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## The Intelligence Services' Struggle Against al-Qaeda Propaganda

History demonstrates that terrorist violence is not, in itself, an efficient instrument. Generally, most terrorist groups have become extinct before realizing their ultimate aims. Moreover, although the effects of terrorism are often spectacular and disproportional in the short term—both in the resources employed and the damage caused—terrorism itself is not a decisive method of conflict. To maximize gains, terrorism should be complemented by a series of political and social actions. Above all, these complementary strategies must have the capacity to evolve with and adapt to complex forms of engagement. Terrorists have succeeded only when they have developed defined and limited goals, and when these are integrated into a wider strategy.

In designing an anti-terrorist campaign against al-Qaeda, a crucial risk is that it consists precisely in not paying sufficient attention to the complementary strategies that accompany terrorist action and prove crucial for the continuity or disappearance of a terrorist network. Among

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these complementary strategies, propaganda and perception management stand out.

### **I. THE IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT WITHIN AL-QAEDA**

Al-Qaeda's structure differs considerably from most terrorist groups of the twentieth century in that it is a decentralized organizational network. Most of its members lead normal lives, which they combine with part-time dedication to terrorist activity. The "netwar" paradigm developed by the RAND analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (1997, 2001) facilitates understanding of the various types of conflict, including this new form of terrorism, that predominate today. This "netwar," in terms of conduct, refers to conflicts in which the rivals are organized in a net (network) or employ nets with the objectives of operational control and of differing types of communication. The information technology revolution favors small terrorist groups that were once relegated to operational obscurity and isolation. Now, these groups can better communicate and coordinate activity. This gives rise to a new form of conflict whereby the protagonists come to use the structure of the network in the organization, doctrine, strategy, and use of violence.

In a structure of this type, the unit reproduces itself on a narrative level, in the cause that inspires action from the network. From this, a major defensive advantage of al-Qaeda is derived: strategic centralization and tactical decentralization. Decapitation thus proves impossible, and the organization assumes considerable flexibility. At the same time, components of the network can vary in the short, medium, and long term because they are dynamic structures, the fruit of temporary coalitions. With regards to terrorism, this applies to all elements of the group: particular individuals, semi-autonomous cells, independent terrorist groups, associations not necessarily violent, arms trafficking, and members of a specific regime.

The characteristics put forward by Arquilla and Ronfeldt correspond to much of what is known about al-Qaeda. But open source information on al-Qaeda is in fact limited.<sup>1</sup> Al-Qaeda is a coalition of individuals, terrorist groups, and radical associations, present in dozens of countries, organized as a kind of franchise of the global Jihad. Its original core was the promoter of the idea and the organization, but, once put in motion, the activity of the network has passed on to become more decentralized and, on occasion, spontaneous.

The aspirations of al-Qaeda's historical leaders consist in not only creating a powerful organization, but in mobilizing genuine believers so as to re-establish the past glory of Islam. The network's members consider themselves the vanguard of their religion—once one of the most important

civilizations in the world—and duty-bound to extend again the idea of Jihad among Muslims.

This project of global mobilization for a holy war constitutes a serious threat to international security. The undeniable success that the international war against terror has achieved until so far (including the loss of refuge in Afghanistan, some 3000 detentions, and half the senior leaders dead or imprisoned) is good news, with the capacity of the organization to realize high-level operations reduced. Nevertheless, parameters used to measure traditional terrorist groups should not prevail. Al-Qaeda is not only a terrorist group; it is a project that nurtures its roots in radical Islam (with notable success in small circles, which together constitute hundreds of millions of people worldwide) and antisystem vengeance (in a world in which thousands of people feel frustrated and victim of some injustice). Although the radical ideology that animates the group originates from an extremist and primitive form of intolerance, the organization and modus operandi reflect an advanced adaptation towards the new environment of globalization and the information revolution. Alarming, even if the original nucleus of al-Qaeda were to be destroyed, the netwar could still mutate and regenerate itself.

Al-Qaeda's significant power derives in great measure from its success in terms of mobilization and propaganda. Funding is crucial, training as well, and the acquisition of explosives and weapons is of great importance, but the information and propaganda battle constitutes an essential pillar under which the organizational architecture resides and continuity is assured. Therefore, in the design of any global antiterrorist politic, special attention should be drawn to the measures taken by terrorists to ensure success.

