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The Rebellion Within: The Radical Challenge to al-Qaeda's Ideology

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At the heart of al-Qaeda's appeal to young, alienated Muslims is a coherent and persuasive ideology that provides a meaningful way of looking at history and a moral platform that justifies violent action. This worldview has been challenged by moderate Muslims, who say that al-Qaeda's thinking distorts the true message of Islam and who emphasize the unity of the Abrahamic faiths.² Such statements do not seem to have had much affect on al-Qaeda's ability to attract recruits and certainly hasn't caused the organization to change its behavior. Recently, however, al-Qaeda has faced a philosophical challenge within its own ranks, one that may prove far more critical to the future of the organization than any critique by non-Muslims or even very authoritative Islamic clerics. It is important for American policymakers to understand the nature of the debate within al-Qaeda in order to appreciate how the organization is changing and how the U.S. and its allies can take advantage of this ideological rift.

Background of al-Qaeda's Philosophy

Many of the key concepts at the core of al-Qaeda's doctrine are to be found in the work of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian writer, educator, and member of the Muslim Brotherhood. While imprisoned in Egypt, Qutb wrote the book that became the fountainhead of radical Islam, *Milestones*.³ Qutb believed that true Islam no longer existed because of "false laws and teachings" that separated

¹ The opinions expressed in this statement are the author's own and should not be interpreted to reflect the official views of the Center for Law and Security.

² For example, in the Amman Message (<http://www.ammanmessage.com/>), 200 senior religious scholars from more than fifty countries, drawn together in July 2005 by Jordanian King Abdullah II, asserted the unity of all branches of Islam and called for tolerance, mutual respect, and freedom of religion; also, in October 2007, 138 prominent Muslim clerics, jurists, scholars, journalists, diplomats and political figures endorsed a document titled "A Common Word Between Us and You,"

(<http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=option1>), which emphasizes the commonalities of Islam and Christianity.

³ Qutb, Sayyid. *Milestones*. Indianapolis, Ind.: American Trust Publications, 1990.

Muslims from the glory of their past.⁴ He sought to create a theocratic government that strictly enforced Sharia, the Islamic legal code, and he called for a vanguard of young Muslims who would rise up and impose Islamic values on every aspect of life. Al-Qaeda sees itself as the manifestation of Qutb's prophesy.

It was Qutb who resurrected an ancient heresy in Islam, that of *takfir*. The word in Arabic means "excommunication." While Qutb was in prison, guards murdered twenty-three members of the Muslim Brotherhood in their cells. Qutb asked himself: What kind of Muslim could do this to another Muslim? His answer was: They are not Muslims. In his mind, he excommunicated the guards from the faith. The same logic extended to the leaders of the Egyptian government who refused to fully implement Sharia. They were apostates and deserved to be slaughtered.

The Egyptian government hanged Qutb in 1966, but by then his manifesto had made its way into the hands of many thousands of young Muslims all over the world, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. The year that Qutb died, Zawahiri started an underground cell to overthrow the Egyptian government. He was fifteen years old.

Dr. Fadl: Al-Qaeda's Philosopher-in-Chief

Another young man strongly influenced by the work of Sayyid Qutb was Sayyid Imam al-Sherif, who would come to be known in the world of radical Islam as Dr. Fadl.⁵ Zawahiri and Fadl met in medical school at Cairo University in 1968. They were both high-minded, pious young men, typical of the scientists, engineers, and technocrats who would make up the first generation of al-Qaeda. Fadl formally joined Zawahiri's secret organization, al-Jihad, in 1977. It was that group that would assassinate Anwar Sadat in 1981 – the first modern victim of Qutb's doctrine of *takfir*.

Zawahiri spent three years in prison for his minor role in Sadat's assassination. Fadl escaped Egypt and made his way to Pakistan, where Zawahiri joined him soon after his release. In Peshawar, the two men reconstituted al-Jihad, with Fadl designated as the emir, or leader, of the group. His main role, however, was to formulate the doctrine that would be used to entice young Muslims into their organization and steer them towards radical action. His book "The Essential Guide for Preparation" appeared in 1988, the same year that he and Zawahiri joined with Osama bin Laden to create al-Qaeda. The "Guide" was immediately adopted as a textbook for jihad.

