Muslim world will lead policymakers to believe that the window of opportunity for effective, targeted strategy is closed, and that costly militant methods, both in terms of economics and social backlash, must be the solution.

Resistance in the Moderate Muslim World, and Why it is Important

The moderate Muslim world offers plenty of verbal resistance to the current militant jihad, and certainly to the tactic of terrorism. Montasser al-Zayat, a formerly jailed Egyptian radical, joins the bulk of the moderate Muslim world in proclaiming that although they share many of the radical's complaints, they reject confrontational methods, especially those that put non-combatants at risk. Mainstream Muslims do not accept bin Laden's argument that citizens are responsible for the unjust actions of their governments, and are therefore legitimate targets.[2] Despite assurances from the moderate Muslim world, our policymakers more often choose to err on the side of caution. Some have discounted moderate voices entirely, claiming that bin Laden is "an Islamic hero," "that faith's ideal type,"[3] and that he "lives in the heart of every Muslim."[4]

Evidence of bin Laden's popularity seems to abound. His speeches proliferate in Muslim communities on CDs, cassettes, and DVDs, his image stares from posters, pens, T-shirts, and candy wrappers, and Muslim areas have experienced a surge in boy babies named "Osama."[5] Searching below the surface of Muslim common ground with bin Laden, however, may unearth some useful areas of vulnerability. For instance, the abundance of bin Laden logos in Afghanistan did not reflect general Afghan interest in joining al Qaeda. The number of Afghan nationals in al Qaeda ranks is remarkably low.[6] Surface expressions of support for bin Laden in that region proved a poor barometer for measuring active support. A thorough investigation into what kept Afghans from the present and easily accessible ranks of al Qaeda may yield useful insight into weak spots of our enemy.

Polling may also be deceiving, unless the right questions are asked. Rohan Gunaratna points out that 2002 polling in the Middle East which showed strong popularity for bin Laden also revealed that most Muslims did not believe he carried out the 9/11 attacks—arguing that they were the result of a Mossad or CIA conspiracy instead.[7] One reason for clinging to conspiracy theory regarding 9/11, is that while the idea of a hero standing up to the United States appeals, many Muslims remain deeply disturbed by terrorism tactics. In short, surface popularity should not be taken at face value. More sophisticated "cultural intelligence" tools need be constructed for measuring bin Laden's pull in the Muslim world, and for unearthing areas where a credible voice may deteriorate his image.

The same can be said of our assumptions concerning the Muslim grievance base toward the United States. While anger and hatred toward the United States from the Muslim world certainly exists, its intensity and prevalence are often exaggerated in current terrorism literature. Many authors and U.S. policymakers fall into the trap of assuming broad level hatred based on the list of grievances bin Laden *advertises*, rather than focusing on those issues that sincerely resonate with the general Muslim public.

Mike Scheuer, in his book *Imperial Hubris*, lays out the length of bin Laden grievances ranging from the obvious (United States' support of Israel), to the less-so (independence given to Christian East Timor but denied to Muslim Bosnia) as evidence to why "Muslims perceive U.S. actions in the Muslim world in a manner like that with which they perceived Soviet actions in Afghanistan."[8] Not only is the list convincing, (the logical basis for most grievances is, at least at

the surface, supported by facts), it is long. Taken as a whole, it would lead a reader to the conclusion that we face a cohesive, logically based, and impenetrable Muslim hatred.

An interest in probing deeper into the salience of this list will, I hope, be sparked by two elementary examples of counter-intuitive empirical data:

1. Bin Laden advertises that Muslims are angry at the United States for supporting Russia in its war with Chechnya. Interestingly enough, however, none of ninety-five recent articles on the subject (as of February 11, 2005) produced by Muslim news giant al Jazeera, made mention of U.S. policy or its support of Russia whatsoever.[9]
2. Palestinian oppression is used as a consistent centerpiece by bin Laden in his propaganda war against the United States. Given the situation on the ground in Gaza and the West Bank, one would certainly expect to see a high level of U.S. hatred, and eager support for al Qaeda and its allies. Again, empirical results do not follow the direction expected. Marc Sageman's research on the profiles of far enemy terrorists (sample size 400) revealed that Palestinians, for whatever reason, did not flock to the ranks of al Qaeda. Their numbers are negligible.[10] Palestinian attitudes, while vitriolic when in front of a television camera, are far more temperate on the ground. Visitors to the Palestinian territories report that Americans are well-received, and that Palestinians, for the most part, tend to view American citizens as generally good people who are uninformed, and duped by the media, about their own government's policies.[11]

Greatly refining our understanding of our current position in the Muslim mind holds strong security value. If we are to be successful in constructing a narrative counter to al Qaeda's[12], it must be informed by a clearer understanding of local worldviews. In addition, as we discover which items on the list hold genuine grievance value for Muslims around the world, we can better determine which deserve our focus for remedy.

