The Jihadist International:

Al Qaeda's Advance in the Levant

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Introduction

September 11, 2001, marked the coming to the fore of the "jihadist international," a loosely connected movement of militant and terrorist groups worldwide with a common ideology and increasingly shared tactics and methods. While such groups still have limited recruitment potential eight years on, they have inflicted substantial physical damage and have forced free societies to take costly precautionary measures. Perhaps most alarming, the global jihadist movement has continued simultaneously to feed off of and perpetuate the growing radicalization that Muslim culture has endured over the last few decades.

The purpose of *The Jihadist International* series is to review critically the record, plans, and prospects of al Qaeda, as the main franchise of the global jihad, in its major areas of activity around the world—as presented, conceived, and attempted by al Qaeda's ideologues and affiliates themselves. Through an analysis of jihadist self-assessments, culled from the open sources used by extremist networks for dissemination and recruitment, this series will provide a window into the patterns of thought potentially shaping future waves of jihadist action. It also will underline the longer-term effects that radical propositions have begun to imprint on Muslim culture.

From the question of Palestine to the utopian and dystopian dream of a twenty-first-century caliphate, al Qaeda is striving to invoke sensitive themes in order to shift the conflict in which it is engaged from one between a discredited fringe and a unified world community to a clash between civilizations. This evolving effort, used to set a framework for al Qaeda–linked terrorism, will thus be examined in this series in both its retrospective and prospective dimensions.

1

Al Qaeda's Ethos, Resources, and Goals

As part of the landscape of global politics, ideology, and security in the early twenty-first century, al Qaeda presents a number of paradoxes. It is a diffuse network whose core members are estimated to be few in number, yet its penetration of multiple societies, and ability to cause serious death and destruction, has prompted the allocation of disproportionate resources toward countering its possible actions. Though al Qaeda may be driven by an ethos that seems transplanted from medieval dungeons and twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, it still has proven apt in its use of cyberspace as a medium for recruitment, propagation, training, and even preparation of operations. In fact, at times, al Qaeda appears to exist principally in virtual reality; its forays into the real world are, however, invariably laden with damage and pain that is anything but virtual.

The Quasi-Official Declaration of al Qaeda in the Levant

The recent declaration by an individual believed to be an al Qaeda "spokesperson" of the existence of an active branch of the organization in the Levant falls into the same paradoxical framework of a reality that, while often not tangible or verifiable, nevertheless possesses distinctly lethal potential. The spokesperson in question, a frequent contributor to jihadist online forums whose essays are regularly published and distributed by "official" al Qaeda outlets, uses the handle "Asad al-Jihad 2" (AJ2, or the Lion of Jihad 2). "Asad al-Jihad 1" is presumably reserved for Osama bin Laden, whom AJ2 consistently refers to as "[my] father"—using a variant of the Arabic word usually reserved for biological parents (*al-walid*). AJ2 is probably the most prominent member of a disparate group of writers, bloggers, and contributors—who can be termed "al Qaeda ideologues"—who both provide the international jihadist movement with its rationale and point potential recruits to regions of interest.[1]

The "declaration" came in the form of a deliberate revelation at the end of AJ2's February 7, 2009, response to questions submitted online by sympathizers and jihadist forum visitors. Since the beginning of the hostilities in Gaza in December 2008, jihadist forums have been flooded with inquiries about al Qaeda's plans in the Palestinian theater. Most of these messages expressed intense desire for quick, robust al Qaeda action. Some, however, expressed disappointment and dismay at al Qaeda's failure to secure a leading role, or even to participate, in the uneven confrontation in Gaza, which inflamed sentiments across the Arab Internet community.[2]

In succession, the global leadership of al Qaeda, as well as that of its local affiliates in Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa, released written statements and audio and video messages expressing determined support—all while denouncing the Arab political order for its failure to act in Gaza's defense and urging Muslims worldwide to join the Gaza jihad.[3] What these pronouncements distinctly lacked, though, was any specific indication that al Qaeda would support its position with action.

At the conclusion of his written answers on February 7, AJ2 addressed a question about who was responsible for the aborted launch of Katyusha rockets into northern Israel on December 25, 2008, just prior to the Israel-Hamas confrontation in Gaza, and for the actual launching of five rockets on January 8, 2009[4]—actions from which Hezbollah was quick to distance itself. The same query also addressed the whereabouts of al-Qa'idah fi Bilad al-Sham, a previously unknown organization that issued a lone communiqué in 2007 following the unexpectedly difficult

confrontation between the Lebanese armed forces and Fath al-Islam.[5] This latter terrorist formation had occupied the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Barid in northern Lebanon and was increasingly daring in its raids on neighboring communities and its maneuvers outside of the camp, suggesting plans and designs beyond the Palestinian enclave. Skirmishes between Fath al-Islam and the Lebanese authorities degenerated on May 20, 2007, into a sudden massacre of Lebanese conscripts in their sleep, prompting the Lebanese armed forces to engage in a full-scale assault on the refugee camp—a battle that lasted until September 2, before Fath al-Islam's routing and the restoration of the status quo in Nahr al-Barid.

The Nahr al-Barid battle was a defining, albeit inconclusive, confrontation that saw al Qaeda–style jihadists declare war on the very concept of the nation-state in Lebanon and beyond. Confessions by captured Fath al-Islam fighters indicated plans to declare an "emirate" in northern Lebanon in order to unravel the Lebanese state.[6] The major unresolved question that emerged from the conflict was the extent of the alleged connection, if any, between the Fath al-Islam insurgency and al Qaeda as a global jihadist movement. In his lengthy answer, AJ2 provided much clarification: while Fath al-Islam may have embraced the ideology and tactics of global jihadism, it was not formally associated with it. AJ2 expressed pride and support for Shakir al-Absi, the Jordanian-born leader of Fath al-Islam who survived the Nahr al-Barid battle and subsequently eluded the Lebanese security agencies in their quest to capture him. In contrast to the silence of al Qaeda and its affiliates throughout the Nahr al-Barid confrontation, AJ2 proclaimed admiration for the "epic" performance of Fath al-Islam fighters and bestowed on Absi the grandiose honorific of "the Vanquisher of the Cross and the Lion of the Levant." He likewise revealed that al Qaeda was closely monitoring developments affecting Absi and his group since their escape from Nahr al-Barid.[7]

More significantly, AJ2 linked the communiqué released in the aftermath of the Nahr al-Barid fighting by al-Qa'idah fi Bilad al-Sham, a then-unknown organization, to a string of diverse attacks that have occurred in Lebanon since at least 2005 to reveal the prior existence of an organized, al Qaeda–sanctioned affiliate in Lebanon. It was indeed al Qaeda who was responsible for the Katyusha attacks in December 2008 and January 2009, AJ2 asserted. With his assertion, the dispute over the existence of an al Qaeda affiliate in the Levant is supposed to end. It is an organization endowed by "a Shura Council, a Sharia committee, a general command, and experienced field commanders with expertise in all aspects of international Jihad."[8] It is a deeply rooted formation that was sponsored and nurtured by the late Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the infamous Jordanian-born leader of the al Qaeda Organization of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, the most notorious jihadist formation in Iraq. It is an organization, according to AJ2, with a meticulous long-term plan that has purposely remained underground until now, but whose existence and impending revelation have been alluded to by the leadership of international jihad, including bin Laden and his second-in-command, Ayman al Zawahiri. With this revelation, and the group's presumed subsequent actions, AJ2 asserted, "the Jews will have to forget all the wars in which they have engaged; they will have to forget the horrors of Nazism and the wars with Arabs," while jihad supporters worldwide will indeed have reasons to rejoice.[9]

Al Qaeda in the Levant (AQL) has thus emerged as an official affiliate of global jihad through unorthodox means. Jihadist forums, replete with communiqués and multimedia releases from a plethora of jihadist organizations—each studded with a colorful logo and consistent branding—still lack the AQL equivalents: the ever-expanding list of communiqués and releases are attributed to organizations engaged in jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq, Algeria, Somalia, and the Caucasus, but not to AQL. Nonetheless, with the authoritative pronouncement of AJ2, a recognized spokesperson for global jihad in its virtual reality, al Qaeda has overcome what seemed to be a vexing obstacle in its quest for real world legitimacy in Arab political culture: a "presence" in Palestine, however symbolic, however fictive.

Al Qaeda, Arab Political Culture, and the Question of Palestine

The Muslim world is today the scene of an asymmetrical confrontation between a conventional, pluralistic, lived Islam, expressed diversely in the multitude of societies where Muslims form communities, and aggressive Islamism, a global ideological movement seeking, in its most forceful expressions, to transform the current Muslim reality into one regimented, religion-based, totalitarian ideal. The asymmetry stems from the fact that conventional Muslim cultures, for reasons that are both common across the Muslim world and particular to individual Muslim societies, are largely lagging in generating effective responses to the Islamist challenge. The way in which Islamism might affect the shape and structure of Muslim communities in the current absence of a counterbalancing movement remains an unwritten chapter in world history.

Aggressive Islamism manifests itself as two major global phenomena, with distinct characteristics, varying in enmity, rivalry, competition, and cautious cooperation: the centralized, Iran-based network of Islamist activist groups (both Shia and Sunni, including the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and the diffuse, al Qaeda–led network of radical Sunni Islamist formations. The recruitment of Sunni Islamist groups into the Iran-based network is itself an indication of a deeply rooted, albeit tactical, division within Sunni Islamism over two approaches to the common goal of Islamization—that is, the transformation of Muslim societies and polities along lines consistent with the Islamist worldview. One is a gradualist bottom-up approach—with clear parallels and synergies with mainline Shia Islamism—developed and promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood movement and derived from the Egyptian-based Islamic revivalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The other is a revolutionary, top-down approach, adopted by al Qaeda and predicated on Saudi-based "Salafism"—a literalist and irredentist recasting of Islamic history and heritage.