The premise that opens the "Guide" is that jihad is the natural state of Islam. Muslims, Fadl decreed, are involved in an eternal conflict with

⁴ Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. New York, NY: Knopf, 2006.

⁵ Wright, Lawrence. "The Rebellion Within," *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2008.

nonbelievers. Every able-bodied Muslim is obligated to engage in jihad, particularly in Islamic countries that are governed by "infidels" – a category that includes practically every Muslim leader. "The way to bring an end to the rulers' unbelief is armed rebellion," Fadl writes. It's no wonder that many Arab governments considered the book so dangerous that anyone caught with a copy was subject to arrest.

Six years later, when al-Qaeda was centered in Khartoum, Sudan, Dr. Fadl produced a massive, two-volume work titled "The Compendium of the Pursuit of Divine Knowledge." Salvation, Fadl writes, is only available to the perfect Muslim. He asserts that the rulers of Egypt and other Arab countries are apostates and that any Muslim who fails to wage jihad against them is doomed. Moreover, anyone who works for the government is an infidel, as is anyone who supports democracy or labors for peaceful change rather than religious war. "I say to Muslims in all candor that secular, nationalist democracy opposes your religion and your doctrine, and in submitting to it you leave God's book behind," he writes.

Fadl also expands upon the doctrine of *takfir*, which is central to understanding al-Qaeda's actions. In Fadl's opinion, one must adhere to his extreme views in order to be a real Muslim; everyone else is a heretic. His book provided a warrant to the leaders of al-Qaeda to kill anyone who stood in their way. Fadl's ideas form the core of al-Qaeda's bloody doctrine. Zawahiri told Fadl, "This book is a victory from Almighty God."

The Revisions

Dr. Fadl moved to Yemen in 1994, and while he was there he learned that portions of what he considered to be his masterwork had been bowdlerized by Zawahiri. The dispute between the two men became so bitter that Zawahiri traveled to Yemen to beg forgiveness, but Fadl refused to see him.

Six weeks after 9/11, Yemeni authorities placed Fadl in jail, eventually transferring him to Egyptian custody. For two years, Fadl was held by the security forces in Egypt, which are notorious for their mistreatment of prisoners. Whether because of torture or the personal animosity he felt toward Zawahiri, Fadl experienced a radical shift in his thinking, which is reflected in his recent manifesto titled "Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World." In the document, and in a subsequent interview with the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat, Fadl attempts to establish a new set of rules for jihad.

This time Fadl begins with the premise that "There is nothing that invokes the anger of God and His wrath like the unwarranted spilling of blood and wrecking of property." Fadl castigates those who resort to kidnapping or theft to finance jihad. "There is no such thing in Islam as ends justifying means," he writes. One must gain permission from one's parents and creditors, as well as the blessing of a qualified sheikh or imam. Jihad is not required when the enemy is twice as powerful as the Muslims; in such an unequal situation, Fadl writes, "God

permitted peace treaties and cease-fires." Despite his repeated calls for jihad against the infidel rulers, Fadl now advises Muslims to be patient, quoting the Prophet Mohammed as saying, "Those who rebel against the Sultan shall die a pagan death." Fadl also asserts that it is forbidden to kill civilians, including Christians and Jews, unless they are actively attacking Muslims. Indiscriminate bombings are also taboo, as they will inevitably take innocent lives. Fadl condemns the 9/11 attacks because killing simply on the basis of one's nationality is a form of slaughter forbidden in Islam; moreover, the consequences have proved to be "a catastrophe for Muslims." He also says that the 9/11 hijackers "betrayed the enemy," because they had been provided visas, a contract of safe passage that the hijackers abused.