I am certainly willing to agree with the bulk of writers on al Qaeda that redoubled efforts to remedy Muslim grievances will do very little to dissuade the current core of global jihadists from attacking us. If the Palestinian issue were resolved tomorrow, core al Qaeda members would not lose their passion for hitting the United States. However, successful resolving of priority Muslim grievances *would* resonate, over time, with the larger Muslim population. A pro-active, violent ideology will have trouble drawing new recruits and operating under the cover of a supportive population without a strong grievance base to fuel it. Global jihadists would be disabled to the extent that they are dependent on private donors for funding, and on regular citizens to "look the other way." The hearts and minds of the moderate Muslim world will go a long way in determining who will win the war.

Already, the moderate Muslim push-back is becoming more organized and visible. Moderate Muslims in London chased disruptive radicals from a meeting at a local mosque after the militants stood to berate the speaker. Mainstream Muslims in Britain also saw to it that radical preacher Abu Abdullah was ousted from Finsbury Park mosque, reclaiming it for the city's moderates, and sealing the deal by changing the locks.[13] In Spain, Muslim organizations have sent memorial wreaths to the Atocha train station, have draped a banner denouncing terrorism on the country's largest mosque, donated blood at local mosques to show solidarity with the victims of terrorism, and recently issued a *fatwa* condemning bin Laden and al Qaeda members.[14] Moderate Muslims are fighting to keep their vision of Islam the predominant one. The extent to which they are willing to accept aid in the form of financial resources, access to media outlets, sponsored travel, or other tools to assist their struggle, it should be offered.

Resistance in the Radical Muslim World

Convincing jihadists of various stripes to use their time, talents, and physical resources to attack the United States (far enemy) rather than home governments (near enemy) has been no small task for al Qaeda leaders. Most analysts studying the anti-American terror phenomenon tend to paper over differences in the jihadist world and discount obstacles to the Target America ideology. Their approach is likely due to the fact that:

1. These obstacles have been overcome on more than one occasion; and
2. We tend to rely on worst case scenarios which lump most jihadists into the Target America category.

This information gap leaves us in danger of creating policy which has the effect of strengthening unity in our foe, when deepening debilitating cleavages was an option.

Evidence of the desire to focus resources on near-enemy targets can be found in unexpected places, one of which is al Qaeda's terrorist how-to manual, *Military Studies in the Jihad Against the Tyrants*. Gunaratna informs us that this manual was reserved for "special ops" terrorists and not widely available to the rank and file.[15] The manual was found in the hotel room of the 1998 embassy bombers. Given the fact that this attack was a closely directed, top-down al Qaeda operation, carried out to broadcast commitment to the famous 1998 anti-American *fatwa*, we would certainly expect a full renunciation of the far enemy in the pages of the perpetrators key instruction manual. Instead, bin Laden seems to have left the original near enemy grievance base, penned by an Egyptian instructor sometime between 1993-94[16], largely intact. This is hard to understand, coming from such an accomplished propagandist as bin Laden[17]. One must ask why, even though his far enemy ideology had been in place for some time (at least since 1996), and had been formally announced to the world (February 1998), still the piece of emotional propaganda held in the hands of his acting terrorists focused almost solely on the near enemy:

- The manual does not detail the evils of, or justify attacks against the United States. The height of vitriol where the United States is concerned is a paragraph accusing America of setting up Rotary and Lions clubs, and foreign schools abroad (page 7 of the UK translation).
- Real venom is reserved for Egyptian, Syrian, Saudi, and Jordanian governments. Accusations of apostate activity and graphic accounts of torture at their hands provide the emotive base for action and the legitimacy for spilling blood (pages 170-72).

The most ready explanation is that bin Laden allows the near-enemy emotive driver preeminence, as long as it steers toward a U.S. target. Which factors account for his ability to harness diverse local grievances and control target choices deserves much closer investigation.

