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THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR: MISTAKING IDEOLOGY AS THE CENTER OF GRAVITY

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A U.S. Army War College Course Paper on U.S. Defense Policy Strategy and Issues

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The Cold War was portrayed as an epic clash of two ideologies – Western Democracy versus Communism. Section IV of the defining cold war document, National Security Council 68 (NSC 68), was entitled "The Underlying Conflict in the Realm of Ideas and Values between the U.S. Purpose and the Kremlin Design," and it argued that the basic conflict was between ideas – "the idea of freedom under a government of laws, and the idea of slavery under the grim oligarchy of the Kremlin."[1] The adversary resided in the Soviet Union and violence in other regions in the world – including terrorist violence – was exported from or used by this center of Communism. Today, the war of ideas is Western Democracy versus Salafi Islam. Al Qaeda is the main enemy, with our main effort targeted to a particular geographic region – the Middle East, where undemocratic, repressive regimes represent the center of the opposing ideology. This is oversimplified, but there is some merit in such a mental picture.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 constitute al-Qaeda's crowning achievement. They also made it clear that we had fundamentally misunderstood the type of globalized threat we now faced. It concentrated U.S. resolve into an overwhelming response that included the most extreme sort of sanction of two designated state sponsors – invasion and regime change. Fifteen of the 37 designated top al-Qaeda operatives have been killed or captured and almost 3,000 al-Qaeda operatives have been detained by about 90 countries. International financial cooperation has frozen about $77 million of suspected al-Qaeda financial assets worldwide.[2] Al-Qaeda as an international business organization with a central organizing function has ceased to exist. Although its two top operatives, bin Laden and al Zawahiri remain at large, their leadership is no longer relevant to the activities of the global terrorist network. In response to the worldwide effort that dismantled al-Qaeda's central leadership global terrorism has mutated once again into a system of franchise operations.[3]

Al-Qaeda is no longer an organization; it is a brand name. Tony Karon noted in Time Magazine that "'al-Qaeda,' the name describes a broad franchise of terrorist jihad against the U.S. and its allies adopted by scores of local Islamist groups."[4] During the years that the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) coalition has been hunting and dismantling Al-Qaeda's central organization, these groups have not been idle. Inspired by the brand of global jihad, they have conducted a series of deadly attacks across the globe; from Madrid to Casablanca, through Istanbul, Riyadh, and Baghdad to Bali and Jakarta. Many of these groups predate al Qaeda and have specific regional or national agendas. They do not directly communicate or overtly coordinate their attacks. It is tempting to argue that, absent a coherent al Qaeda organizational network, these groups are really only bound together through ideology. Under this theory,

[1] National Security Council. *NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (Washington D.C.: National Security Council, April 14, 1950), 2.

[2] Kenneth Katzman, "Al-Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment," *Congressional Research Institute Report to Congress*, February 10, 2005, 5.

[3] A number of descriptive terms have been used in recent literature, but I attribute the term "Franchise Operations" and its description to Brigadier General Rick Zahner. As the EUCOM J2, BG Zahner was pointing out the phenomenon in early 2003, while most observers were still concentrating on the al-Qaeda network itself.

[4] Tony Karon, "Why the Qaeda Threat is Growing," *Time*, March 17, 2004, 2.

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one could conclude that franchising into nationalist groups is precisely what the National Strategy for Combating Strategy (NSCT) predicts – the U.S. is successfully whittling down the global network into its component regional and state groups. There is no doubt that Islamist jihad is a powerful ideological phenomenon, but it is only one aspect of the global terrorist network and making it the central organizing concept is perhaps more a result of a cold war mentality than of the reality.

It is instructive to remember that we did not win the Cold War by winning the war of ideologies. We drove the Soviet Union out of business and their material support to terrorist groups and client state sponsors of terrorists dried up. The ideology of communism was subsequently discredited, but there are two important points to make about this. First, very few terrorist groups or insurgencies which claimed some connection to communism or received support from the Soviet Union ceased operations because communism was discredited. These groups were symptoms of the "anti-colonialism" wave of Post-World War II, not of the struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Second, in the eyes of much of the world, discrediting communism did not validate democracy.