The importance of the information dimension in the war against terror becomes clearer when the beneficial results of perception management for al-Qaeda are examined more closely:

*a) Permits the Realization of Franchise Terrorism*

Al-Qaeda is animated by an ideology that crosses borders, social classes, and ethnic groups. In this way, it manages to integrate dispersed groups of people who might have otherwise remained marginalized from the terrorist scene. In countries of Muslim majority, and in the capitals of the Western world, there exist subcultures that participate in the ideas of a global Jihad but would not have joined a terrorist campaign were it not for the success of several attacks and al-Qaeda propaganda. Once al-Qaeda's message, which permits universal understanding, is elaborated and distributed, the likelihood of forging transnational alliances and interaction between dispersed points is increased, all the while supported by the information revolution. The elevated number of states that have suffered attacks, or where members have been arrested, demonstrates the success of the Jihad discourse, in

terms of both transmission and reception of the message, even if it refers only to a minority.

*b) Maintains and Increases Social Bases of Support*

Although the majority of Muslims reject the practices of al-Qaeda and violence in the name of Islam, radical circles that share the principles of the network do exist. These groups seek continuity and expansion thanks to audiovisual and written propaganda, the interpretation this has on international reality, and the terrorist attacks that keep alight the flame of holy war. All this creates a transnational conscience and ties of virtual solidarity, which feed into the perpetuation of these marginal circles.

*c) The Narrative that al-Qaeda Diffuses Inoculates Desires of Hate and Vengeance on a Global Scale*

The emotional and affective components are often crucial in any terrorist motivation. In some cases, terrorists are people with a strong sense of frustration due to unfulfilled expectations, who opt for physical coercion as a way of achieving their unsatisfied goals. In other cases, they are consumed by hate and rancor, and recur to violence as an act of reprisal to reaffirm individual or collective dignity. The al-Qaeda discourse appeals to these passions and gives them ideological coherence. The propaganda machine delegates indignation down to the people, even to those who suffer no direct injustice, moved by an empathy to join.

*d) Potential for Amateur Terrorism*

In general terms, a growing membership base is dangerous for terrorist groups because it threatens the clandestine nature of the network. This rule is not altogether applicable to al-Qaeda since it promotes a part-time terrorism, practiced by nonprofessional terrorists, who often die on their first mission. This is possible largely because of the success of mobilization through propaganda, which facilitates recruitment and local coordination for the network. A terrorism of this kind is probably less effective in operational terms but much more difficult to combat on a great scale.

## **II. ELEMENTS OF AL-QAEDA'S IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE**

Al-Qaeda projects a simple discourse, of incredible magnetism, as is demonstrated by the huge number of people who participate in the ideas of the global Jihad, some even sacrificing themselves for the cause. In this discourse, religious ideas are intermixed with political aspirations, which emerge from a sense of revenge against what are considered to

be intolerable injustices. The discourse that justifies violence in the name of religion has been in incubation since the 1970s; but it is since the 1990s that it has become radically anti-Western and in particular, anti-American.

*a) The Ultimate Strategic Objective*

Al-Qaeda's goal consists of the establishment of Islamic regimes in Muslim states and achievement of a union of all Muslims within a political community, in other words, a restoration of the caliphate. This simple program of action does not dwell on concrete political, social, or economic issues. Rather, it is an idealized objective that, in its fulfillment, hopes to resolve all other secondary problems that afflict the community of believers.

The ultimate motivation of al-Qaeda coincides with the essential principles of Islamic thought, and therefore, with the social and political activity of Muslims in divergent parts of the world. Nevertheless, the differences between al-Qaeda and nonviolent Islamists are significant when deciding on the means to fight a netwar. For the ideological members of al-Qaeda, the armed Jihad is an indispensable instrument. As Abdullah Azzam, of the Afghan Service Office (MAK), later to become al-Qaeda, states:

So, everyone not performing jihad today is forsaking a duty, just like the one who eats during the days of Ramadhan without excuse, or the rich person who withholds the Zakat from his wealth. Nay, the state of the person who abandons jihad is more severe.<sup>2</sup>

Osama bin Laden also ties in the practice of Jihad with the roots and traditions of original Islam:

There is no choice but return to the original spring, to this religion, to God's Book, Praise and Glory be to Him, and to the sunna of His Prophet, Peace be upon him, as understood by our predecessors, may God be pleased with them. Of this, the acme of this religion is jihad. The nation has had a strong conviction that there is no way to obtain faithful strength but by returning to this jihad.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Qaeda considers the Jihad a defensive battle, and at the same time, a total war—a conviction that transforms into an object anything or anyone that fortifies the adversary, including civilians for supporting their government:

As for what you asked regarding the American people, they are not exonerated from responsibility, because they chose this government and voted for it despite their knowledge of its crimes in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and in other places and its support of its agent regimes who filled our prisons with our best children and scholars.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, employment of terrorism as a form of strategic defense is justified:

