

Terrorism Franchised: Al-Qaeda as Autonomous Imitation and Al-Shabaab as Proto-Caliphate

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If ideologies that inspire violence are not overcome by force of persuasion, they will only be overcome by force of arms. Al-Qaeda's ideas continue to take root in new and diverse soil. Where they do, violence, destabilization, and devastation are the predictable results. During the last eleven years, America and her allies have waged war on al-Qaeda the organization. War has not been waged on al-Qaeda the idea. The result has crippled al-Qaeda's tactical capabilities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but has allowed for its transnational presence to flourish. To engage al-Qaeda the idea, the foremost warriors needed are state and public diplomats whose weapons are far more subtle than bombs and bullets.

It has been eleven years since September 11, 2001, and despite insistence on behalf of America and her allies that we are "winning the war," the realities of international developments indicate otherwise. The frankest example is al-Qaeda's (AQ) self-replicating franchise. In September 2001, al-Qaeda, or what will be referred to here as al-Qaeda-Core (AQ-Core), was based primarily out of Afghanistan but was capable of carrying out effective operations anywhere on the planet. An adjunct to AQ-Core was al-Qaeda in East Africa (AQEA). In the last ten years, America has seen the birth of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Shabaab, which recently declared loyalty to AQ-Core,¹ and Boko Haram, which sees AQ-Core and AQIM as their natural allies, forebears, and inspiration. Despite two theaters of war, covert action operations too numerous to count, and a vast collection of tactical and operational successes, this declared enemy continues to reproduce and expand its base of operations.

This expansion is due to a vacuum in terms of strategic understanding and strategic response. There has been a failure to understand the enemy at any more than an operational level. Instead, the current default strategy addresses the enemy solely on the operational plane of engagement.² This is futile, as al-Qaeda has no center of gravity in the traditional

¹ "Somalia's al-Shabaab Join al-Qaeda," BBC News, last modified 10 February 2012, Available online: www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16979440.

² For an extensive analysis of al-Qaeda's threat doctrine and its 20th century ideological roots, see Sebastian L. Gorka, "The Enemy Threat Doctrine of Al Qaeda: Taking the War to the Heart of our Foe," in *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, ed. Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012), 185-204.

sense—no economy, no cities, no homeland, no power grids, no regular military.³ America continues to engage the enemy on the wrong battlefield.

Every offshoot of AQ-Core is unique. Each has its own regional character and strategic goals. What unifies them is their consistent identification with al-Qaeda's narrative and ideology. Al-Qaeda knows this. Al-Qaeda's greatest strength is its tenacity to survive. When necessary, al-Qaeda has re-imagined and re-formed itself into ever-new incarnations. Since 2005, al-Qaeda has reorganized its approach to intensify its focus on media operations over terrorist attacks. This strategic reframing has enabled AQ-Core's aging senior leadership to reclaim a role as the main ideological inspirers of the globally dispersed violent jihadist movement, which is now dominated by younger leaders.⁴ This was a tactical decision by al-Qaeda in order to strategically reposition and survive. Their metrics of victory are different from a Western understanding. One of these metrics is simply inspiring terrorist acts in the name of Islam. Whether this is done by rag-tag groups of Nigerians or a single army officer in Texas, this is seen as a metric of victory. And usually, wherever people find inspiration in al-Qaeda's narrative, violence is the result.

Al-Qaeda's ideology is the product of centuries of political, cultural, philosophical, and theological evolution.⁵ Ideology is defined here as the intellectual bridge based on a subjective analysis of a negative reality which posits a positive future. In other words, the world as it exists now is defined as flawed, yet a future world, often utopist, is envisioned. This world can only be ushered in through the creative engine of violence and chaos. For the purposes of this analysis, it need only be stated that groups and individuals who adhere to al-Qaeda's ideology commit acts of the most horrific nature in the name of religion.