One reason that the popularity of al Qaeda's Target America First ideology has been assumed, rather than investigated, is because al Qaeda, as the primary far enemy ideologue, did very little recruiting. Recruits came to them[18]. Upon closer scrutiny, however, motives outside of Target America ideology present themselves as the primary recruitment drivers. Most active participants of the organization we call "al Qaeda" may be divided into two camps:

1. Recruits enamored with the idea of fighting jihad, in whatever legitimate form, who came to Afghanistan ripe for encouragement toward *shaheed* (martyrdom);
2. Co-opted, pre-existing jihad groups.

The first set—unaffiliated recruits who made their way to Afghanistan or other training areas in small-pod peer groups[19]—have proved to be fairly flexible in their willingness to be pointed toward an appropriate jihad "target." They are drawn in more by the concept of fighting for Islam than by desire to hit a specific enemy. Evidence for this may be found even within the group of 9/11 perpetrators. The initial target for the Hamburg group was not the United States, but Russia.

They left Germany intent on fighting in Chechnya. A chance meeting on a train redirected them to Afghanistan. Through a series of connections they were co-opted by al Qaeda and assigned to the 9/11 "planes operation."[20] Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, primary planner of the 9/11 attacks, reports that a similar target flexibility existed for the initial four suicide operatives recruited by bin Laden (Mihdhar, Hazmi, Khallad, and Yemeni). They committed to end their lives in a jihad mission, not knowing whether their target would be the United States or Asia.[21]

New recruits seeking opportunity to engage in an active jihad, and even martyrdom, look for their sacrifice to be directed by a credible, and successful, jihad leader. Al Qaeda fit this bill. Bin Laden's international renown, big bang operations, and financial stature provided a powerful "success" attraction for young recruits. Without direction from a credible organization, it is unlikely that these recruits would contravene prophetic advice, which tells Muslims to attack the near, rather than far, enemy first, or that they would actively engage in a less clear-cut defensive jihad (target America) than those otherwise available to them (i.e. Chechnya). For most newly radicalized Islamists, targeting America is the result of a highly socialized ideological process rather than an individually inspired act of revenge.[22]

The second set of al-Qaeda followers have come largely in the form of co-opted pre-existing jihad groups. Many of these seem to have been drawn to al Qaeda largely for practical, resource-based reasons that allowed them to keep their organizations alive, or provide them with the means to achieve dominance over competing groups in the home front.[23] The ideological heritage for most of these groups espouses the near enemy stance. Bin Laden stands in conflict with many of their revered spiritual mentors.[24] His pull with diverse, locally grown jihadist organizations rests on his ability to convince them that diverting resources to the far enemy target will result in the toppling of their own "apostate" regime. That success is inconsistent, at best.

Numerous accounts exist of al Qaeda courting being turned down by other jihadist groups. For instance, Indonesia's premier Islamic terrorist group, Lashkar Jihad, turned down financial assistance overtures from bin Laden since it involved some degree of control and influence over the group, and the Indonesians wanted to remain focused on their domestic agenda.[25] The same may be said for the Algerian GIA, and branches of Ansar ul Islam.[26]

Al Qaeda's original membership has fluxed due to this issue as well. Sageman claims that rather large numbers of al Qaeda 's previous membership stayed behind in Sudan when it became clear that bin Laden had shifted to an entrenched far enemy stance. The small numbers who accompanied his move back to Afghanistan revealed the controversy of his position.[27]

Perhaps most telling is the outrage exhibited by the rank and file of the two Egyptian groups when their leaders pledged allegiance to The World Islamic Front as signatories to bin Laden's 1998 far enemy *fatwa*. Rifai Taha, leader of the EIG, was forced by his own organization to recant, and Ayman al-Zawahiri responded to Egyptian Islamic Jihad's (EIJ) fury by threatening to step down as leader.[28] Most explanations concerning al-Zawahiri and Taha's decisions to sign with bin Laden convincingly argue that their decision was practical, based on resource and credibility deficits, and not initially due to shared Target America First ideology.[29] The extent to which this ideology has been internalized (rather than complied with) by the significant numbers of Egyptian jihadists in al Qaeda leadership (those that would manage the organization in the event of bin Laden's demise) is a matter that deserves serious investigation.