Every state and every civilization and culture has to resort to terrorism under certain circumstances for the purpose of abolishing tyranny and corruption. . . . The terrorism we practice is of the commendable kind for it is directed at the tyrants and the aggressors and the enemies of Allah, the tyrants, the traitors who commit acts of treason against their own countries and their own faith and their own prophet and their own nation.<sup>5</sup>

And so is the death of civilians, women, and children:

So we kill their innocents, and I say it is permissible in law and intellectually. . . . That it is not permissible. They spoke of evidence that the Messenger of God forbade the killing of women and children. This is true. . . . However, this prohibition of the killing of children and innocents is not absolute. It is not absolute. There are other texts that restrict it. . . . If the infidels killed women and children on purpose, we shouldn't shy way from treating them in the same way to stop them from doing it again.<sup>6</sup>

To reach the desired strategic end, the restoration of the caliphate, al-Qaeda has developed several intermediate instrumental objectives. These second-tier goals define plans for terrorist organization and explain their behavior.

#### *b) Depose Corrupt Apostate Governments*

According to members of the Jihad movement, those in power who fail to apply religious law are not genuine Muslims. They are considered worse than infidels because they are aware of the true faith and have rejected it. In other words, they are apostates. This qualification refers to most regimes in the Arab and Muslim world. Although al-Qaeda refrains from naming specific countries, possibly the only exceptions were the Taliban and today, Iran. As a result, similar political systems within Arab-Muslim states are targeted by the terrorist network. But, the Jihad movement considers it a greater priority to target Western influence, which has infiltrated Arab-Muslim societies through indirect channels such as tourism, communication, education, and the support which apostate regimes receive from the United States.

#### *c) To Defeat to the "Crusaders and Jews"*

This refers in a broad sense to Europe, the United States, and Israel. Nonetheless, al-Qaeda concentrates the struggle on the United States, considering it to be the "head of the serpent," the hegemonic power and

central source of the “Christian Zionist alliance,” for several reasons.

- The United States supports apostate leaders that govern Muslim countries;
- It contaminates pure values within Muslim societies;
- The United States commits profanity through military occupation on holy Muslim land;
- Direct or indirect oppression of Islam worldwide.

*d) To Fight Where Islam Is Oppressed*

In his 1996 declaration of war, bin Laden affirmed:

The people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist Crusaders alliance and their collaborators, to the extent that the Muslim’s blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies. Their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Erithria, Chechnya and Bosnia Herzegovina took place—massacres that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience. All of this and the world watched and heard, and not only didn’t respond to these atrocities, but a clear conspiracy developed between the USA and its allies under the cover of the iniquitous United Nations and the dispossessed people were even prevented from obtaining arms to defend themselves.

Bin Laden’s deputy, Dr. Ayman Mohammad al-Zawahiri, expresses in a similar way what al-Qaeda represents:

A growing power that is rallying under the banner of jihad for the sake of God. . . . It is anxious to seek retribution for the blood of the martyrs, the grief of the mothers, the deprivation of the orphans, the suffering of the detainees, and the sores of the tortured people throughout the land of Islam, from Eastern Turkestan to Andalusia.<sup>7</sup>

*e) Mobilize the Muslim World to Join the Jihad*

The vision that al-Qaeda has of the world would correspond with the first vision of Islam that differentiates between dar-al-islam (land of Islam) and dar-a-harb (land of war). Bin Laden changes the terms and speaks of those who are with him and those who belong to the Christian Zionist alliance. There is no place for neutrality; the true Muslim has to choose the decree that Al Qaeda ordains:

I say these events have split the whole world into two camps: the camp of belief and the disbelief. So every Muslim shall take—shall support his religion. . . . I say the matter is very clear, so every Muslim after this, and after the officials in America, starting with the head of the infidels, Bush.<sup>8</sup>

For al-Qaeda there is no doubt as to the existence of a clash of civilizations. The war is a consequence of the hostility initiated by the adversaries, and every real Muslim, in defense of the religion, should be involved in the struggle. Hence, one of al-Qaeda's aims consists in embedding this obligation into the conscience of Muslims, through discursive and active propaganda. In a few declarations that express more desire than reality, Bin Laden avowed:

Today, the entire Muslim world, by the grace of God, has imbibed the faithful spirit of strength and started to interact in a good manner in order to bring an end to occupation and the Western and American influence on our countries.<sup>9</sup>

Like any violent ideology, al-Qaeda's holy war theory finds a direct minority support base. What makes it so popular in wide sectors of the Muslim world is its ability to manipulate feelings of frustration and humiliation toward the West and Israel. The social situation of many in these countries turns out to be seriously unsatisfactory for hundreds of thousands of young men and women, and al-Qaeda's discourse presents an alternative antisystem to the style of Robin Hood. Palestine is a common example to justify the war and oppose Western military presence in Iraq. This probably does not suppose the collapse of Muslim regimes, but instead conjures an atmosphere favorable to a constant labor of recruitment.