Of AQ-Core's various offshoots, al-Shabaab is of prime importance to study due to its current success as a terrorist organization. Al-Shabaab can be understood as a result of al-Qaeda at the next developmental stage. Al-Shabaab (Arabic for "the youth" or "the boys") as of this writing controls large geographical portions of South East Somalia and the port city Kismayo. In other words, al-Shabaab is a terrorist group that has graduated to an insurgency. The primary difference between a terrorist and an insurgent is that a terrorist never holds territory. Insurgencies actually start to function like small militaries with quasi-military formations and actions. Terrorism is just a tactic for the insurgent; it is not a way of life. To use a parallel of another designated terrorist organization, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia, or FARC, held 40 percent of Columbian territory at its zenith of power. At this point, it was no longer simply a terrorist organization but a much more powerful entity capable of achieving conclusive victory.

³ Anonymous (Michael Scheuer), *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror* (Dulles: Brassey's Inc., 2004), 259.

⁴ For an in depth analysis of al-Qaeda's ideological and cultural subversion strategy, see Patrick Sookhdeo, "The West, Islam, and the Counter-Ideological War," in *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, ed. Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012), 15-44.

⁵ See Robert R. Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2010). The author traces the origins of al-Qaeda's ideology to a centuries old theological dispute in the Islamic world. Sources of Islamism, pages 173-195.

Territory gives stability and finances. Al-Shabaab's greatest source of revenue is taxes imposed on Kismayo. This money gives al-Shabaab extensive operational possibility. As of this writing, Kenyan military forces are currently waging a protracted offensive against al-Shabaab for control of Kismayo. Even if the Kenyans are successful in dislodging al-Shabaab from Kismayo and the majority of their holdings in Somalia, al-Shabaab will not be defeated, but instead will simply morph back into an underground terrorist group. Terrorist attacks and guerilla operations will continue. If al-Shabaab is successful in their ambition of controlling most, or all of Somalia, they will graduate from an insurgency to a regional power with potential diplomatic recognition, much the same way the Taliban did with Afghanistan in 1996. In that case, Osama bin Laden viewed the Taliban as a proto-caliphate and hoped to expand and perpetuate its system of government-induced repression. The stability offered by Taliban sponsorship allowed AQ-Core to plan and enact highly complex transnational terrorist operations of an unprecedented devastating nature.⁶ This is why terrorist groups must never be allowed to maintain geographic and operational stability.

This pattern is not unique to al-Shabaab. Boko Haram, AQAP, and AQIM could all potentially consolidate their gains and become more powerful insurgencies. The ideological soil is still fertile throughout North Africa and parts of the Levant. If the United States is to continue leading the world into a future of free peoples, it cannot continue to neglect the importance of ideology. Why does the United States now, as the world's greatest power, insist on killing a man rather than persuading him?⁷ Moreover, why will the United States not discredit him, isolate him, separate him from his allies, or divide the ranks of his organization instead of resorting to violence?⁸ Ideology as a guiding principle of culture, intellect, and therefore politics, is a critical strategic variable of the modern era. It has proven to possess continued efficacy in enacting political change. As such, a long-term, global ideological struggle must be accepted as a key facet of this new iteration of conflict.⁹

⁶ This analysis was heavily influenced by the writings of Dr. Sebastian L. Gorka, cited previously. Also see Prepared Testimony by Sebastian L. Gorka, "Ten Years On: The Evolution of the Terrorist Threat Since 9/11," House Armed Services Committee: Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 22 June 2011, Available online: armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/hearings?ContentRecord_id=be90895b-4da5-467d-861d-6c8d82b4fdf1.

Also see Sebastian L. Gorka, "International Cooperation as a Tool in Counterterrorism: Super-Purple as a Weapon to Defeat the Nonrational Terrorist," in *Toward a Grand Strategy Against Terrorism*, ed. Christopher C. Harmon, Andrew N. Pratt, and Sebastian L. Gorka (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011), 71-84.

⁷ See J. Michael Waller, *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*, ed. J. Michael Waller (Washington: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2008). The premise of this collection of essays is founded on this concept, i.e. to persuade the enemy rather than kill him. The authors document several examples of how political warfare has aided US foreign policy in the past and how it can continue to do so.

⁸ John Lenczowski, *Full Spectrum Diplomacy and Grand Strategy: Reforming the Structure and Culture of US Foreign Policy* (New York: Lexington Books, 2011), 74-75. Dr. Lenczowski argues for a return to public diplomacy in the US State Department and cites numerous examples of its use and potential.