"People hate America," Fadl told al-Hayat, "and the Islamist movements feel their hatred and their impotence. Ramming America has become the shortest road to fame and leadership among the Arabs and Muslims. But what good is it if you destroy one of your enemy's buildings, and he destroys one of your countries? What good is it if you kill one of his people, and he kills a thousand of yours?... That, in short, is my evaluation of 9/11."⁶

Fadl certainly does not condemn all jihad; he is careful to say that he supports the insurgency in Afghanistan, which he hopes will lead to the triumph of the Taliban. Iraq and Palestine are more problematic, he believes, because neither conflict is likely to lead to an Islamic state. He charges that the leaders of al-Qaeda have used the Palestinian cause as "a grape leaf... to cover their own faults." On the subject of *takfir*, Fadl now says that the matter is so complex that it should be left to Islamic jurists to decide. "It is not permissible for a Muslim to condemn another Muslim," Fadl writes, although he has been guilty of this himself on countless occasions.

This would be a sweeping critique by an al-Qaeda insider under any circumstances, but it is all the more devastating because it is written by the organization's chief theorist and supported by his unquestioned scholarship.

Zawahiri's Response

Zawahiri immediately sought to discredit Dr. Fadl's about-face. When word of Fadl's forthcoming document first appeared, via a fax Fadl sent to an Arab daily from the Cairo prison where he is being held, Zawahiri wryly observed, "Do they now have fax machines in Egyptian jail cells? I wonder if they're connected to the same line as the electric-shock machines." But the attack clearly threatened Zawahiri, who has never had the religious authority Fadl enjoyed within the organization. In March of this year he responded with a two-hundred page letter published on the Internet. Zawahiri skirts around many of Fadl's most telling arguments. While conceding that "mistakes have been made,"

⁶ Al-Hayat, December 9, 2007.

he warns the many Islamists and clerics who welcomed Fadl's document that "they are giving the government the knife with which to slaughter them."

Zawahiri disputes Fadl's assertion that Muslims have been harmed by 9/11; on the contrary, he claims that the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia are wearing America down and empowering the radical Islamic movement. He prods his readers to remember the mistreatment that Muslims have suffered in the West, pointing to the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Denmark and the celebrity of author Salman Rushdie as examples of Western countries exalting those who denigrate Islam. Zawahiri points out that the U.S. and some European countries forbid Muslims from donating money to certain Islamic charities, although money is freely raised for Israel; and he claims that some Western laws outlawing anti-Semitic remarks would prevent Muslims from reciting certain passages of the Koran.

Zawahiri defends the practice of kidnapping or killing tourists, even when Muslims are mistakenly included. "The majority of scholars say that it is permissible to strike at infidels, even if Muslims are among them," he writes. He derides the notion that the hijackers abused their visas, saying that al-Qaeda is not bound by international agreements. America itself doesn't feel bound to protect Muslims, Zawahiri writes, citing torture in the military prisons and Guantánamo Bay as examples. "The U.S. gives itself the right to take any Muslim without respect to his visa," he writes. "If the U.S. and Westerners don't respect visas, why should we?" Zawahiri also complains that al-Qaeda is being held to a moral standard that is not being required of the Palestinian resistance group, Hamas, whose missiles also kill innocent children and elderly in Israel, including Arabs.

In December last year, Zawahiri opened himself up to an online question-and-answer session in order to staunch al-Qaeda's plummeting popularity in much of the Muslim world. Many of the often testy questions touched on issues raised by Dr. Fadl, such as the slaughter of innocent Muslims and the failure of al-Qaeda, despite its rhetoric, to effectively attack America or Israel. Zawahiri was clearly on the defensive. One of his Saudi correspondents asked him why Muslims should continue to support al-Qaeda, given its history of indiscriminate murder. "Are there other ways and means in which the objectives of jihad can be achieved without killing people?" he asked. "Please do not use as a pretext what the Americans or others are doing. Muslims are supposed to be an example to the world in tolerance and lofty goals, not to become a gang whose only concern is revenge." Zawahiri even had to defend al-Qaeda against the charge that Israelis had actually carried out 9/11, a myth he attributed to Al Manar, a television station operated by Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite organization. "The objective behind this lie is to deny that the Sunnis have heroes who harm America as no one has harmed it through its history," he responds indignantly.