### III. EVOLUTION OF AL-QAEDA'S PROPAGANDA

Until 11 September 2001, al-Qaeda's propaganda was hardly visible, though not less active. The main office was located in London, under the pseudonym "Committee of the Council and the Reform," coordinated by Khalid al-Fawwaz, who was arrested in 1998. Other organizations and charitable associations were used to distribute messages and win supporters; for example, both the Movement for the Islamic Reform in Arabia and the Committee for the Defense of the Legitimate Laws, had offices in the British capital. On other occasions, al-Qaeda used mosques and Islamic meeting points as centers for propaganda. This happened in London's Finsbury Park mosque, Baker Street's center, and the Center of Islamic Studies in Milan. Sometimes propaganda was distributed in these places without the knowledge of the people in charge, especially in mosques, which serve as a place of meeting, knowledge, and prayer.

Through this constant and patient labor of proselytization, al-Qaeda has penetrated other terrorist groups, associations, and Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Added to this is the spectacular nature of the attacks. Propaganda is essential because it precedes support,



funding, and recruitment. The majority of the Islamicist cells detained in the West perform this function.

The information campaign is also realized on a personal level via periodical publications or Internet Websites like azzam.com—one of the first sites to emerge but shut down in November 2001. Afterwards, it reappeared, only to disappear again. Other Internet sites in support of the Jihad movement include almuhajiroun.com; khalifornia.org; tanzeem.org; and stcom.net. Currently, one of the most impressive and active is jihadunspun.net; its contents are of notable quality, and include video footage in which images and emotive music are used to justify the terrorist struggle against the United States. Admittedly, the Internet was a medium already used by the mujahedin prior to 11 September 2001, but since the recent war on Afghanistan, cyberspace has been transformed into a crucial element in maintaining contact between activists and visionaries.<sup>10</sup> In 2002, al-Qaeda began publishing a new Internet magazine, *Qaidat al-Yihad*.<sup>11</sup> The Web addresses initially used were quickly blocked by the U.S. government; hence, the beginning of the cat and mouse game between al-Qaeda propagandists and U.S. security agencies. On other occasions, new Web addresses have not been created; instead servers, of no relation to terrorism, have been taken hostage, often without the realization of legal Internet administrators.<sup>12</sup> From these Web pages comes the idea of a global conspiracy against Islam, and attempts to reach Muslims sensitive to these issues, especially those who live in the West. Shortly after the war on terror began, azzam.com published this statement:

Elsewhere, thousands of Muslims have been arrested and detained in America, where they are beaten (by both the prison guards and other prisoners), tortured, humiliated and denied access to lawyers and their families. Muslim homes are being raided and Muslims being detained across Europe. Muslim websites, businesses and banks are being closed. In the midst of all this, Western leaders are at pains to explain that this is not a war against Islam and that the West loves Muslims. Scenes of the bodies of both the Taliban and the foreign Mujahedin lying on the streets have been broadcast around the world much to the delight of the disbelievers and their hypocrite allies from amongst the “Muslims” (e.g., some “official” American and British Muslim Councils, etc.).<sup>13</sup>

The authors warn that the Website will soon be shut down by Western intelligence agencies. In response to this inevitability, they claim to have copied the contents and translated them into several languages for later diffusion across the Internet.<sup>14</sup>

Until 11 September 2001, propaganda within al-Qaeda focused on and highlighted the idea of a global Jihad. The organization itself was never in

the spotlight. Indeed, Osama bin Laden publicly named al-Qaeda only after this date. In the beginning, bin Laden denied al-Qaeda's existence so as to divert the attention of security services. For this reason, it never claimed responsibility for attacks; instead, the names of fictitious groups were used. Al-Qaeda was protected by a cloudy information network that frustrated international penetration efforts. Its declarations called for a holy war and rejoiced in actions by the mujahedin, but did not state itself responsible for any atrocities. This astute strategy has allowed extravagant conspiracy theories to emerge in many parts of the Western and Muslim worlds.