Al Qaeda represents the culmination of the Sunni Islamist movement. It combines elements of Salafism with "jihadism"—the religiously based legitimization of armed action as a means to achieve political ends—against organizational and operational structures that benefit from both twentieth-century totalitarian experiences and turn-of-the-millennium globalism. As a universal project, with an explicit vision of world domination, al Qaeda is not concerned, in principle, with any particular cause of Muslim populations. Still, the repertoire of causes that have emerged in the wake of twentieth-century decolonization and international conflict have forced al Qaeda to construct narratives directed at specific populations.

None of these causes has equaled in its symbolic importance the question of Palestine. Palestine has dominated Arab political culture, virtually since the inception of a common public intellectual space in the Arabic-speaking societies of the Middle East and North Africa in the aftermath of World War I. The plight of the Palestinians, under occupation or in exile, is the primary and openly stated reason for this centrality. This is, however, not sufficient in itself to explain Palestine's at times exclusive hegemony over Arab political discourse. A multitude of factors has contributed to the embrace of the Palestinian cause by regime apologists and regime opponents in the Arab world—whether as a means to channel public frustration and maintain authority prerogatives or to pressure extant regimes and gain revolutionary legitimacy against them. At the pedestrian level of the Arab citizen, the symbolism of the injustice suffered by the Palestinians and their struggle to correct it is a potent focal point vicariously substituting for other grievances that cannot be redressed.

The omnipresence of the question of Palestine in Arab political thinking has developed into an interpretive prism through which local, regional, and international conditions are understood. Detached from empirical assessments, these interpretations, developed and propagated by the mainstream Arab media, have yielded an inordinate number of conspiracy theories, with the United States at first assuming the role of the lured blind actor, then the

willing conspirator, and, more recently, the evil puppet master. Israel today fills the complementary role in the conspiracy equation, despite the fact that it was originally the surreptitious instigator when the assumption held that the United States was deceived into adopting pro-Israeli policies. It was only when the assessment moved in the direction of considering the United States as the source of all ills did Israel become the local tool of the global hegemon. The transition from an Israeli-focused to an American-focused conspiracy framework is an ongoing development in Arab political culture, with both the al Qaeda–led Sunni Salafist-jihadist movement and the Iran-led jihadist network (both Shia and Sunni) actively engaged in effecting the change. A disparity thus exists between a "street-level" Arab political culture still consumed with the Palestinian question and a media, intelligentsia, and activist political culture that is moving toward understanding the question of Palestine as a symptom, not a cause, of the current Arab conundrum, with U.S. imperialism being assigned the real responsibility.

Al Qaeda Doctrine and Palestine

While Palestine is still central in Arab popular culture, its place in al Qaeda's doctrine is more nuanced. In fact, in addition to the predominant Salafist-jihadist identification of the United States (rather than Israel) as the main external enemy, the centrality of the question of Palestine is severely undermined by the Salafist-jihadist postulation that the entire Muslim world—with the exception of a few fictive entities, namely the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Islamic State of Iraq, the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus, and the Shabab-ruled territory in Somalia—is governed by *Taghut*, illegitimate systems not based on true Islam. National and nationalist aspirations are deemed irrelevant in the future global caliphate to which al Qaeda aspires. Thus, in theory, there is no particularity for the Palestinian situation. Whether the locale is Palestine, Algeria, or Uzbekistan, the obligation of jihad on true Muslims is one and the same: a struggle that ends only with the imposition of Islamist rule on the totality of the population, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.[10]

While al Qaeda has internalized the frequent anti-Jewish bigotry and occasional anti-Jewish racism native to Arab culture, as well as various forms of imported Western anti-Semitism, its main imagery in referring to its existential enemy is inspired by Christianity, not Judaism. Crosses are prominent in al Qaeda target practice, rather than Stars of David. "Crusader" is the pejorative label of choice applied to enemies, while "Zionist," with its connotations of evil world power, has fallen out of usage in the discourse of many al Qaeda ideologues in favor of the contempt-filled generic "Jew." The "massacre of Gaza"—that is, the alarmingly high casualty count suffered by the Palestinian population as a result of the Israeli war on Hamas in December 2008 and January 2009—is thus not blamed on "the Zionists," as is the inclination in Arab nationalist and leftist circles, but instead is characterized as then–U.S. president-elect Barack Obama's "gift" to the Palestinians. Lest this change of focus be misinterpreted as a softening in the enmity toward Israel and the Jews, al Qaeda and sister organizations have standardized the use of a distorted derivation from a Quranic parable of transfiguration, thus making "the progeny of monkeys and swine" an established euphemism for Jews. Another derogatory practice in common use in Salafist-jihadist circles is the application of the word *Yahud* (Jews), stripped of the definite article as a collective name. This practice, however, is only a supplemental disparagement, since virtually any reference to Jews lacking a positive qualification is, in Arab culture, *ipso facto* derogatory.[11]

From a dogmatic point of view, al Qaeda's doctrine has often displayed unease about the place of Palestine in Arab political discourse. Centrality, from al Qaeda's perspective, ought to be reserved for the establishment of divine rule on earth; the fetishism of Palestine, as practiced by nationalists, leftists, and human rights advocates alike, endows Palestine with an importance that dilutes or rivals the true purpose of the struggle. Abu Yahya al-Libi,

a second-generation leader and spokesperson for al Qaeda, underlined in his reaction to the last Gaza confrontation the tension between the generic yet assertive support that al Qaeda reserves for the Palestinians in their struggle and the rejection of the Palestinian fetish in Arab discourse. Al Qaeda, Libi asserts, recognizes Palestine as *ard al-ribat* (the land of confrontation [with the West]).[12] There is, however, no ideological premium on an active role for the network in Palestine. Still, the al Qaeda leadership has productively referenced the Palestinian cause in order to elicit public support in the wider Muslim world in general, and in the Arab context in particular.

A distinct, inverse relationship can be observed in Arab political rhetoric between the recourse to the Palestinian question and self-assessments of progress toward political goals: Whether it is Saddam Hussein, Hassan Nasrallah, Zarqawi, or bin Laden, in times of perceived ascendancy, references to Palestine are formulaic and largely submerged within the elaboration of desired goals—ranging from world domination to the code of conduct to be imposed on subject populations. In moments of retreat, however, pronouncements are stripped of much of their assertive content, relegating the discourse to the affirmation of the justice of the Palestinian cause. Under sanctions and under attack, all the way to the moment of his execution, Hussein proclaimed the irrevocable Arabness of Palestine. With illusions of a "divine victory" following the Israel-Lebanon war in 2006, Nasrallah depicted a world free of the "Great Satan"; the prospects of his own endeavor's failure, however, have invited him back to reflections on justice for Palestine. Similarly, a battered Zarqawi proclaimed that he was engaged in fighting in Iraq "with an eye on Jerusalem." As to bin Laden, while the question of Palestine was included in the list of grievances articulated in his declaration of jihad, its prominence was gradually enhanced, with the later identification of the suffering of the Palestinians and the actions of the Israelis as motivators in the shaping of al Qaeda's anti-American and anti-West campaign. With the severe crippling of al Qaeda's capacities in the last few years, Palestine has increased in prominence in bin Laden's sparse pronouncements.[13]

In fact, even when al Qaeda is silent on the question of Palestine, the current dominant acceptance in the Arab "street" of a dualist nature of global conflict (United States/Israel/the West versus Arabs/Islam/Palestine) assigns to its anti-American and anti-Western actions a pro-Palestinian value. Even with the absence of any effective presence of al Qaeda in Palestine, and with the apparent lack of any particularism for the struggle in Palestine within al Qaeda doctrine, the references to the plight of the Palestinians in al Qaeda public pronouncements have provided the jihadist network with considerable support among Arabs and Muslims.

Al Qaeda's Opportunism

With such a positive predisposition, an engagement by al Qaeda on the Palestinian scene would be expected to amplify the support currently received by the jihadist network by an order of magnitude. Yet, the most glaring omission in al Qaeda's global operations is the absence of any meaningful action by its operatives in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Even if the recent claims by AJ2 attributing responsibility for the sporadic rocket attacks from south Lebanon to AQL are true, al Qaeda still lacks credible association with any Palestinian faction, whether in the West Bank and Gaza or in the refugee camps in neighboring countries. In fact, al Qaeda's record in the Levant has been mediocre when compared to its actions in adjacent regions, in particular Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula.[14]

The Levant is not merely another theater of operations that al Qaeda may or may not opt to join. Since the emergence of the post–World War I nation-state system in the Middle East, Levantine society and culture, with the Palestinian cause at the heart of its concerns, have been instrumental in shaping the character and direction of Arab political culture. A framework of reference in political culture in the Middle East has consistently been one in which the Palestinian question is concentrically surrounded by

Levantine, Arab, and Muslim layers, with the Levantine backdrop to Palestine serving as an incubator of ideas and movements.

The voracious opportunism of al Qaeda naturally suggests that its absence from the Levant is not due to the region being assigned a lower priority. Instead, as described in the following chapter, al Qaeda has so far failed to take root as a result of multiple factors that have constituted obstacles to its emergence. Al Qaeda, in ideology and practice, is still alien to the Levant. Still, from the point of view of Islamists sympathetic to its cause, the prospects of its emergence in the Levant are improving as a result of the attrition of such obstacles.