Following in this cold war (or maybe it would be more accurate to call it a uniquely American) mindset, military theorists whose study of the adversary follows traditional military thinking – identifying a group, studying leaders, and so on – have increasingly begun to tout "Islamist ideology" as the center of gravity for the GWOT.[5] Echevarria states that "….the war against global terrorism is foremost a battle of ideas—ideas powerful enough to provoke violent emotions. Consequently, it is within this arena that the war will be won or lost."[6] Eloquent words, but the reality is that the ideas justify the violent impulse, they do not provoke it. There are two unspoken assumptions that drive this sort of debate in the West: first, that political Islam is monolithic and second, that it is inherently violent.[7] Political Islam is a modern phenomenon and, although the Western observer may perceive it as generally all "Islamic," Muslim scholars like Mohammed Ayoob argue that "it is the local context that has largely determined the development and transformation of Islamist movements within particular national milieus. Moreover, it is not true that Islamist political formations have been primarily violent in nature. The most long-standing and credible Islamist parties have normally worked within the legal frameworks in which they have found themselves."[8] Instead of being monolithic, political Islam is defined by national and local circumstances and shows as much diversity as the world's Muslim population itself. Wahhabism and Salafism, which are commonly cited as violent ideologies, do not advocate violence. Moreover, their practice varies in different regions.[9] There is no single ideology to be discredited and even the groups which advocate violence justify it with an interpretation that is location and context specific.

The particular brand of Salafism preached by al Qaeda was as much inspired by Marxist-Leninist revolutionary ideas as it was by Islam. The movement's founding ideology derives from Egyptian revolutionary Sayyid Qutb and Abu Ala Maududi of Pakistan, who were influenced by the organizational tactics of secular leftist and anarchist revolutionaries. Their concept of the vanguard is influenced by Leninist theory. Qutb's most famous work, "Milestones," has been likened to an Islamicized Communist Manifesto.[10] The terrorists have often named grievances that are far more anti-global in nature than they are religious. One of bin Laden's recent documents cites the United States' failure to ratify the Kyoto agreement on climate change. Ayman al-Zawahiri has decried multinational companies as a major evil and Mohammed Atta once told a friend that he was angry at a world economic system that meant Egyptian farmers grew cash crops such as strawberries for the West while the country's own people could barely afford bread.[11]

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[5] Even a cursory review of various Army War College writings reveals this trend. See, for example, James Reilly's Strategy Research Project, *A Strategic Level Center of Gravity Analysis on the Global War on Terrorism*, April 9, 2002, Joseph Schweitzer's, *Al-Qaeda: Center of Gravity and Decisive Points*, April 4, 2003; or Joe Etheridge's, *Center of Gravity Determination in the Global War on Terrorism*, May 4 2004.

[6] Antulio J. Echevarria III, *Globalization and the Nature of War,* Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, U.S. Army War College, March 2003. http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/pdffiles/PUB215.pdf/. Internet accessed February 18, 2005, 22.

[7] Mohammed Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2004, 1.

[8] Ibid., 6.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Jason Burke, "Think Again: Al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2004. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2536&print=1/. Internet accessed February 18, 2005, 2.

[11] Ibid.

The Jihadist terrorists use Salafi Islam as a religious frame for modern political concerns, including social justice. They do not reject modernization; they resent their failure to benefit from it. This fits the classic pattern of increasing opportunity and changing political systems that generated waves of terror in response to empire building and colonization. There is no doubt that bin Laden and the fundamentalist groups which look to him for inspiration are dedicated to restoring traditional Shari'a law and conservative Islamic rule to Muslim countries. But the underlying grievances are not about religion, they are about power and opportunity. Dr. Radu, writing about the root causes of Islamist terrorism, commented that "Islamist terrorism, just as its Marxist or secessionist version in the West and Latin America was, is a matter of power—who has it and how to get it."[12] This is not to minimize the power of the religious message, or the importance of supporting the growth of democracy in the Middle East. But it is important to understand that global terrorism is not about Islam; it is about the social conditions connected with globalization.

Al Qaeda – the organization – was a bridge between Industrial Age and Information Age terrorism. Al Qaeda – the brand – is one manifestation of a new form of terrorism that is irrevocably global. We know this – both the National Security Strategy and NSCT discuss the importance of globalization. But we persist in believing it is merely a technological enablement, rather than a fundamental characteristic. The NSCT states that "Modern technology has enabled terrorists to plan and operate worldwide as never before. With advanced telecommunications they can coordinate their actions among dispersed cells while remaining in the shadows. Today's terrorists increasingly enjoy a force-multiplier effect by establishing links with other like-minded organizations around the globe."[13] The implication is if the franchise in Malaysia is not phoning or emailing the franchise in Algeria, then they must not be global terrorists because they are not directly connected by technology.