Since the attacks on Washington and New York, al-Qaeda has become a much more recognizable and communicative enemy. Of the more than 130 texts of all kinds published since 1993, only twenty-four were published before 2001. Sixty were published in 2002 and thirty in 2003.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, propaganda has become more direct, even offering details on certain attacks, with more clarity about the "war of liberation" against the U.S. Al-Qaeda's marketing strategy seeks to create a reference for all Muslims who seek to fight against the "crusaders, Jews, and infidels."<sup>16</sup> In sum, al-Qaeda aspires to become more adept and decentralized. Despite more visibility and exposure, however, the network continues to be concerned with international perceptions and does not fully accept responsibility for all its attacks; instead, it justifies them ideologically. The following comments Web-published on 14 October 2002, are a good example of this game play. After referring to terrorist activity against a French petroleum company in Yemen, a U.S. military base in Kuwait, and a dance hall in Bali, the author declares:

Is it Al-Qaida that is behind these events? Or perhaps it is the (Muslim) nation that stands erect and fully conscious. [Or perhaps] in its most important interaction since the abolishment of the caliphate?

I do not verify or refute who stands behind the attacks.<sup>17</sup>

#### **IV. AL-QAEDA'S PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES**

Like other activities, propaganda and recruitment are enhanced by the network's structure. Decentralization allows for superior penetration into other social nets, to take advantage of opportunities that arise suddenly, and intercept potential recruits who meet al-Qaeda's internal standards of security and confidence. The net has not arisen spontaneously, but its earlier development had not been planned either. It spreads constantly and in a dispersed fashion. As a consequence, bin Laden's leadership is undoubted but not indispensable. The Jihad discourse transcends personal charisma. It is an ideology with deep religious anchorage and an attractive "antisystem" that will survive al-Qaeda's leader.

Any analysis into the strategy used to diffuse al-Qaeda's ideological content must arise from the fact that the propaganda is multidirectional. Both the message and the method of circulation differ notably, depending on the public addressed and the aim that it attempts to achieve, making possible the establishment of different "theaters of operations" in the realm of ideas:

*a) Muslims Who Live in Countries of Islamic Majority*

Al-Qaeda's actions are facilitated enormously by the previous existence of a deep-rooted sense of rancor and hostility toward the West in certain parts of the world. With regards to the perception and psychology of the masses, al-Qaeda has resorted to a simple but terribly effective mechanism of mobilization: to spur on frustration and provoke the desire of revenge. Bin Laden and his associates are aware that it is easier to determine the behavior of the masses through an appeal to the feelings and passions than by an elaborate theological or rational argumentation. Al-Qaeda's use of language offers an attractive justification for millions of people who need to find the ultimate cause of their misfortune and stagnated future. Situating the origins of misfortune in past acts intentionally hostile against Muslims (i.e., an alleged Christian Zionist conspiracy led by the U.S.) and reinforcing the notion of the existence of a historical enmity toward the "real" religion and a jealousy of the Arab world's wealth is a mechanism capable of initiating enormously destructive behavior.

In addition to manipulation at the strategic level is the reference to the concrete cases of Palestine, Chechnya, the Balkans, and Iraq, and the appeal to instincts that are rooted in the most elementary anthropology. Many communiqués by bin Laden are full of references to the indiscriminate murder of children, women, and the elderly. To associate the politics of the United States with aggression against the most defenseless strata of every society—taboo in any culture—helps to reinforce the demonization of the enemy, and to boost the spirits of those who feel called upon to end such injustice.

From the point of view of understanding the environment, man is a "greedily cognitive"; given his limited capacity to process information, and the natural tendency to simplify problems that appear to him, he needs stereotypes that allow him to have answers to a great number of questions. The success of al-Qaeda's propaganda resides in certain sectors of the Islamic world. Through the radicalized interpretation of the Koran, and the simplification of reasons that govern the international system, al-Qaeda has been able to elaborate a simple, but attractive statement of the role and duty of every Muslim, the reasons for his unhappiness, and the way to overcome them. Nevertheless, the power of words does not reside only in the force of ideas, but also in the facts that endorse them. This strategy of

diffusion corresponds with an old resource used by publicists throughout history—the technique of “band wagon.”<sup>18</sup>

The vision of the world and the call to holy war that bin Laden and his followers propose are distinguished from a whole set of marginalized ideologies through the force of the attacks and the magnitude of security measures taken to prevent them. For al-Qaeda militants, the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union was a consequence of its defeat suffered in Afghanistan. At the time, the Soviet Union was a military superpower, and nobody expected a guerrilla force armed with light weapons to defeat such a force. Nevertheless, for ten years the Afghan and Arab volunteers successfully attacked the Red Army and, soon, the Soviet empire was crumbling. Al-Qaeda thus applies an excessively subjective cause-effect logic, which strengthens subculture morale. In this light, harassment of the Allied forces in Iraq reaps considerable benefits, in terms of resources, prestige, and mobilization within Islamic radical circles. As a result, the net has enormous confidence in asymmetric conflict, and in this way counts on being able to ultimately defeat the coalition forces, as expressed in a 2003 communiqué, on the situation in Iraq:

With guerilla warfare, the Americans were defeated in Vietnam and the Soviets were defeated in Afghanistan. This is the method that expelled the direct Crusader colonialism from most of the Muslim lands, with Algeria the most well known. We still see how this method stopped Jewish immigration to Palestine, and caused reverse immigration of Jews from Palestine. The successful attempts of dealing defeat to invaders using guerilla warfare are many, and we will not expound on.<sup>19</sup>

Terrorist actions are another instrument of mobilization. Through them, the United States can be painted as a giant whom it is possible to hurt. The symbolic character of some of al-Qaeda’s successful targets—the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and U.S. warships, highlight this vulnerability. Therefore, it is not a question of indiscriminate action that damages U.S. support bases or the rejection that they could generate, as sometimes is said of terrorists who act for religious motives and whose only calling would be divinity. Al-Qaeda tries to earn sympathy from the Muslim population. In video footage found in Afghanistan, featuring his comments on the attacks on Washington and New York, Osama bin Laden emphasizes the propaganda effects of 11 September 2001:

Those young men (...inaudible...) said in deeds, in New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere else in the world. The speeches are understood by both Arabs and non-Arabs—even by Chinese... Some of them said that in Holland, at one of the centers, the number of people who accepted Islam during the days that followed the operations were more than the

people who accepted Islam in the last eleven years. . . . This event made people think, which benefited Islam greatly.<sup>20</sup>

As for the diffusion of his communiqués, the success of bin Laden's actions has allowed him to have preeminent, though indirect, access to the mass media within the Islamic world. Of special importance has been Al-Jazeera. Al-Qaeda has shown a particular predilection for this satellite channel, and through this medium it has publicized important manifestos since 11 September 2001. The station has also been favored in interviews. It was the only channel granted an interview with bin Laden after the assaults on Washington and New York. The interviewer was the journalist Tayseer Alouny, who in September 2003 was arrested in Spain for belonging to al-Qaeda. Alouny, then residing in Granada, was about to commence a position as Al Jazeera's Spanish newspaper correspondent. Likewise, the station obtained an interview on details of 11 September 2001, just one year after the attack, with the brains behind the operation.

Al-Jazeera maintains an ambiguous attitude with regard to al-Qaeda's terrorism, while diffusing a discourse that some interpret as a "global intifada." It employs populist rhetoric that inflames the masses, and benefits from the scant credibility of the official mass media within Arab-Muslim countries. Terrorists indirectly benefit from this politic.

#### *b) Muslims Who Live in the West*

In this area al-Qaeda is perceived more clearly that, far from being the simple result of a backward and archaic fanaticism, it is a product of the included and immersed world of the information revolution. Only through the growing importance of, and interest in, experimentation in information technologies can the capacity of the organization to recruit members and supporters in Islamic radical circles removed geographically from communities of origin and the problems of the Middle East be explained.

On some occasions, these people elsewhere endure insufficient integration in socioeconomic terms, yet their conditions of life, rights, and freedoms are substantially better than those that they would enjoy in their countries of origin. Nevertheless, al-Qaeda is conscious that manipulation, frustration, and indignation are not the only personal experiences extracted, but that these can be generated across emotive and sentimental resources recounted to a third party. Personal accounts, telecasts, photos, and an entire array of electronic means are capable of ensuring that individuals born and educated in Western societies, with no direct suffering themselves, nevertheless experience and empathize with the desperation of others. This skillful management of propaganda and the means that the information provides gives rise to deep transnational solidarities and nets of identity from which the terrorists obtain considerable yield.

Al-Qaeda's efforts extend not only to the recruitment of new followers; another aim is the auto-segregation of Islamic communities in the West, and the exacerbation of incomprehension among Muslims and non-Muslims. As indicated, al-Qaeda believes in the theory of the clash of civilizations, and tries to generate this contest within Western societies. Any resulting xenophobic event or violence against Muslim minorities constitutes a most valuable resource in its propaganda arsenal. The same can be said about various types of information that promote mutual distrust, for example, conspiracy theories that blame the Western intelligence services and the economic ambitions of Western leaders for conflicts, terrorist attempts, and evil that, in general, actually stem from the international struggle against the terrorism.