2

The Transformation of the Islamic Denominational and Activist Landscape in the Levant

Al Qaeda as an ideology is an outgrowth of the reductionist interpretation of Islam initiated by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in eighteenth-century Arabia. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab promoted a strict intransigence toward interpretations and practices inconsistent with his own reading of the Islamic foundational corpus. To exact greater discipline, he created the kernel of a clerical establishment with enforcement powers and allied himself with a powerful political dynasty. The Wahhabi establishment has remained entrenched ever since. Indeed, today, Wahhabism, with the backing of the current Saudi monarchy—the heir to this arrangement—has become religious orthodoxy and custodian of social norms across the Arabian environment of which it was a product. Prior to the advent of oil wealth, though, its impact beyond its cradle was limited.

Due to the yearly pilgrimage (the Hajj), Arabia—and, in particular, the Hijaz, the western part of the Arabian Peninsula and the location of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina—was historically a land of religious immigration and a melting pot for Muslim expressions. While Wahhabism disrupted the inflow to the Hijaz, it created, through persistent attacks on groups that deviated from its orthodoxy, an outflow into neighboring territories. Thus, for example, Sufi mystics and ascetics who in previous centuries would have settled in the Hijaz occasionally made Egypt and the Levant their final destination. By the end of World War I and with the emergence of the new political order, Arabia and the Levant were sharply different in terms of their sociocultural and religious outlook: the common label of Sunni Islam, though predominant in both, masked substantive differences in religious and social life. In jurisprudence, the more literalist Hanbali school of Islam dominated in Arabia, while in the Levant an interlacing of the Shafi'i and Hanafi schools prevailed—both incorporating more liberal approaches to jurisprudence. In theology, the Wahhabi understanding of the Athari dogma—a literalist school that rejects exegetical tools aimed at rationalizing the Islamic belief system—laid the foundation for modern Salafism in Arabia. Levantine scholars, following the lead of their Egyptian counterparts, experimented with rationalist formulations, rooted in the Ash'ari tradition—influenced by and articulated in reaction to Hellenistic philosophy—and informed by the progressive nineteenth-century Nahdah, or renaissance, approach. And while Sufism, the mystical expression of Islam, continued to find in Egypt and the Levant a warm welcome, it was systematically and forcibly eradicated from Arabian society.[1]

More significant, the intellectual strata of the Levant, home to a multitude of non-Sunni and non-Muslim communities, adopted nationalism as a basis of its sociopolitical identity, relegating religion to a theoretical background. Also, it was Cairo's Al-Azhar University, not Mecca or Medina, that graduated the clerical class and defined the general religious identity of Levantine Muslim communities. Levantine Islamism, from Gaza to Aleppo, was inspired by and oriented toward Cairo, where the Muslim Brotherhood had restated Islamic values by replacing quietism with activism and pietism with proselytism. It was indeed these Egyptian reformulations, imported to Arabia in the second half of the twentieth century, that combined with Wahhabi absolutism and irredentism to eventually create the potent ideological totalitarianism of al Qaeda.

In fact, developments in the second half of the twentieth century began to erode the differences between Arabia and neighboring regions that had emerged during previous centuries. The advent of oil wealth further empowered the Wahhabi

establishment's grip on Saudi education and enabled the funding of new clerical learning centers in the kingdom. In particular, the Islamic University of Medina, a producer of ideological formulations that were increasingly at odds with the evolving political approaches and lifestyle of the Saudi monarchy, nurtured through its scholarship programs a new generation of Arab clerics.

The effect of this new curriculum was considerable. Ample space in the new course of study was allocated to the fourteenth-century scholar-activist Ibn Taymiyyah and his line of disciples who developed the Salafi ideology professed by the Wahhabi establishment. Through both the carefully designed amplification and reduction of the importance and assessed impact of other schools and currents of thought within Islamic history, this curriculum, empowered by the newly elevated status of Saudi Arabia as patron of much of the Muslim world, set the stage for a fundamental transformation of Islamic doctrine—from an explicitly recognized pluralism to an intransigent orthodoxy with Salafism as its unadulterated expression.

Changes in Religious Landscape

Upon their return, the graduates of the new Saudi learning centers had a noticeable effect on the religious landscape of their hometowns. Traditional forms of religiosity that had already been undermined by the nationalist and leftist challenge of "modernity" were becoming even more emasculated. The most vulnerable of these forms had proven to be the Sufi orders: many cities where Sufism dominated religious life at the beginning of the twentieth century were effectively void of any tangible Sufi presence at the century's close. Even when the social and political order prohibited Sufism's open takeover by militant forms of religious expression, literalist and pietistic movements, such as the Sururiyyah and Qubaysiyyah, emerged, decimating the centuries-long presence of Sufi orders in the Levant.

The impact of Arabia as a new center of religious learning in the Middle East was compounded by the regression of Al-Azhar University—conventionally the foremost institution of religious learning in the Sunni Muslim world and home to the Islamic revivalist movement that shaped much of Muslim culture worldwide in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Al-Azhar in Egypt did not enjoy the same quasi-autonomy from the state accorded to the Wahhabi establishment in Saudi Arabia; nor did it have access to the financial resources that were bestowed on its Saudi counterpart. It instead became a mouthpiece and rubber stamp for the policies of the Egyptian state, losing much credibility in the process and developing a "schizophrenic" ideological outlook—that is to say, compliant with regime demands at the top while maintaining different and occasionally opposing positions at the rank-and-file level. More dramatically, the resulting vulnerability of Al-Azhar allowed a gradual Salafist encroachment, leading to the transformation of the institution, which was traditionally pluralistic and with a considerable Sufi color, into another Salafist bastion.[2]

In the ideological competition that began flaring in the mid-twentieth century between the militant forms of Islamic revivalism and Salafism for the mantle of restoring Islam to the center of Muslim political life, Salafism enjoyed the advantage of oil wealth, giving it the upper hand. Still, activists schooled in the gradualist revivalist approach, as synthesized by the Muslim Brotherhood, continued to thrive.

Indeed, today, while Salafism may be aspiring for supremacy in the Levant, a generational transformation has yet to occur there. And though such a transformation may still be plausible, the texture of Levantine Islam is distinctly different from that of its Arabian expression. This difference remains an impediment to the acceptance of the underlying ideological premises upon which al Qaeda jihadism is based. And while the impact of induced change in religious denominational and activist outlooks may be considerable, the resilience of Levantine culture—and the incompatibility of Arabian Salafism, with its evolving sociocultural patterns—will prove to be a difficult, perhaps even insurmountable, obstacle for the appropriation and replication of al Qaeda–style jihadism.

In fact, while the ascendancy of the financial and doctrinal influence of Arabian Salafism on the Levant is noticeable, the aggressive character of Salafi dogma has generated considerable reactions. The battered movement of Sufism has occasionally found in Shiism a refuge, not only in the Levant, but also in Egypt and North Africa. Active Shiite proselytism—from Najaf, Iraq, and Qom, Iran—has been able to gain public converts, both in Palestine and in Syria, often on the basis of its provision of a Sufi-like connection with human spiritual figures (the imams of Shiism thus replacing or being identified with the sheiks of Sufism).[3] In Lebanon, where the presence of a significant Shiite community and communitarian rivalries preclude the possibility of a meaningful Sunni conversion, open anti-Salafist, post-Sufi formations have emerged, challenging both Salafist dogma and praxis and underlining the resistance to Salafism and jihadism as Arabian imports. For al Qaeda–style jihadism to take root in the Levant, it will have to adapt to local Levantine concerns and worldviews. In the case of Palestinian society, Hamas might offer a practical balance.

Hamas as Levantine-Style Jihadism

A product of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Hamas emerged in Palestinian society during the 1980s as an expression of the growing self-assertiveness of Islamist thought in the Muslim world following the Islamic revolution in Iran and in the midst of the Afghan jihad. Its birth was also a reflection of disillusionment with the many militant factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—of various national, pan-nationalist, and leftist stripes—prone to infighting, corruption, and lack of a clear ideological program. With the emergence of pragmatic tendencies within the PLO and the ensuing acceptance—however tactical—of the existence of the state of Israel, Hamas was able to inherit the support of the maximalist tendencies within Palestinian society. Hamas benefited from multiple assessments. For the Israelis, at first, it was viewed as a potent rival that could bleed support from Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, a more imminent threat. For some on the ideological left in the Arab world and elsewhere, Hamas became the true, albeit rough, expression of Palestinian popular resistance to occupation once the PLO's proclivity to compromise was exposed. As a movement native to the Palestinian territories, Hamas was even portrayed as an expression of opposition to the oligarchic and even kleptocratic PLO elite returning from exile in Tunisia to the West Bank and Gaza following the 1993 Oslo Accords.

The truth of these assessments is subject to debate. However, the question of whether Hamas has become the most successful example of an Islamist movement in the Levant is not. In both its electoral success and assumption of executive decision-making power in the Gaza Strip, it represents the first instance of an Islamist movement acquiring political power by nonviolent means. Paradoxically, this nonviolent political success was achieved while the organization engaged in one of the most virulent, lethal campaigns in the history of jihadism.