Importance of the Debate

The dispute between bin Laden's chief lieutenant and his former emir provides a useful window into al-Qaeda's thinking and exposes its many schisms and vulnerabilities. For the nihilists drawn to the action or the thrill or the prospect of revenge, the controversy is meaningless. But for those idealists who are responding to al-Qaeda's moral argument, the fact that there is a debate at all may be decisive. Such men need certainty. They are staking their claim to Paradise on the truthfulness of al-Qaeda's revelation.

A number of intelligence agencies in Islamic countries have allowed imprisoned radicals, who claim to have reformed, to open discussion with their colleagues in jail. Egypt has been among the most successful of these experiments. Some imprisoned leaders of the Islamic Group, a far larger organization than Zawahiri and Fadl's al-Jihad, with much more blood on its hands, began to rethink their violent philosophy in the 1990s. Their prison debates led to a deal with the Egyptian government that permitted thousands of Islamists, many who had never been charged with a crime, to return to society. In 1999, the Islamic Group called for an end to all armed action, not only in Egypt but also in America. The leaders continue to publish books and documents criticizing radical doctrine. Senior clerics at al-Azhar University oversee the revisions of the former terrorists. "Our experience with such people is that it is very difficult to move them two or three degrees from where they are," Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Egypt's Grand Mufti, told me. "It's easier to move from terrorism to extremism or extremism to rigidity. We have not come across the person who can be moved all the way from terrorism to a normal life."

Despite the obvious manipulation of this process by the Egyptian government, the revisionist movement has proved to be successful, both for the imprisoned radicals, who have gained their freedom, and for the government, which has seen very few of the released men return to violent actions once they have accepted the bargain and publicly renounced their previous thinking.

The Larger Context

The Muslim world has suffered appalling violence since the rise of radical Islam in Egypt in the 1960s. Many Muslims have begun to openly question the tactics of radical Islam and the bloodshed that has ravaged their societies, especially in Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The failure of al-Qaeda to achieve any meaningful progress in its campaign against the West, while killing tens of thousands of Muslims in the process, has created a popular philosophical backlash. One can see this not only in the barbed questions submitted to Zawahiri in his online question-and-answer sessions, but also in the declining popularity of al-

Qaeda in opinion polls and the increasingly aggressive rejoinders of Islamic clerics. In 2007, Sheikh Salman al-Oadah, a radical Saudi cleric that bin Laden had lauded in the past, went on television and read an open letter to bin Laden. "Brother Osama, how much blood has been spilled?" he asked. "How many innocent children, women, and old people have been killed, maimed, and expelled from their homes in the name of al-Qaeda?" What makes these reconsiderations so potent is that they arise within the politically radical fringe of Islam, where al-Qaeda is most likely to discover new recruits.

Al-Qaeda is an adaptive, flexible, evolutionary organization, however, one that is a long way from extinction. Although the core of the group is much reduced from pre-9/11 days, it has found a secure base to operate within the tribal areas of Pakistan. American intelligence estimates the core membership of al-Qaeda at less than three hundred to more than five hundred men; a source in Egyptian intelligence put that figure at less than two hundred. And yet al-Qaeda has been able to form key alliances, notably with the Taliban and possibly with elements inside the Pakistani military and intelligence communities. Franchised al-Qaeda branches – particularly in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa – have extended the brand name. Al-Qaeda has been able to attract adherents among ethnic groups that previously had little or no affiliation with the organization. Future terrorist attacks will continue; the only real questions are those of scale.

And yet, al-Qaeda is currently under great pressure to prove its relevance. In particular, al-Qaeda would like to pull off major attacks in the U.S. and Israel, in order to silence its critics. As an aside, I note that the next two months offer resonate opportunities for an organization obsessed with dates and anniversaries. Exactly twenty years ago, on August 11, 1988, al-Qaeda had its first organizing meeting, and it officially inducted new members the following month, on September 20th. Two additional dates stand out: August 8th – 8/8/08, the date the Olympics open in Beijing – and of course the seventh anniversary of 9/11. If al-Qaeda is unable to strike during this period, it will reflect on its ability to remain operational.