Al-Qaeda uses the technological advances that, to a great extent, produced the civilization that it tries to defeat. The Internet plays a pivotal role in its information strategy, even within the terrorist organization itself. The appearance of power and the outreach of the Jihad message achieved through the Internet is reinforced as a consequence of links that include the related Web pages dedicated to al-Qaeda. Any Web navigator interested in the Palestinian cause is able to easily connect to pages that gather the messages of the Chechen or Philippine mujahedin, the Islamic militants of Kashmir, or the Afghan Taliban. All this transmits the idea of a global and linked struggle as al-Qaeda tries to mobilize to new candidates against the alleged enemies of Islam. Equally, the image culture, with the consequent credibility granted to everything visual, finds in the Internet a riverbed of natural expression. In the struggle to undermine an opponent's credibility the Internet allows the spread of images (real or manipulated) that contradict official pronouncements.<sup>21</sup>

c) *"No Muslims Need Apply"*

The communicative action of al-Qaeda terrorism toward the West tends to spread fear, distort normal modes of behavior, generate insecurity, and stir hostility and distrust toward Islam. In other words, it manipulates both the enemy (West) and the follower (Muslim). These are the most evident effects of its violent actions. But several subtle and dangerous others must be emphasized: to undermine the support that a population gives to leaders; to sow doubt on the capacity of the government to protect its population; and, especially, to spread the feeling of self-guilt among those receiving terrorist assaults. Therefore, there is a double objective: to terrify and de-legitimize.

Al-Qaeda is aware that one way of balancing the military supremacy of the United States and Western allies consists in undermining the social support of respective governments. Putting this strategy of de-legitimization into practice is much easier if the society in question has not suffered directly

from the effects of terrorism. Hence, in the United States, al-Qaeda has fewer possibilities of influencing the perceptions of wide groups, whereas in some European countries, whose residents are essentially spectators to the struggle against terrorism, the capacity for al-Qaeda to affect responses on a wider scale increases considerably.

The mass media, especially television, possess characteristics that make them especially vulnerable to the informative actions of terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. The presentation of news bulletins under more attractive television formats and contents, from the visual point of view, provides a cinematographic imagery of terrorism; this enormously determines governmental action, which is inclined to look for more "palpable" and visual results in the struggle against the terrorism.

The lack of depth in news analysis of events, together with the tendency of the media towards "personification" of the news, raises equally perverse effects. The need of the media to provide a face and an image to the assaults of 11 September 2001 gave rise to the emergence of charismatic figures that compete, in importance and amount of time and attention dedicated, with democratic figures like George W. Bush and Tony Blair. In this way, violence can be turned into a source of certain "legitimacy" and "representation." Turning bin Laden into "public enemy number one" has increased his importance in the eyes of the Muslim world.

## V. COUNTER-PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES

Al-Qaeda's future depends not only on its aptitude to support an operative nucleus capable of realizing ostentatious assaults, and its ability to obtain funding and secure recruits. Its fate is also tied to maintaining its cultivated image of being a fortress and power. Achievement of this aim depends on the organization's ability to cover essential aspects in the survival of any terrorist group like, for example, the constant recruitment of new members, the guarantee that communiqués and ideological messages will receive sufficient coverage by the mass media, or the dissuasive factor against potentially hostile states that, for now, prefer to abstain from the ongoing war against terror. Nothing contributes more to the achievement of these last aims than the population's internalization of the facet of solidity. The information and propaganda strategy employed by the Jihad movement deliberately seeks to establish the perception that "al-Qaeda" is only the tip of the iceberg, part of a considerably wider movement. Consolidating this stereotype allows a restatement of the issue in terms much more favorable to the terrorist strategy. The "irresolute societies" thereby become convinced that forceful measures against the terrorists are sterile because of an apparently inexhaustible wealth of new candidates. Acquiescence to certain terrorist demands can seem to be a realistic means to solve the problem.

Eroding and neutralizing this image of a mighty fortress must be the ultimate goal of any action designed to offset al-Qaeda's propaganda campaign. In achieving this aim, the following measures can be useful:

*a) Turn al-Qaeda's Violent Discourse into an Unjustifiable Discourse*

The challenge is the uprooting of opinion that terrorism constitutes an acceptable way, independent of the legitimacy of the ends it seeks. Debating the foreign policies of the United States, or the West in general, does not help to neutralize popular support for the terrorists, since it involves a question of opinions, an area where unanimity cannot exist. Seating within the Muslim populations the idea that terrorist violence delegitimizes those that employ it can help to erode the supposed popular representation that terrorists always claim. A global rejection must be achieved in the long term to this type of violence. This aim is easy to enunciate but very difficult to achieve. Disaffected people who tune in with the ideas of the global Jihad will always exist; expecting the majority of those that formulate and guide popular opinion (journalists, academics, intellectuals, religious authorities) to coincide with a common definition of terrorism is unrealistic. Nevertheless, this aim should not be seen in terms of "black or white." Through persistent effort, the idea of opposition is likely to infiltrate slowly into some sectors of population and deactivate them from mobilization by the Jihad movement.