Through its recurrent recourse to suicide bombing—a tactic endorsed and empowered by fatwas[4]—and religious opinions issued across the Muslim world, Hamas instilled and amplified a new definition of human worth—or lack thereof—in Palestinian culture. The "cause," previously defined in terms of historical injustice, degenerated with the help of Hamas and much of the supporting Arab political culture into a visceral existential fight with the "Jewish enemy." It was thus cast to legitimize the killing of the innocent in enemy ranks, but also the willing sacrifice of one's self in the process. Any suicidal attack on the enemy, however futile and irrespective of the damage caused, would thus become a "qualitative" operation (*'amaliyyah naw'iyyah*) worthy of praise and glorification. Its praiseworthy quality lies in the willing self-sacrifice of the indoctrinated individual sent to his or her death.

The devaluation of human life is expressed in various ways. It has ranged from the dispatching of Palestinian youth on suicide missions designed to kill demonized Israelis indiscriminately to the excessive tolerance of civilian deaths among Palestinians

through reckless—almost masochistic—actions. Images of the resulting carnage are then recycled in propaganda campaigns glorifying resistance and martyrdom. Ideologies previously dominant in Palestinian and Arab political culture, both nationalist and leftist, have elaborated on such themes, elevating the collective at the expense of the individual. Their conception of the national community as the collective, however, has preserved plausibility for the argument of a rational choice through personal sacrifice.

Hamas uses a hybrid proposition in which a nationalist argument is layered upon religious foundations, often with apocalyptic dimensions. The conflict in Palestine is no longer a mere struggle for the recovery of lost land and the emancipation of a captive population. Indeed, it is also framed as a preordained mandate to recuperate territory belonging to Islam—as a monolithic religion—from an eternal enemy that embodies evil in this world. While optimistic intellectuals in the Arab world and beyond dismiss such an argument as a mere rhetorical device aimed at mobilizing the base in a conflict characterized by rising bitterness, its effects on corroding shared norms of common humanity between Palestinians and Israelis, and Arabs and Jews, are readily visible.[5] Since its assumption of power, Hamas itself appears to have retreated, in its official discourse, from blatantly anti-Jewish statements by qualifying the enmity as one stemming from the occupation. The official retreat, however, is less meaningful in the context of the cultural saturation that the previous discourse had achieved.

Even if the dogmatically charged proposition is the result of a pragmatic decision on the part of a leadership seeking to maximize both loyalty and willingness to sacrifice, its damage to Palestinian society and to any progress-based vision will outlast any tactical advantage it was meant to generate for Hamas as an organization. Hamas "moderates" might be willing, in some hypothetical future, to steer a course toward "compromise." The culture that Hamas has amplified and deeply anchored in Palestinian society, however, will constitute a permanent deterrent against such a reversal.

Hamas and al Qaeda

The totalitarian regimentation sought by al Qaeda under the guise of religious compliance consists of four major facets: political, military, social, and cultural. Hamas, even by al Qaeda's standards, has performed satisfactorily in three out of the four.[6] At the cultural level, Hamas has engaged in a systematic program for the reform of the individual, in pursuit of the Islamist ideal. Its members are provided with strict instructions on obligatory, permissible, and forbidden actions ranging from personal hygiene to speech and thought. At times, the high burden of compliance has hindered Hamas membership drives, even among its ideological supporters, prompting such rules to be adjusted accordingly. The reform of the individual is the first stage in the multiphase program devised by Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna in Egypt in the 1920s. Hamas has been engaged in a diligent implementation of this program, notably at the social level. Gaza under Hamas has far fewer venues for youth and popular culture and is more gender segregated. The main difference between the Hamas approach toward Islamization and the methods favored by al Qaeda is that Hamas has largely proceeded in incremental steps—at times discretely—that are often phrased as responses to social and cultural demands. The sale of alcoholic beverages and entertainment venues thus gradually disappeared from Hamas's Gaza with little fanfare, through a process of regulation and intimidation that avoided the spotlight favored by al Qaeda in its targeting and elimination of establishments engaged in activities incompatible with its religious understanding.

Socially, culturally, and militarily, Hamas has won the admiration of al Qaeda–style jihadists. Militant forums as well as al Qaeda leadership statements are replete with admiration for the "Mujahedin" in Gaza. It is apparent that, while the ideological underpinnings might exhibit theoretical differences, Hamas and al Qaeda are in agreement about the practice of jihad. The disagreement between them is fundamentally political.

It has repeatedly been noted in academia and the media that a distinction must be made between

Hamas and al Qaeda on the basis of the former's national focus versus the latter's global approach. Yet, al Qaeda itself, as evidenced by the elaborate critique that its leadership and ideologues have offered, does not view this distinction as a reason for disagreement. Indeed, al Qaeda claims a number of affiliates with localized focus, in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Algeria, and Somalia. Al Qaeda ideologues have even stated that allegiance to or identification with the al Qaeda network is not a sine qua non for endorsement by the al Qaeda leadership. Instead, what is expected of those seeking al Qaeda's imprimatur, in addition to the tangible proof of their ability to deliver massive lethal blows to the enemy, is the solemn adherence to "divine rulership" (*hakimiyyat Allah*) and the Salafist concept of *al-wala' wa-l-bara'*, or allegiance to fellow believers and repudiation of all others. On both accounts, from the al Qaeda perspective, Hamas falls short.

By accepting the political framework of the Palestinian Authority, recognizing international law, and seeking power through the electoral system, Hamas has transgressed on divine rulership. And by entering into tacit and explicit alliances with Shiite Iran, Hezbollah, and the Alawi regime in Syria, Hamas has ignored the obligation of repudiating nonbelievers. Al Qaeda ideologues would be satisfied if Hamas were to declare its rejection of all agreed-upon political arrangements and terminate its current alliances; they would be gratified if Hamas were further to declare its allegiance to the global jihad network. Even in the ranks of al Qaeda ideologues, however, the realization exists that, from a practical point of view, these steps are not possible today. The attitude toward Hamas thus ranges from seeing its defaulting from the acceptable political path as a matter of necessity, and thus excusable, to viewing it as a mere reflection of the corrupted thought of the Muslim Brotherhood—a perennial rival, albeit also an incubator, of al Qaeda–style jihadism. In its current state, Hamas is thus a group that cannot be granted unqualified al Qaeda endorsement; it is, however, a group that satisfies most of the prerequisites for such an endorsement. Thus, the compromise implicitly reached in al Qaeda discourse in recent months is to provide unequivocal endorsement and support for the jihad in Palestine as an action, with no reference to Hamas as an organization or leadership.

As discussed in chapter three, in response to Hamas's departure from the al Qaeda–approved path, al Qaeda leadership and ideologues had first sought to "advise" the group—to no avail. With its counsel ignored, al Qaeda engaged in a loud denunciation of Hamas, with the hope of intimidating it into compliance. However, bolstered by its strong position in Palestinian society, Hamas responded defiantly. Intimidation did not work.[7] The sidelining of the Hamas leadership in al Qaeda discourse constitutes a third approach to dealing with Hamas and is a considerable shift from a previous relationship characterized by anger and animosity.

Al Qaeda ideologues have instead recognized a number of smaller groups in Gaza as endeavoring toward the initiation of Salafist jihadism. The most notable of these groups is Jaysh al-Islam[8] (the Army of Islam), responsible—in partnership with Hamas—for the 2006 raid on Israeli territory and the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Jaysh al-Islam is a clan-based militia that has succeeded in carving out a territory for itself, through measures that combine elements of militancy with organized crime. It provides tactical added value to Hamas, as part of the configuration of militant organizations that shield Hamas from responsibility in problematic operations that are nevertheless consistent with Hamas's vision, such as the targeting of Christian educational and social organizations. Its assertiveness vis-à-vis Hamas's authority, however, led to a confrontation in September 2008 in which Hamas forces raided the Jaysh al-Islam complex, killing and injuring many of its members and their relatives. It was notable that al Qaeda ideologues, while deploring the action, called for restraint and refrained from any meaningful denunciation of Hamas.

Other Palestinian Salafist-jihadist groups claimed presence on the ground and were occasionally highlighted in the jihadist cyberspace, including Jaysh al Ummah,[9] Fath al-Islam,[10] Kata'ib al-Mujahidin,[11] and Jund Allah.[12] Virtually all are ephemeral in their

setup and recruitment capacity, as well as problematic in their composition. While they may engage in sporadic anti-Israeli actions, they also contribute to the state of lawlessness that Hamas has sought to counter. Since its confrontation with Jaysh al-Islam, Hamas seems to have moved in the direction of imposing its control over other jihadist groups, with virtually no complaint from al Qaeda ideologues.

3

A Strategy for al Qaeda in Palestine?

As a largely virtual entity thriving on perception management, al Qaeda has been bracing for the potential harm it would suffer in the event of a Palestinian battle from which it was excluded. To help mitigate the danger, al Qaeda leaders and ideologues have periodically engaged over the last few years in preemptive announcements and analyses designed to underline the fact that al Qaeda is a leader, not a laggard, on the issue of Palestine.

The treatment of Hamas over the years has changed considerably. The original al Qaeda approach to this predominant Palestinian Islamist formation was one of giving both criticism and advice. Hamas was invited to reform itself along lines consistent with pure doctrinal precepts, as promoted by al Qaeda. The list of required actions was lengthy, but it could be best summarized as a renunciation of Hamas's acceptance of the political process and a severing of its questionable regional alliances. The Hamas leadership largely ignored al Qaeda's advice. It was clear that al Qaeda constituted a further nuisance to a Hamas striving for legitimacy in a generally hostile court of world opinion.