⁹ Patrick Sookhdeo, "The West, Islam, and the Counter-Ideological War," in *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, ed. Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012), 42-44.

The United States has waged this kind of struggle before and waged it very effectively. Since the American Revolution for Independence, the United States has engaged in influence and information operations that buttressed and supported direct military action.¹⁰ The Cold War, however, was centered on the struggle of ideas during its most decisive phase in the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration understood that the source of the conflict between East and West was the ideology of the Soviet regime. US policy therefore needed to find a way to change that nature from within without risking total and global war.¹¹ The Soviet regime was founded upon communist principles, and the legitimacy of the regime was rooted in that ideology. Destroy the ideology, the regime's legitimacy and the whole narrative upon which the Soviet Union was built is destroyed with it. Destroying that ideology became *the* central struggle. American military, diplomatic, political, covert, and economic actions began to all orbit this central struggle.

The nature, character, and ideology of the Soviet Union were laid out by George Kennan via NSC-68 in 1950. This document, a 58-page top secret cable, elucidated the threat doctrine and strategy of the Soviet Union. US policy for the next several decades was largely shaped by the document's recommendations. Granted, there was a roughly thirty year gap between the birth of the Soviet Union and the identification of the Soviet threat in NSC-68. Currently, the United States has little understanding of al-Qaeda's threat doctrine or its strategy.¹² This is largely due to the immediate and necessary tactical response following 9/11. Since that response, however, there has been no implementation of a grand strategy that seeks to understand or counter AQ's fundamental doctrine.

Ironically, America has possessed a much clearer understanding of al-Qaeda than it does now. The 9/11 Commission articulated an adequate understanding of al-Qaeda and recommended actions to combat it:

Our enemy is twofold: al-Qaeda, a stateless network of terrorists that struck us on 9/11; and a radical ideological movement in the Islamic world, inspired in part by al-Qaeda, which has spawned terrorist groups and violence across the globe. The first enemy is weakened, but continues to pose a grave threat. The second enemy is gathering, and will menace Americans and American interests long after [O]sama Bin Laden and his cohorts are killed or captured. Thus *our strategy must match our means to*

¹⁰ J. Michael Waller, "The American Way of Propaganda: Lessons from the Founding Fathers," in *Strategic Influence: Public Diplomacy, Counterpropaganda, and Political Warfare*, ed. J. Michael Waller, (Washington: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2008), 26-42.

¹¹ John Lenczowski, "Political-Ideological Warfare in Integrated Strategy, and its Basis in an Assessment of Soviet Reality," in *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, ed. Katharine C. Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo (McLean: Isaac Publishing, 2012), 95-147.

¹² Sebastian L. Gorka, "Ten Years On: The Evolution of the Terrorist Threat Since 9/11," House Armed Services Committee: Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, 22 June 2011, Available online: armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/hearings?ContentRecord_id=be90895b-4da5-467d-861d-6c8d82b4fdf1.

*two ends: dismantling the al Qaeda network and prevailing in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism.*¹³ (Italics added)

The report was issued on July 22, 2004, but those words could have been said yesterday with just as much legitimacy. The report goes on to state, “In short, the United States has to help defeat an ideology, not just a group of people...”¹⁴ The report has many recommendations which largely mirror the ideology struggle the United States waged in the Cold War:

Recommendation: Just as we did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideals abroad vigorously. America does stand up for its values...If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us.¹⁵

As Mark Twain said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

During the Cold War, a coordinated grand strategy won a conclusive victory against the Soviet Union. Communism was contained while vast and imaginative arrays of ideological weapons were used, primarily by the Department of State, to enact an ideological change from within. The war was won by force of persuasion, and this prevented another global war. These weapons can be utilized again. The Soviet Union was defeated because its narrative was defeated. The economic and political collapse followed shortly thereafter. Destroy al-Qaeda’s narrative in the minds of its sympathizers, and you destroy its legitimacy. This is its center of gravity, as opposed to a central command, city, or economy. This center of gravity can only be destroyed with weapons of the mind. It is far past the time to dust off these weapons and employ them once again on the world stage.

¹³ *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2004), 363.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 376.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 377.