"Homegrown" Terror

In the last few years, al-Qaeda has successfully cultivated followers among the native-born Muslim population in Europe, a phenomenon that took place with little notice until the London bombings in in 2005. Before then, there was little official belief that the Pakistani population in the United Kingdom was a fertile community for al-Qaeda recruitment. Now, Pakistani British citizens have figured in several major plots. Last year, German intelligence authorities confided to me that they were increasingly concerned both about native-born converts to Islam and about their large Turkish population. Shortly afterwards, in September, authorities arrested three men, two converts and a Turkish resident, in a plot to

attack the American military base at Ramstein and the U.S. and Uzbek consular offices. The men arrested in Germany had assembled 1,500 pounds of hydrogen peroxide, the same material used in the London subway bombings, but a far greater quantity.

America has been blessed with a Muslim population that is considerably more integrated and less alienated than is the case with European Muslims. That is the main reason that al-Qaeda has not been able to carry off an attack within the U.S. Muslims in America mirror almost exactly the income distribution of the U.S. population in general; they are just as likely to be rich or poor, about as likely to go to college or graduate school, and far less likely to go to prison than the average American. Compare that to the situation in France, for instance: only about 12% of the French population is Muslim but 60% of the prisoners are. What a stark measure of alienation that statistic represents!

That doesn't mean that America is immune, however. The 2007 Pew Poll of Muslim Americans found that 58% of them strongly disapproved of al-Qaeda, a far higher percentage than in Europe, but five percent had a favorable view. In a population of perhaps 2.5 million people, that is 125,000 self-identified radicals, certainly a large enough base for a homegrown movement, should it arise.

In recent speeches, both Zawahiri and bin Laden have been courting African-American Muslims, who are by far the most disaffected portion of the American Islamic community. Only 36% of them expressed an unfavorable view of al-Qaeda.

Implications for American Policy

Al-Qaeda's violent philosophy, which continues to be a powerful source of appeal to young Muslims, has become vulnerable to the reconsiderations underway within the radical Islamic movement. As al-Qaeda's many critics have pointed out, the main victims of terrorism are other Muslims. This is undermining al-Qaeda's standing all over the Islamic world. It is a propitious moment for American policymakers to take steps that will further discredit radical Islam and help restore America's image in the Muslim world.

1. Intelligence. Until now, American intelligence has done a poor job of understanding, much less penetrating or disrupting al-Qaeda. Since 9/11, the intelligence community has been reorganized. A new tier of bureaucracy – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence – has been added. A new department – Homeland Security – has been created. These have been valuable reforms in many respects, easing communication among agencies that have historically been reluctant to communicate with each other. But in themselves, the reforms add nothing to our store of vital intelligence. What would do that? Skilled

people on the ground. People who natively speak Arabic, Pashtu, Dari, Urdu – the languages that al-Qaeda and its affiliates speak. On 9/11, there were only eight agents in the entire FBI who spoke Arabic at a near native level. Now, nearly seven years later, there are nine.

After 9/11, many Arab and Muslim American citizens came forward to join the intelligence community. They were spurned. Some of them went into the U.S. military, which welcomed them. Many of those served in Iraq as interpreters, the most dangerous imaginable assignment. I spoke to a former commander of the Army interpreter corps. He told me that after four years of serving their country, these American citizens still can't get a job in the intelligence community because they are considered a security risk.

What further declaration of loyalty do they need to make?

2. Diplomacy. The language issue is not confined to the intelligence community. The Iraq Study Group found that, out of a thousand people working in our embassy in Baghdad, only eight were fluent Arabic speakers. How can you build a country if you can't read the newspaper?