By the end of 2007, with Hamas firmly in control of Gaza and having de facto renounced its recognition of the Palestinian Authority, al Qaeda stepped up its pressure for compliance. In fact, Hamas's June 2007 "coup" in Gaza, ouster of its Fath rivals, and self-appointment as the sole legitimate authority in Gaza—at the exclusion of official Palestinian Authority entities—was a considerable step in the direction proposed by al Qaeda. Independent of al Qaeda pressure and from a democratic perspective, these moves exposed a major defect in Hamas's acceptance of the electoral process, giving credence to the argument that such an embrace was utilitarian and one-way—that is, Hamas was willing to recognize a democratic process that elevated it to power but was just as prepared to ignore it when it required the surrender of any control it had gained. Still, allowing its actions to be interpreted as consistent with al Qaeda demands would have been disastrous for an already besieged and battered Hamas. Hamas reacted publicly, dismissing al Qaeda's advice and underlining that no one was in a position to lecture the Palestinian resistance on its course of action.

The advice approach—the first tactic adopted by al Qaeda—was no longer tenable. Al Qaeda thus resorted to denunciation. A salvo of al Qaeda verbal attacks followed,[1] with contributions from Osama bin Laden; Ayman al Zawahiri; and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, the "commander" of the al Qaeda–affiliated Islamic State of Iraq—a figure about whom little is known with certainty but who at one point was groomed by jihadist media for a potential role in any resurrected caliphate. Baghdadi openly called for a mutiny by the Izziddin al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, and invited all Palestinian factions for jihad training in the "triumphant" Islamic State of Iraq—despite a precipitous decline in al Qaeda's ability to maneuver there following the "surge" and the rise of antiradical Sunni groups.[2] The prominent al Qaeda ideologue Asad al-Jihad 2 (AJ2) made a series of contributions placing Hamas's actions and statements in the context of a conspiracy aimed at "liquidating" the Palestinian question by ultimately accepting a compromise that would allow Israel to continue to exist.[3]

Hamas's response was defiant, unyielding, and dismissive. Zawahiri's elaborate argumentation was discounted as irrelevant by the Hamas leadership,[4] while a blunt and slighting response to Baghdadi's offer was given by a young Izziddin al-Qassam field commander,[5] further raising the ire of devoted al Qaeda supporters. It was nonetheless clear that, in the battle of words al Qaeda had initiated, Hamas

had the upper hand. Al Qaeda had to yield and effectively abandon its second approach—denunciation—in favor of a new and third approach.

Bin Laden's statement,[6] on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the inception of the state of Israel, epitomized this third approach. Al Qaeda would henceforth embrace the Palestinian cause, underlining its primacy as a justification for jihad, but would deliberately avoid any substantive reference to Hamas. Vowing to "continue" the fight against Israel, bin Laden informed the West that "the Palestinian cause is the central cause for my nation." Though the centrality of Palestine in al Qaeda discourse had varied over the years, bin Laden realized that it would have been counterproductive to allow this question to drain the credibility and stature of al Qaeda. The new "ignore and embrace" approach would thus be justified on the basis of the objective progress Hamas made toward meeting al Qaeda's political precepts—in particular, in its resistance to resubmitting to the Palestinian Authority's rule. Al Qaeda also realized that there was a need to avoid distractions, given that Gaza was under siege. Abu Yahya al-Libi, one of the most prominent second-generation al Qaeda leaders, embodied this approach in his October 2008 *'Id Khutbah* (sermon): in it, there were traditional supplications to God to support all al Qaeda affiliates, which Libi referenced by name and theater, including "Palestine and its Mujahedin," but without any specific indication of who they were.[7]

In March 2008, AJ2 made a prediction that would prove of considerable utility to his standing as an informed source: "Within a year or so, a devastating calamity will befall Gaza, and a hopeful development will be revealed."[8] It may not have been difficult to anticipate that the reckless behavior of the Hamas leadership, and the continuous barrage of rockets it persisted in launching, would trigger a confrontation. But this statement and subsequent al Qaeda pronouncements were meant to compensate for the effective exclusion of al Qaeda from the Palestinian arena.

Still, almost three weeks had elapsed since the start of the Israeli military confrontation with Hamas in December 2008 before new statements from al Qaeda were released, expressing support for Gaza and urging action against Israel, as well as Arab regimes, for their failure to provide aid to the Palestinians. Two statements were released in tandem by al Qaeda's top leadership: one by Zawahiri and another by Baghdadi, followed shortly by a call by bin Laden himself for jihad on behalf of Gaza. Offerings of support also came from al Qaeda affiliates in Arabia and the Maghrib.

In the days prior to the release of these statements, expectations in the jihadist cyberspace ran high amid promises of a major al Qaeda announcement. Speculation centered on everything from prospective recipients of a presumed "al Qaeda in the Land of al-Aqsa"[9] franchise to talk of a specific announcement of forthcoming al Qaeda action and a response to Israel's Gaza incursion. The delay in the release of the statement, many believed, stemmed from the need to complete necessary preparations.

Al Qaeda Discourse on Hamas

The primary candidates mentioned for an al Qaeda endorsement were the Izziddin al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas—itself previously courted unsuccessfully by Baghdadi—and the al-Nasir Salahuddin Battalions, a group closely associated with Hamas.[10] The absence of a reference to Jaysh al-Islam or other openly Salafist-jihadist formations as contenders indicated a realization among al Qaeda active supporters that al Qaeda action in Palestine would have to emerge from within Hamas, not outside it.

However, upon the circulation of the al Qaeda leadership's statements, unease could be felt across the blogs, forums, and websites that propagated them. Jihadist Internet outlets hosted the usual flow of concurring messages, endorsing the content of the statements with supplications for divine help. Some of these messages, however, expressed mild disappointment at the lack of a specific promise for vengeance on the part of al Qaeda. Others repeated the demands for al Qaeda's entry into the Palestinian scene.

These demands were answered, albeit not in the anticipated way, with the claim of responsibility

provided by AJ2 for the Katyusha rocket attack across the Lebanese-Israeli border and the revelation of the existence of an al Qaeda affiliate in the Levant (Bilad al-Sham), and not in Palestine (Ard al-Aqsa, the land of the Aqsa) as speculated.

It can indeed be argued that, being content with such meager offerings to its constituency, al Qaeda has demonstrated its limitations and failure to achieve a breakthrough on the Palestinian scene. AJ2 himself, in the context of the second approach (denunciation) then adopted by al Qaeda toward Hamas, had declared that two opposing and incompatible paths are being offered in Palestine—one being the genuine jihad exemplified by Jaysh al-Islam and the other being a path of corruption and compromise represented by Hamas.[11] In his most recent answers to queries about jihad in Gaza, the previous dichotomy between two opposing camps no longer holds; instead, AJ2 discourses on the importance of unity and cooperation.[12] Is al Qaeda conceding the ideological battle?

An alternative reading may consider that al Qaeda's change of discourse vis-à-vis Hamas is instead reflective of the development of a consistent al Qaeda strategy toward Palestine, and a more charitable reassessment of Hamas's doctrinal and ideological stands. In its early years, Hamas reluctantly followed the precedent set by the Islamic Jihad in Palestine organization by entering into a tacit, and then explicit, alliance with Iran. Fathi al-Shiqaqi, then leader of the Islamic Jihad, had actively sought to reconcile an Islamism that seemed dismissive of the Palestinian cause with a Palestinian activism that was overwhelmingly hostile to Islamism.[13] The relations that he established with Iran were consistent with his call for a nondenominational activist Islamism with Palestine as its focus. Hamas's subsequent course was a reflection of the appeal of the Shiqaqi message on the Palestinian scene, especially in the context of the perceived victories of the Lebanese Hezbollah—a Shiite formation and the main ally of Iran in the region. From a doctrinal point of view, however, the reliance on Shiite Iran remained problematic for many devout Hamas leaders. For figures such as Khalid Mish'al in Damascus, and even Isma'il Haniyyah in Gaza, the primacy of the struggle overrode the arcane doctrinal Sunni-Shiite disputes, notably with influential Hezbollah media engaged in highlighting commonalities and sidestepping differences.

This tolerance, born out of necessity and practicality, was unacceptable for al Qaeda and other Salafists. It was problematic even for those who saw in it an unavoidable compromise. The late Nizar Rayyan, a professor at the Islamic University of Gaza and the leader of the Izziddin al-Qassam Brigades who was killed in the latest confrontation with Israel, exemplified this tension.[14] While overseeing logistical and operational cooperation with Iranian allies, Rayyan authored texts delineating the differences between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam and insisting on the preservation of the integrity of Sunni principles against any possible attrition.

Rayyan himself may have been the rationale behind Baghdadi's attempt at igniting a Salafist mutiny in the ranks of the Izziddin al-Qassam Brigades. Baghdadi's attempt was an example of recurrent al Qaeda overreach. Still, as symptomatic of a forceful current within Hamas—notably at the Islamic University of Gaza—Rayyan represents an argument in favor of understanding Hamas's alliance with Iran in terms of pragmatic necessity. An al Qaeda supporter encapsulated the argument in a recent post in one of the Salafist online forums: hold Hamas doctrinally accountable for its Iranian connection once it is provided with the equivalent support from a Sunni state.

Al Qaeda leaders and ideologues may be reasonably satisfied that Hamas's current policy is not reflective of a doctrinal corruption. From the perspective of al Qaeda, putting aside the history of acrimonious interaction, the radicalization in which Hamas has engaged in the territory under its control—and to a lesser extent through physical and cultural intimidation across Palestinian society as a whole—is a one-way street heading in a direction suitable for al Qaeda–approved jihadism and Salafism. Furthermore, the distinction between the two approaches to Islamization—the incremental, bottom-up approach favored by the Muslim Brotherhood and the comprehensive, top-down approach mandated as uniquely

legitimate by al Qaeda—no longer holds with Hamas in power and not-so-discretely engaged in the enforcement of religious precepts. Finally, Hamas's pariah status and its own rejection of the Palestinian Authority satisfy, albeit partially, al Qaeda's requirement of repudiation of un-Islamic frameworks.