Asset No. 2: Cracks in the Ideological Process

Al-Zawahiri, today's most prolific al Qaeda ideologue, sheds light on the value of a common physical space in the ideological internalization process:

A jihadist movement needs an arena that would act like an incubator where its seeds would grow and where it can acquire practical experience in combat, politics and organizational matters.[30]

Without the ability to assemble in critical mass, al Qaeda is deprived of some of the necessary "incubation" tools for keeping competing factions harnessed to the Target America ideology. Some may be tempted to discount the security value of removing al Qaeda from its physical training space (Afghanistan) by pointing out that would-be terrorists may still learn tradecraft and conspire with co-jihadists over the Internet. They argue that common space on the Internet is providing a sufficient replacement for a physical meeting ground, and therefore al Qaeda's far enemy ideology is in no jeopardy of deterioration. I disagree. While the Internet may indeed be useful in keeping a certain level of fervor alive, it has significant weaknesses that may serve to deteriorate an ideology as much as build it. Specifically, the Internet is an open forum, a rather level playing field where any number of ideas may compete for devotion from the same audience.

Internet Vulnerabilities

Disagreement over target choices and infighting over scarcer resources provides the United States an opportunity to allow al Qaeda and its Target America stance to suffer significant set-backs in an internal war of attrition. A pro-active strategy should have us seeking to agitate splits in the radical world and amplify competing moderate ideologies wherever we have a legitimate voice to do so. Specific areas where cyberspace may offer exploitable vulnerabilities are:

Devotion to the ideological hero

In a closed space, competition for the "hero spot" is more limited. A trainee is surrounded by peers who revere the same figure, and the culture of the group is often based on unquestioned obedience. Loyalty to the leader is rewarded socially. Rather intense physical and emotional experiences are tied to the leadership of the ideologies' particular personality.

Internet hero worship is much more difficult to come by. Its open forum allows for exposure to competing voices for leadership spots. Mutual criticism diminishes the stature and leadership credibility of all involved (the consistent conundrum of open elections). In addition, opposition voices are more harsh, and more frequent, when the source can speak with e-anonymity.

Study of a sacred text ("sacred" in the sense of "accepted as profound truth")

Confined training spaces allow for much greater control over interpretation of key texts—in this case, the Holy Qu'ran and other revered Islamic doctrine as well as the writings of select jihadists. Al-Zawahiri has produced profound literary works, explaining in compelling detail the righteousness, and proper practical application of al Qaeda's cause. These can be taught, and convincingly explained to a captive crowd. In his *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, however, al-Zawahiri notes the difficulty in using this same logic to reach and persuade, "the masses."

The jihadist movement must move toward the masses, defend their honor, prevent injustice, and guide them along the path to victory...we must not blame the *umma* for not reacting or not being up to the task. We are to blame for not having been able to get our message across, not having been able to convey our compassion and the sacrifices we have made.[31]

Most all ideology and texts taught in the camps are likely available on the Internet—and much, much more. So much more that the effect is quite overwhelming. *Fatwas* are issued in bulk, some of them over 1,000 pages long. The information overload of the Internet is as likely to confuse interest in militant jihad as it is to compel it. Ideological calls to action are far more effective when

received through a simplification and "clarity" process, in well-timed doses, from a trusted hero-source.

Affirmation from brotherhood peers

Rob Boyd and Peter Richardson have done extensive research of the power of conformism in human relations.[32] They argue that one of our evolved social survival mechanisms is to participate in what is working, and being socially rewarded, locally. While much of the Muslim world has deep concerns about U.S. policy, there is great division on the proper action to influence that policy. Participants in camps are removed from debate, and receive strong positive peer pressure to participate in behaviors that the larger society may question. Elbow-to-elbow participation buoys confidence in the legitimacy of the cause. Participants urge each other on and boost morale generally in a validating cycle of peer affirmation.

Cyberspace lacks the trust level that a common physical experience achieves. Brian Jenkins, in his work *Countering al Qaeda*, states:

> Prior to September 11, the training camps in Afghanistan provided a way of testing commitment. In Afghanistan, volunteers faced hardship and sacrifice, as well as opportunities for combat. With practical training came further indoctrination. The recruits became part of a secret international brotherhood that superseded all other affiliations and loyalties.[33]

Intimacy/trust levels achieved in chat rooms may be surprisingly profound, but will rarely be sealed with action until discussants met with each other in person, and assess credibility in an eye-to-eye conversation. The process for establishing the type of trust that precedes action will be more lengthy, and more complicated. Given the risky nature of new relationships, Internet connectors are likely to meet in much smaller numbers, and will be hard pressed to achieve the atmosphere of large-group conformism to jihad norms that the camps provide.