Al-Qaeda has long taken advantage of the rage and frustration the issue of Palestine generates among Muslims all over the world. Recently, many Muslims have become more cynical about al-Qaeda's ability to affect any real change in the conflict. A bold, fair-minded, determined American initiative to take this issue off the table once and for all would do more to diminish al-Qaeda's appeal than any other policy the U.S. could initiate. Despite the weakness of the Palestinian and Israeli leadership, and the lame-duck status of the current administration, this is a propitious moment in the history of this long conflict. The Arab offer, initiated by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, to recognize Israel is a breakthrough that can't be allowed to dissipate. In my view, the chances for a two-state solution are rapidly diminishing, and future alternatives won't be nearly as appealing.

Similarly, the unresolved issue of Kashmir draws new recruits to al-Qaeda and affords it a strategic alliance with key intelligence and military figures in Pakistan. Kashmir is rarely addressed by American policymakers, but it remains the primary reason Pakistan has been unwilling to fully commit to the battle against Islamic extremism. American policy seems to be content to let this issue fester. That is a mistake. Forceful and fair diplomacy on this matter would help diminish feelings of anti-Americanism in the region and help stabilize a country that is dangerously close to capsizing.

3. Guantánamo Bay. The continued detention of foreign nationals without charge, many of whom may have had little or nothing to do with al-Qaeda, remains a black mark on America's record for human rights, not only for Muslims around the world but also for Americans who feel that the rule of law has been spurned. Al-Qaeda loyalists frequently invoke Guantánamo because it reminds

many Muslims of the oppressive conditions in their own countries. The Director of National Intelligence, Mike McConnell, told me that he is in favor of closing Guantánamo because of the damage it does to America's image, but he admits there is a problem about what to do with detainees who may be dangerous.

The success of the Egyptian government's dialogue with its own radicals may provide a way for the U.S. to release some of the Guantánamo detainees. Allowing Islamic clerics to open discussion within the detention center could offer some of the men a chance to adjust their thinking and the U.S. a face-saving way of releasing prisoners whose continued detention is legally difficult to justify.

4. Changing the Narrative. It is vital to defuse the idea, so successfully planted by al-Qaeda propagandists, that the West is at war with Islam. The best way the U.S. can respond to these reconsiderations is to open a dialogue with non-violent Islamists who are seeking reconciliation. That means, among other things, welcoming prominent Muslim thinkers and activists, such as Tariq Ramadan, the Islamic theologian, and Kemal Helbawy, the former spokesperson for the Muslim Brotherhood, into the U.S. for teaching or speaking engagements, rather than shutting them out. It means emphasizing the bankruptcy of al-Qaeda's politics while supporting democratic movements in the Muslim world – even when they produce disappointing results. The process is more important than the personalities it produces.

How Terrorist Movements End

Twenty years is a long time for a terror organization to exist. One can look back at history and see the critical moments that closed the door on some of al-Qaeda's ancestors. Most terror groups disappear with the death of their charismatic leader. The Red Army Faction failed when the Berlin Wall fell and the organization lost its sanctuary in East Germany. The Irish Republican Army, which endured in various incarnations for nearly a century, came to an end when economic conditions in Ireland significantly improved and the leaders were eager to make a political accommodation.

These examples offer few hopeful parallels for al-Qaeda. The organization has new sanctuaries, the social economic conditions that gave rise to it persist, and the leaders of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, continue to elude capture. The main challenge to al-Qaeda now is philosophical.

Conclusion

Radical Islam is at a defining moment. The movement has accomplished nothing practical for its adherents. There is philosophical ferment within its ranks. As the realists among them begin to sober up after the earthshaking events of 9/11 and its aftermath, the intransigence of the past has given way to a new mood of accommodation and coexistence. America has an unusual opportunity to begin a vigorous diplomatic campaign directed toward ending the polarization with the Islamic world that al-Qaeda has sought to create. America can be seen, as it once was, as a model for change; indeed, nothing we have done since 9/11 has done more to improve our image in that part of the world than this magnificent presidential election we are currently engaged in. But a sudden and surprising attack by al-Qaeda or an ill-advised political or military move on the part of the U.S. will foreclose this opportunity. We must do whatever we can to make sure that neither of these eventualities comes to pass, at the same time remembering that the status quo also terribly dangerous.