Accordingly, seen from this perspective, it makes sense for al Qaeda to abandon the counterproductive effort of seeking to find or create alternatives to Hamas in Gaza. Instead, its focus ought to be on insuring that Hamas is prodded in the right direction. As noted by numerous al Qaeda ideologues and underlined by AJ2 himself, allegiance to the leadership of al Qaeda is not a prerequisite to establish bona fide jihadist credentials.[15] In the current assessment of al Qaeda, Hamas is the de facto reification of jihad in Gaza. Hamas's own consent to the honor is not needed.

Palestine has proven impenetrable to direct al Qaeda action. Palestinian society is still dogmatically and ideologically unripe for a pure adoption of the al Qaeda vision: Palestinian Salafist-jihadist groups have been lacking in capacity, thwarted by both Israel and Hamas, and unable to establish the logistics of any al Qaeda penetration. The implicit rehabilitation of Hamas as a valid expression of jihad may serve the cause of the global jihad, and that of Hamas, but not al Qaeda per se. The ambiguous creation of al Qaeda in the Levant (AQL) may address this lacuna. It does, however, place a considerable burden on al Qaeda to deliver: claiming responsibility for disparate operations in the distant past, and further responsibility for a lone rocket attack that had no impact on the unfolding of the Gaza war, is not sufficient. Al Qaeda has promised spectacular operations by its new Levant affiliate. Its ability to deliver, however, depends on the assets it is able to gather and activate.

Jihadist Strongholds in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan?

Looking more broadly at the region, two models of operations are available for AQL states outside of Palestine and Israel (Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan): the stronghold model and the guerrilla cell model. In the context of the first, the al Qaeda affiliate imposes itself as the actual force in a particular area, commanding the allegiance of other actors and pushing state authority out. "Optimistic" assessments have pointed to numerous potential strongholds: the Levantine urban centers, excluding the capital cities of Beirut, Damascus, and Amman, which are deemed under prohibitive state security control; the Lebanese rural north, being predominantly Sunni; and the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, which, given their dismal living conditions, have become genuine incubators of violent militant action. Due both to geography and to the nature of the security regimes in application, a more realistic calculus eliminates both Syria and Jordan as candidates for the stronghold model. Lebanon, despite its many complications, remains the only possible target for the stronghold approach. Even there, however, the prospects for success are slim.

Under the Syrian occupation of Lebanon (1976–2005), jihadist elements with links to al Qaeda were able to enjoy what seemed to be a stronghold in the northern Lebanese highlands of Dinniyeh. In the 1990s, much of northern Lebanon seemed hospitable to Salafist-jihadist activism. The Lebanese state, then under the exacting suzerainty of Damascus, had even legalized a network of educational and media institutions in northern Lebanon with a clear Salafist agenda.[16] The space accorded to Salafism in northern Lebanon was naturally more reflective of Syrian policy than of Lebanese sociocultural realities. The Syrian regime had in the previous decade crushed two Islamist movements: one an insurgency in Syria led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood that was defeated only after Syrian Special Forces besieged, pounded, and sacked the city of Hamah, leaving thousands of victims in their wake, and the other an Islamic "emirate" in Tripoli, empowered by the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Yasser Arafat.[17]

Having understood the potency of militant Islamism, the Syrian regime allowed the formation of a closely monitored reserve of Islamist militants in northern Lebanon to serve as one counterweight,

among many, for the various political and militia forces it managed in its Lebanese domain. In 2000, however, skirmishes between the Lebanese security forces and Islamists taking refuge in the Dinniyeh Mountains degenerated into full-fledged combat, exposing the enclave and necessitating its termination.[18] Following the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2005 after former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination and the ensuing mass protests, references to militant Islamism's threat in northern Lebanon became a refrain of Damascus in its quest to secure recognition of its "legitimate" interests in Lebanon. Naturally, omitted from this narrative was any mention of the Syrian responsibility in fostering this Islamism.

The responsibility and protestations of the Damascus regime aside, the risks of an Islamist, potentially Salafist and jihadist, stronghold in northern Lebanon ought not be dismissed; by the same token, they ought not be exaggerated either. The limited nature of these risks was demonstrated, in fact, by the Syrian regime itself, through its manipulation of a "perfect storm" of Islamist activism—efforts that failed to undermine its former Lebanese vassal, a state now controlled by vocally anti-Syrian politicians.

Nahr al-Barid, Fath al-Islam, and al Qaeda

Similar to its performance in northern Lebanon in the 1990s—where its security apparatus had the evident ability to eliminate all dissent and opposition but nonetheless made deliberate room for the nurturing of an Islamist enclave—the Syrian regime relaxed its strict internal travel and border controls after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003 to accommodate jihadist transit networks funneling fighters to Iraq. By enabling jihadists' passage through its territory, the Syrian regime secured considerable leverage over jihadist operations.

During its occupation of Lebanon, Syria had preserved a special security regimen for the Palestinian refugee camps. Syrian and Lebanese forces were excluded from the camps, with security responsibilities being recognized as the sole prerogative of Palestinian factions. Syria ensured that, wherever possible, these factions were its proxies, not the PLO's. Shortly after its withdrawal in 2005, Syria mandated the transfer of an arsenal amassed by its Fath al-Intifadah proxy in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp to Fath al-Islam.[19] The latter was a new formation with a declared Salafist-jihadist agenda,[20] led by Shakir al-Absi, a Jordanian activist previously detained in Syria who had benefited from an uncharacteristically early release. Accounts in the jihadist cyberspace reported that Absi had sought and failed to receive al Qaeda affiliation.[21] The subsequent battle between Fath al-Islam and the Lebanese state revealed the extent of Syria's manipulation of jihadist transit networks and its ability to channel fighters away from their original Iraqi destination—where pressure by both the U.S. and Iraqi governments had invited more caution—toward northern Lebanon, thus contributing to a collection of potentially useful assets there.

In May 2007, a bank robbery by Fath al-Islam operatives led to a pursuit by the Lebanese security forces. The confrontation soon developed into full-scale combat. The battle lasted months, ending with almost two hundred fallen Lebanese armed forces personnel, hundreds more jihadist fighters of various nationalities dead (with both Lebanese and Palestinians as small minorities), and the Nahr al-Barid camp destroyed.[22]

Syria and its local allies in the Lebanese opposition attempted to establish an association between Fath al-Islam, the pro-Western, majority bloc in the Lebanese government, and al Qaeda (with the occasional implication of Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other parties out of Syrian favor). According to this reading of events, in an effort to create or nurture counterweights to the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah-Hamas axis, the United States and Saudi Arabia, through their local Lebanese government proxies, have miscalculated and generated the lethal threat that Lebanon faced in the summer 2007 confrontation. Disparate questionable reports were thus strung together to develop a narrative in which Fath al-Islam became the brainchild of U.S. vice president Dick Cheney and Saudi National

Security Council secretary general Bandar bin Sultan. The northern Lebanon city of Tripoli was described by pro-Syrian politicians as Kandahar, in reference to the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan, and the threat of Lebanese Salafists was elevated by the Syrian regime almost to an existential level. It was noteworthy that al Qaeda itself remained silent in the many months of the confrontation.

Undoubtedly, al Qaeda, and others, observed with concern the failure of any Lebanese Sunni uprising to materialize in support of Fath al-Islam, as would have been anticipated in accordance with the optimistic reading of the Levant situation. In fact, Lebanese Sunni parties were quasi-unanimous in their support of their national armed forces. The only dissent was from a few Salafist figures who offered their mediation toward ending the bloodshed but were rebuffed by Fath al-Islam.

The investigation by Lebanese authorities after the conclusion of the hostilities revealed the bona fide jihadist credentials of most of the Fath al-Islam fighters—many of whom believed that they were in advanced positions en route to Iraq. It also exposed the skilled Syrian manipulation of the leadership and rank-and-file members of this jihadist organization.

The experiment of Fath al-Islam demonstrated to al Qaeda that the stronghold approach was not valid, neither in northern Lebanon nor in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps. Other contenders for al Qaeda affiliation—namely 'Usbat al-Ansar[23] and Jund al-Sham,[24] both formed by veterans of the Afghan and Iraqi jihads and based in the southern Lebanese Palestinian refugee camp of 'Ayn al-Hilweh—faced far less favorable conditions than those enjoyed by Fath al-Islam. Their ability to deliver and maintain a stronghold is therefore negligible.

However, Absi's successful escape from the Nahr al-Barid camp prior to its capture by the Lebanese armed forces demonstrated the value of jihadist cells in Lebanon. The cautious, postmortem embrace of Fath al-Islam in a speech by Baghdadi seems to have reflected a gradual adoption by al Qaeda of Fath al-Islam activists and other assets in Lebanon that al Qaeda may have considered valuable. Indeed, a hasty video communiqué from "the Organization of Al Qaeda in the Levant" with indications that it was produced in Iraq was released in fall 2007, followed in early January 2008 by an audio message by Absi with production markers linking it to "mainstream" jihadist media. Prior to the aforementioned "revelation" provided by AJ2 in February 2009, the "AQL" video communiqué was an oddity: it was issued by a previously unknown organization, included generic threats uttered by a masked man with a distinctly non-Levantine Arabic accent, and offered no information to provide confirmation of claims.[25] This communiqué could have been dismissed as an amateur attempt at intimidation. It now seems to be reflective of the early stages of preparation of an effort that remains limited to claims.