The fact is that they do not need to communicate directly, or even know much about each other, any more than the hashish customer in Amsterdam needs to know about the grower in Bolivia to be part of the same global drug network. The global network is comprised of both local franchises which tend to attack western targets on their home turf, and internationalist contingents which may target far from their place of origin. These cells are composed of a second generation which may have traveled to Afghanistan in the 1990s, or participated in Jihads in places like Bosnia and Chechnya. Most of these young internationalists came from the West.[14] They had moved to western countries with their families or as students. Some were born in western countries. They adopted a western lifestyle and were not particularly religious. Members of the internationalist contingent rarely return to their home countries. As one example, no European Algerians who joined the jihad movement have been identified as returning to Algeria to join the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). They did go to take part in peripheral jihad – in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya and even Kashmir – but they returned to Europe. "Most of the operatives in Europe….can be better defined now as part of the European Jihadi milieu…the GSPC [Group for Preaching and Combat] European network ranks among the most active terrorist networks in the world."[15]

Marc Sageman, who developed a model of the different terror networks responsible for the major Western targeted attacks – to include September 11 – demonstrated how the network was composed of nodes that formed spontaneously, through social bonding. They stretched across regions, were not constrained by nationality or borders and were not the product of poverty and ignorance. Instead, he says "They were…upwardly mobile compared to their parents….Underemployed and discriminated against by the local society, they felt a personal sense of grievance and humiliation. They sought a cause that would give them emotional relief, social community….Although they did not start out particularly religious; there was a shift in their devotion before they joined the global jihad, which gave them both a cause and comrades."[16]

As the links between the Middle East and transnational terrorism become more and more dispersed, its global nature becomes clearer. Other groups and individuals which are fundamentally antiglobal are beginning to identify with the jihadists. Neo-Nazis, White Supremacists, Identity Christians and former communist radicals have applauded the jihadists and urged followers to join forces.[17] One of the premier terrorists of the Cold War, Carlos the

[12] Michael Radu, *Futile Search for the Root Causes of Islamic Terrorism*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 23 2002 [journal on-line]; http://www.fpri.org/enotes/americawar.20020423.radu.futilesearchforrootcauses.html/. Internet accessed February 20, 2005, 2.

[13] Ibid., 10.

[14] Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 92.

[15] Jonathan Schanzer, *Al-Qaeda's Armies: Middle East Affiliate Groups and the Next Generation of Terror* (The Washington Institue for Near East Policy, 2004 & 2005), 111.

[16] Ibid., 97.

[17] Jessica Stern, *Terror in The Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (NY, NY, Harper Collins Inc., 2003), 275.

Jackal, has converted to Islam and now espouses the cause of anti-Western Jihad.[18] The truck bomb tactic Timothy McVeigh used to destroy a government building in Oklahoma was perfected in Lebanon. The use of roadside improvised explosive devices (IED), tested in Iraq, has become a very successful terrorist tactic being employed by Maoist insurgents in Nepal.[19]

Terrorist financing is a global network of both illegal and legal businesses, financial assistance from state agents, criminal activities and donations.[20] Terrorists and other criminal offspring of globalization meet in areas like the tri-border region connecting Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay to make connections and "swap tradecraft."[21] Terrorism is increasingly exhibiting a freedom from the constraints of either state or region. Instead, it exists in a transnational milieu, divorced from state-driven ideology or constraints. Terrorist groups have begun to exhibit the same characteristics of the other negative aspects of globalization that Moises Naim characterizes as the Five Wars of Globalization – illegal trade in drugs, arms, intellectual property, people, and money.

Naim points out that the struggle to overcome all of these negative outcomes "pits governments against agile, stateless, and resourceful networks empowered by globalization. Governments will continue to lose these wars until they adopt new strategies to deal with a larger, unprecedented struggle that now shapes the world as much as confrontations between nation-states once did."[22] He argues that they all exhibit fundamental changes that are persistent, transnational, incredibly flexible and immune to traditional government solutions. The global networks have four characteristics: they are not bound by geography; they defy traditional notions of sovereignty; they pit governments against market forces; and they pit bureaucracies against networks.[23] Naim's analysis, like that of other observers of globalization and terrorism, highlights that the fundamental challenge lies understanding the revolutionary differences of the enemies we face. It is very important that we understand the ideological justifications of the terrorists which threaten us, but we should not be misled into believing that is their center of gravity. Instead, it is the networks that span regions and nations, making them marginal or irrelevant, that are the challenge of the twenty first century. The evidence of the last few years indicates that the enemy will not "de-globalize," but will evolve into something else, continuing to operate globally. We need to understand the traditional assumptions of terrorism that drive our strategy and define a new way ahead. It is time to operationalize and test a practical model of a networked enemy conducting Netwar, and develop a truly revolutionary strategy to combat the enemy of the "now and future," not the "now and past."

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[18] Amir Taheri, "The Axis of Terror," *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9 Iss. 14 November 24, 2003. http://www.benadorassociates.com/article/700/. Internet accessed February 20, 2005, 2.

[19] BG Paban Thapa, Nepalese Armed Forces, "Nepal," Seminar presentation, Carlisle Barracks, PA, U.S. Army War College, January 2005, cited by permission of BG Thapa.

[20] Stern, 272.

[21] Ibid., 277.

[22] Moises Naim, "The Five Wars of Globalization," *Foreign Policy*, Jan/Feb 2003. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/. Internet accessed February 20, 2005, 29.

[23] Ibid., 35.

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