Opportunity to act on ideological beliefs

In the case of illegal organizations, this often comes in the form of "dipping hands in blood"— practical experience which violates the participants previous moral code and seals him to the new organization (the name references Shakespeare's portrayal of the Senators' commitment to mutually dip their hands in Caesar's blood after spilling it, so that none may later profess disagreement with the action). The human brain seems nearly perfect in its capability to rationalize behavior when choosing between deep, perhaps salvation-threatening levels of guilt on one hand, and a validating ideology on the other. After "dipping hands in blood," indoctrinated graduates can move beyond the affirming confines of the training camp, into a more complicated world, and keep their rationalizing lenses intact.

Large, stateless, or state-sanctioned training spaces buoy the confidence of trainees to participate in illicit activity for at least two reasons. First, the risk of being caught and punished by authorities is much lower, resulting in higher participation levels,[34] and secondly, the legitimacy of questionable activity as "Islamic" or "necessary" is more easily achieved with a large and physically present support group.

Success draw

No ideology lasts long if its basic precepts are not successful. Thus far, al Qaeda's tactics have brought on much heavier U.S. involvement in the Middle East, not less. Their organizational dispersal and unsatisfactory common ground of the Internet have resulted in smaller, local attacks by loosely affiliated groups. Many are pledging alliance with al Qaeda, but continuing to

operate in their own home front. Al Qaeda has become stronger as a symbol of Muslim resistance, but weaker as a command center for directing attacks against the United States Our behavior in the Muslim world will play a significant role in determining whether this portion of their influence continues to fade, or is infused with new energy.

Potential Liabilities: Policy to Avoid

Our greatest asset, at this moment in time, is bin Laden's ideological weakness. We must be sophisticated enough, however, to recognize our advantage and refrain from the types of brash, wide-sweep action that will galvanize otherwise diversely interested jihadists. Policy that capitalizes on bin Laden's weak spots must deepen jihadist splits rather than close the ranks. Stronger investment in cultural intelligence, deeper probing into moderate Muslim positions, and closer attention to rifts in the militant jihadist world will enable us to more accurately pinpoint areas for effective action. Our failure to thoroughly investigate areas of advantage may result in crafting policy that assumes monolithic Muslim hatred, and reverses the very assets we have in hand.

Graphic accounts of torture at the hands of apostate governments shout for revenge from the pages of bin Laden's jihad manual. Engaging in this practice will remove any strategic advantage we enjoy as the ideological far enemy and entrench us in a war of personal revenge. Unlike ideology, personal revenge requires no socialization process, brotherhood affirmation, hero, or sacred text to compel it. We will have removed, through our own action, many of the ideological obstacles now standing in bin Laden's way.

As many who have fought terrorism before us, we are in danger of being tempted by short-term wins, which information from torture may provide, at the price of long-term failure.[35] Referencing Mubarak's crack-down on Egyptian terrorism Gilles Kepel writes:

> The interrogations, torture and socialization of prison turned most of the men rounded up by Mubarak into hardened militants, thirsty for revenge: they would become the foot soldiers of terrorism.[36]

Not only will torture create a dedicated core of anti-American jihadists, their stories will lose us the "hearts and minds" campaign with the larger Muslim population. Our position is already precarious. Routine round-ups in Falluja created deep discontent there. In November 2003, a young man in Falluja explained to reporter Mark Danner:

> For Fallujans it is a *sham*e to have foreigners break down their doors. It is a *shame* for them to have foreigners stop and search their women. It is a *shame* for the foreigners to put a bag over their heads, to make a man lie on the ground with your shoe on his neck. This is a great *shame*, you understand? This is a great *shame* for the whole tribe.

> It is the duty of that man, and of that tribe, to get revenge on this soldier—to kill that man. Their duty is to attack them, to wash the *shame*. The *shame* is a stain, a dirty thing; they have to wash it. No sleep—we cannot sleep until we have revenge. They have to kill soldiers.[37]

Should our behavior in Iraq and elsewhere produce revenge as a widespread emotive force, we would indeed be facing a dangerous world of ideologically unified, socially and financially supported Target America global jihadists who dedicate their lives to doing us harm, and multiply in numbers impossible to track. We will miss strategic opportunities to capitalize on the cracks in bin Laden's ideological machine, and will ensure that we are fighting the War on Terror for decades to come.

About the Author

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