The confirmation that al Qaeda has indeed opted for the guerrilla cell model of operation in Lebanon was provided by Zawahiri in January 2008 in his written response to questions submitted on the Internet. Zawahiri proclaimed that Lebanon would indeed be a new front for al Qaeda, with an eye on Palestine.

4

The Prospects of Jihad and al Qaeda in the Levant

Policymakers and pundits in the United States have occasionally characterized the war with al Qaeda as the "Long War." A better description, at least from al Qaeda's standpoint, would be the "Slow War." Al Qaeda operates slowly. Actions take years of planning and are far in between. This is the result of the sparse resources available for jihad—resources whose use is often optimized for the greatest damage possible. It is also a reflection of the radical change that al Qaeda aims to usher in in Muslim societies, one that requires a generational transformation, and of its own view of history—al Qaeda ultimately seeks to reinstate the caliphate, an institution that was abolished eighty-five years ago. Palestine seems to be today a project that falls within the slow-process paradigm of al Qaeda.

Jihadists have often run out of the patience that this approach necessitates. Many of the defeats suffered by al Qaeda and like-minded jihadists stem from their overreach and proclivity to pretend to be victorious or assume success. This lack of patience brought al Qaeda in Palestine to the brink of full-scale media confrontation with Hamas. Al Qaeda would inevitably have been the loser of such a confrontation. Hamas's blood credentials are virtually insurmountable; Hamas has countless "martyrs" and many fallen Zionist enemies to its credit. Al Qaeda has virtually none. While clearly losing the ability to claim the initiative, al Qaeda has managed its reaction to the Gaza war in such a way as to avoid any appearance of a confrontation with Hamas, without acknowledging any primacy of its role.

In the long term, al Qaeda seems to have accurately assessed a convergence between the ideological trajectory of Hamas and its own doctrinal outlook. While the conditions for a direct al Qaeda role in Palestine are not ripe, the overall evolution of Palestinian political and sociocultural trends, as enhanced by Hamas, will preclude the need for such a role. The obstacle for al Qaeda in Palestine is not Hamas, as occasionally argued, but a successful Palestinian Authority that is able to deliver on the promise of security, prosperity, and dignity for the average Palestinian, in the context of a genuinely peaceful settlement with Israel.

Al Qaeda continues to be troubled by Iranian inroads into the Levant. Tactical arrangements with Iran are not unknown to al Qaeda. However, the prospects of an erosion of the Sunni base, through conversion or even through harmonious coexistence, remain problematic. If the progress of Hamas on the path to the purism expected by al Qaeda is confirmed, the apprehension of al Qaeda toward the Hamas-Iran alliance will further recede. On the other hand, the dismissal, or at least the indefinite postponement, of open animosity toward Shiism, as displayed by Hamas, may provide radical Sunni Islamism with the opportunity to capitalize on any new or renewed Iranian strength—such as the acquisition of nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran would need to be elevated to the level of primary enemy by the al Qaeda–like open and active animosity with Shiism, hence diverting resources from actual jihad theaters. With the Hamas approach, however, a nuclear Iran becomes an asset, not a liability.

In all of the Levant, al Qaeda seems to be convinced that the stronghold model of operations cannot bear fruit. In contrast, developments in Lebanon seem to have proven that the guerrilla cell model can be productive. If al Qaeda is able to carve a place for itself in Lebanon, it will be in a position to assume a role in the Palestinian cause. It will be able to both affect the Hamas-Iran relationship by "exposing" Hezbollah's willingness to interdict its anti-Israel actions if deemed incompatible with Iranian interests, as well as to engage the West

through attacks on United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon personnel. The stakes are indeed high. An al Qaeda presence in Lebanon would be dramatically disruptive; its prospect cannot be dismissed. Still, the assets al Qaeda has accrued in Lebanon so far are minimal. Only through the spectacular actions that al Qaeda leadership and ideologues have promised can the organization gather the credibility that has so far eluded it. Fortunately for Lebanon, and the rest of the world, these promises seem to be formulated in the context of al Qaeda's slow-war framework.

AEI research fellow Jeffrey Azarva worked with Mr. Mneimneh to fact-check and edit successive drafts of this report.

Notes

Chapter 1: Al Qaeda's Ethos, Resources, and Goals

1. The growing "canon" of the al Qaeda ideologues is maintained by Umm Abi Dharr. Originally posted on the now crippled "al-Ikhlas" forum in summer 2007, this canon is periodically updated and widely distributed on the Internet as an archived collection of hundreds of tracts, fatwas, and books by a select number of authors. Umm Abi Dharr included twenty-four authors in her initial release. By late 2008, her list of authors had grown to thirty-six. Asad al-Jihad 2 made his entry into the list in mid-2008.

2. *Basha'ir li-l-mu'minin wa-zalzalah li-l-tawaghit wa-l-kuffar wa-l-munafiqin: al-jiz' al-thani wa-l-akhir min ajwibat ra's harbat al-mujahidin Asad al-Jihad 2* [Good Tidings for the Believers and Shattering Earthquakes for the Oppressors, Infidels, and Hypocrites: Second and Final Part of the Answers of the Arrowhead of the Mujahidin, Asad al-Jihad 2] (Global Islamic Media Front, February 2009).

3. See in particular the statements by Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi ("Innama al-mu'minun ikhwah" [Verily the Believers Are Brothers]), Ayman al Zawahiri ("Majzarat Ghazzah wa-hisar al-khawanah" [The Massacre of Gaza and the Siege of the Traitors]), and Osama bin Laden ("Da'wah ila al-Jihad li-waqf al-'idwan 'ala Ghazzah" [A Call to Jihad to Stop the Aggression against Gaza]), released in quick succession in mid-January 2009—many weeks after the start of the Gaza confrontation—and underlining a reinvigorated, albeit delayed, centrality for the question of Palestine in al Qaeda discourse. The utilitarian nature of this reorientation is most visible in the statement of the "leadership" of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on January 23, 2009, "Min huna nabda' wa-fi al-Aqsa naltaqi" [From Here We Begin, at al-Aqsa We Will Meet]. Rhetorical references to jihad in Palestine are intermingled with denunciations of Arab rulers, in particular the Saudi monarchy, for failure to offer more than rhetoric.

4. *Basha'ir*, 53.

5. For a Palestinian perspective on the predatory character of Fath al-Islam in its adoption of Takfirism—an ideology equating noncompliance with apostasy—see Muhammad Ahmad 'Abd al-Ghani, *Min Athar al-Fikr al-Takfiri 'ala Mukhayyam Nahr al-Barid* [Of the Effects of Takfiri Thought on the Nahr al-Barid Refugee Camp], 2008.

6. News reports on the planned Islamic emirate in North Lebanon dominated Arab media in spring 2007. It was confirmed in a conversation with a Lebanese official source, name withheld on request, December 23, 2008.

7. *Basha'ir*, 25–27.

8. *Basha'ir*, 55.

9. *Basha'ir*, 59.

10. The question of Palestine is not trivialized in Salafist-jihadist thought. It is, however, contextualized in the wider overarching cause of Islam. The complex treatment of the status of the question of Palestine in Salafist jihadism is exemplified in *al-Difa' 'an Aradi al-Muslimin Aham Furud al-A'yan* (standardized edition from Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad website), by 'Abdullah 'Azzam, a principal advocate of jihadism, and bin Laden's mentor. Writing in the midst of the Afghan jihad, 'Azzam, himself a Palestinian, stresses that Palestine is "the first cause of Islam" (16). However, he argues, priority ought to be given to Afghanistan, enumerating six reasons, including the fact that the Palestinian cause is championed by leftists, nationalists, and secularists (17–18).

11. The selective recasting of the Islamic corpus with an inflation of anti-Jewish content is a thriving industry in Islamist thought (and Arab culture in general). One recent example, originally a doctoral thesis, queries the Quran and Sunnah to identify the imminent preordained end of the State of "Yahud." See the (positive) book review, and the enthusiastic viewer comments, at the Muslim Brethren website, available at www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=44510&SecID=343 (accessed April 8, 2009).

12. Compare "Filistin, al-An Hamiya al-Watis," a 2009 video release in which Abu Yahya al-Libi highlights the

importance of the Palestinian issue in the midst of the Israel-Hamas Gaza confrontation, to his *Wasatiyyat al- Islam wa-Wasatiyyat al-Inhizam* [Islamic Centrism versus Defeatist Centrism] (As-Sahab Media, 2008), in which he states "falsification and defeatism have led some to claim that our fight with the occupying Jews and the criminal Christians is not an ideological fight, but merely a conflict about land that they have occupied and homes that they have violated. . . . [T]hose and others who have thus espoused false centrism out of meekness and weakness should know that Islam is the religion of the sword; we are not embarrassed to say it." (15–16).

13. With the mid-March 2009 video release of bin Laden's "Practical Steps for the Liberation of Palestine," a generic call for the ideological strengthening of the Muslim Ummah toward a definitive battle with Israel, its Western backers, and presumed allies in the Arab political order, al Qaeda confirms its intent on laying a rhetorical claim to the Palestinian question.

14. The discrepancy between al Qaeda's declared centrality of the Palestinian question and this absence has been the subject of discussion in Palestinian Islamist and nationalist circles. See, for example, Sari Sammour, *Wujud Far' li-Tanzim al-Qa'idah fi Filistin, Mumkin aw Mustahil?* [Is the Existence of a Branch of al Qaeda in Palestine Possible or Impossible?] (Jenin, 2005).

Chapter 2: The Transformation of the Islamic Denominational and Activist Landscape in the Levant

1. The effort to expunge Sufism from Arabia and the Sufi resistance to eradication are ongoing. An example of the continuing Salafist campaign against Sufism is www.alsoufia.org. Ahmad bin Hasan al-Mu'allim, *al-Quburiyyah, Nash'atuha, Atharuha, Mawqif al-'Ulama' Minha* [Shrine Worship: Origins, Sources, and Scholastic Assessment] (Ta'iz: Dar ibn al-Jawzi, 2005) provides an overview of the doctrinal position of the Salafist critique and assessment of the current state of the confrontation in one part of Arabia.

2. A description of the incremental "Salafization" of Al-Azhar was provided in 2006 by Nabil Sharaf al-Din in the web-based Arabic newspaper Elaph, available at www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphWriter/2006/10/182308.htm (accessed April 8, 2009).

3. The polemical character of the discussion on Shiite proselytism dominates the topic in Islamist forums. The Center for Belief Research (affiliated with the Iraqi Shiite leading cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani) maintains a section on converts to Shiism, available at www.aqaed.com/mostabser/index.html (accessed April 8, 2009), that illustrates the breadth of the effort.

4. A compilation of many such fatwas, from a Salafist-jihadist perspective, is available at www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=167868 (accessed April 8, 2009). The influential mainline cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi has also issued a fatwa endorsing suicide bombing operations. See www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=1461&version=1&template_id=130 (accessed April 8, 2009).

5. See, for example, www.ikhwanonline.com/Article.asp?ArtID=37377&SecID=343 (accessed April 8, 2009).

6. Even Salafist complaints about the lack of implementation of Sharia law in Gaza are countered with calls for patience and understanding. See, for example, http://alboraqforum.info/showthread.php?t=64240 (accessed April 8, 2009).

7. See, for example, the response of Khalid Mish'al on the "advice" of Zawahiri, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/news/newsid_4775000/4775266.stm (accessed April 8, 2009).

8. Jaysh al-Islam was founded in 2006 by Palestinian militant Mumtaz Dughmush on Salafist-jihadist principles and consists mainly of militants of the Dughmush clan. See www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1232171601252&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Daawa%2FDWALayout (accessed April 8, 2009) and www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/31758 (accessed April 8, 2009).

9. "Hal Jaysh al-Islam 'Unwan al-Qa'idah fi Filistin?" [Is Jaysh al-Ummah al Qaeda's Address in Palestine?], available at www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=159648 (accessed April 8, 2009).

10. The organizational links between Fath al-Islam in Nahr al-Barid and the Gazan Fath al-Islam, if any, are not evident. Still, Fath al-Islam in Gaza has tried to capitalize on the performance of its Nahr al-Barid counterpart to gain jihadist credibility. See "I'lan wa-Bayan li-Ummat al-Islam

[A Proclamation for the Islamic Nation],” available at www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=280091 (accessed April 8, 2009).

11. See www.km-pal.ps/show.php?id=1172 (accessed April 8, 2009).

12. See www.moqawmh.com/vb/showthread.php?t=21299 (accessed April 8, 2009).

Chapter 3: A Strategy for al Qaeda in Palestine?

1. See Osama bin Laden, “al-Sabil li-Ihbat al-Mu’amarat” [The Way to Defeat Conspiracies], December 29, 2007; Abu ‘Umar al-Baghdadi, “al-Din al-Nasihah” [Religion Is Advice], March 14, 2008; Osama bin Laden, “al-Sabil li-Khalas Filistin” [The Way for the Salvation of Palestine]; and, more blatantly, Asad al-Jihad 2, *Tabarru’ Qadat al-Jihad al-Rasikhin min Qadat Hamas al-Mudhabdhibin* [The Denunciation of the Unsteady Leadership of Hamas by the Established Jihad Leadership], March 22, 2008, and Ayman al Zawahiri, “Hubbu li-nusrat Ahlina fi Ghazzah” [Rise for the Support of Our Brethern in Gaza], March 2008.

2. Non-Salafist jihadism in Iraq had championed Hamas in its media. The rise of the Sahwat (Awakening Councils) and their coordination with the Iraqi and U.S. forces constituted an image liability for these jihadist groups, and by extension for Hamas. See www.ikhwan.net/vb/showthread.php?t=44884 (accessed April 8, 2009) for a statement by the Iraqi Hamas—stemming from the same Muslim Brothers framework as Hamas but with no organizational connection with its Palestinian namesake—distancing itself from the Sahwat.

3. Asad al-Jihad 2, *Tabarru’ Qadat al-Jihad al-Rasikhin min Qadat Hamas al-Mudhabdhibin*.

4. See www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=351533&issueno=9960 (accessed April 8, 2009).

5. See www.almnbr.info/vb/showthread.php?t=11323 (accessed April 8, 2009).

6. “Asbab al-Sira‘ fi al-Dhikra al-Sittib li-Qiyam Dawlat al-Ihtilal al-Isra’ili” [The Causes of the Conflict, on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Rise of the Israeli Occupation State], May 15, 2008.

7. “Khutbat ‘Id al-Adha” [The Sermon of the Adha Feast], November 9, 2008.

8. Asad al-Jihad 2, *Tabarru’ Qadat al-Jihad al-Rasikhin min Qadat Hamas al-Mudhabdhibin*. 4–5.

9. Al Qaeda nomenclature is part of an implicit system of rejection of the “post-Islamic” order. The current names of states, even when ancestral, are avoided in favor of archaic-sounding—even if novel—designations. Hence, the name of the original al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq was “Al-Qa‘idah fi Bilad al-Rafidayn” (al Qaeda in the land of the two rivers—that is, Mesopotamia), an Arabic neologism with archaic tones. Similarly, the putative al Qaeda in Egypt is rumored to be “Al Qa‘idah fi Bilad al-Kinanah,” and the rumored al Qaeda in Palestine was expected to be “Al-Qa‘idah fi Bilad al-Aqsa” (al Qaeda in the land of the al-Aqsa mosque); neither reference is historically established.

10. See the (rhetorical) “declaration of allegiance” to al Qaeda by Abu ‘Abir, a field commander of the al-Nasir Salahuddin Battalions, available at www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=204967 (accessed April 8, 2009).

11. Asad al-Jihad 2, *Tabarru’ Qadat al-Jihad al-Rasikhin min Qadat Hamas al-Mudhabdhibin*, 16–17.

12. *Basha’ir*, 14.

13. See www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5BA3B02F-9917-46FA-8943-5A34EC8EA34B.htm (accessed April 8, 2009).

14. “Nizar Rayyan Yafdah al-rawafid fi Lubnan wa-Iran” [Nizar Rayyan Exposes the Rejectionists (Shiites) in Lebanon and Iran], available at www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=331027 (accessed April 8, 2009).

15. *Basha’ir*, 34.

16. “Hakadha Bada’a al-‘Amal al-Salafi fi Lubnan” [This Is How Salafist Activism Started in Lebanon], available at www.islamtoday.net/nawafeth/artshow-89-8800.htm (accessed April 8, 2009).

17. See www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/47529 (accessed April 8, 2009).

18. The chronology of events is presented as part of a series on Lebanese Islamism by Fida’ Itani, “al-Tarikh al-Maktum li-l-Jihadiyyin Kama Yarunuhu” [The Hidden History of the Jihadists from Their Perspective], available at www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/47863 (accessed April 8, 2009).

19. On the transition from Fath al-Intifadah to Fath al-Islam, see www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/arabicNewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&E976E21BB2434C96C225740A00227028 (accessed April 8, 2009) and http://

almustaqbal.com/stories.aspx?StoryID=291102 (accessed April 8, 2009).

20. Fath al-Islam, Communiqué Number 1, circulated November 2006.

21. See "al-Salafiyyah al-Jihadiyyah fi Lubnan Mu'taqadat wa-Namadhij" [Salafist Jihadism in Lebanon: Beliefs and Examples], available at www.tahawolat.com/cms/article.php3?id_article=1342 (accessed April 8, 2009).

22. See Muhammad Ahmad 'Abd al-Ghani, *Min Athar al-Fikr al-Takfiri 'ala Mukhayyam Nahr al-Barid*.

23. An illustration of the shadowy nature of this organization is provided in "Jama'at 'Usbat al-Ansar Tazhar Laylan fi 'Ayn al-Hilwah" [The 'Usbat al-Ansar Group Surfaces at Night in the Ain al-Hilweh Refugee Camp], available at www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=58772&issueno=8338 (accessed April 8, 2009).

24. For a critical overview of this organization, see www.al-akhbar.com/ar/node/34726 (accessed April 8, 2009).

25. The masked "military commander" delivering the threats in this video spoke with a recognizable Iraqi accent and used uncommon pronunciations of Lebanese names and locations.

Author's Biography

Hassan Mneimneh is a visiting fellow at AEI. He has written extensively on radicalization and insurgency in the Middle East, and he continues to participate in initiatives designed to assess extremism in the Arab and Muslim worlds. As director of the Iraq Memory Foundation, Mr. Mneimneh supervised the structuring, annotation, and analysis of a massive archive of documents from Saddam Hussein's regime. He is also one of the political experts consulted by the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group. At AEI, Mr. Mneimneh tracks the online presence and the ideology of jihadist organizations such as al Qaeda.