*b) Criminalizing the Diffusion of Impersonal Incitement to Murder via Communiqués and Propaganda Messages*

In some countries that have suffered for years, for example, Spain, terrorism is defined in legislation and punishable by a jail sentence. This strategy can be transplanted to other countries. Working against the apologists of terrorism does not hit against the public's general freedom of expression because the expression of support for the murder of innocents is a way of endorsing those who commit such actions. In addition, in an interconnected world, without real restrictions to the flow of information, tackling this dilemma solely within a national arena is pointless. Combatting crime and actions against persons in charge, independent of the country or region where the call to violence is made, should be included in any international agreements on the struggle against terrorism.

*c) Effective Use of the Mass Media that Reaches into the Deepest Parts of the Muslim World*

The mass media should be activated to spread an anti-terrorist message, as was done during the Cold War with the anti-Soviet Western radio listened



to on the other side of the Berlin wall. In the current case, not perceiving these means as foreign agents of manipulation is difficult. Phenomenal successes like Al-Jazeera (and others that could arise in the future) show the need to detract attention from these mediums, and take part in expressing opposing opinions and facilitating contrary information, otherwise the mass media become easy prey to systematic terrorist manipulation.

*d) Paying Attention to the Power of Symbols*

Any informative action that tries to offset the effects of terrorist imagery must use the mobilizing power that symbols possess. In this struggle to erode the image of terrorists' being a fortress, such actions as the loud and clear advertising of the detentions of the terrorist (such as showing images of the arrested), or in the case of Iraq, a bearded Saddam Hussein being examined by U.S. medics, the publication of their confessions and of any act that shows their lack of loyalty to the organization and to their colleagues, and any other measures that cast a mist over al-Qaeda's heroic image of fallen or captured members, can prove enormously helpful.

*e) Discrediting Those Who Spread Rumors*

Rumor and misinformation occupy an important place in the terrorist network's propaganda strategy. Through them, al-Qaeda manages to question the legitimacy and the honor of its opponents, without the need to justify the truth of its accusations. Rumors can consist of all kinds of delirious statements, conspiracy theories, and odd suggestions.<sup>22</sup> Though the public first grants only limited credibility to this type of statements, the long-term effect supposes an internalization of doubt about all those involved: the political and security leaders, the security agencies, and the terrorists. The often secret nature of the authorities, the frequent lack of coordination, and the damage of the allegations, allow the "fire to spread." Neutralization of the pernicious effects of these statements can perhaps be achieved through the creation of an agency or foundation that devotes itself exclusively to denying, in an informed manner, the misinformation, and to providing clear and forceful proof to end rumors. Keeping its composition neutral, by including academics and professionals outside the political or military arenas, would contribute to its credibility and efficiency.

*f) Resorting to the Emotions*

Terrorist propaganda relies on a wide use of the emotional impact of certain visual material. Without any type of available or effective restriction, crude images of corpses and mutilations can be found on terrorist-sponsored

sparse Web pages, including disabled persons and injured men portrayed as supposed evidence of the results of U.S.–Israeli political and military action.

Terrorists are conscious that appealing to the emotions is one of the most rapid and effective ways of modifying public and personal attitudes, and they do not hesitate to resort to any type of material that they consider to be useful to this end.

Without committing to excesses, and always respecting ethical criteria, the Western counter-informative strategy cannot ignore the emotive perspective of this information war. Illustrating the results of terrorist action, through actual images of its victims and the resulting human tragedy, is one of the most powerful ways of delegitimizing terrorists. Together with respect due to the victims and their families, the exhibition of certain images can constitute a revolt against terrorists much more powerful than a long series of official communiqués regarding penalty. Indeed, concealing the real results of terror only helps to generate an idealized stereotype removed from what terrorism actually is.

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- <sup>19</sup> Declaration by Bin Laden from The Middle East Media Research Institute, *Special Dispatch Series—No. 493*, 11 April 2003 at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP49303>.
- <sup>20</sup> Video transcript of Osama Bin Laden found in Afghanistan, 13 December 2001. Available at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ubl-video.html>
- <sup>21</sup> The war in Chechnya is given as a case in point where, in reaction to an official Russian communiqué denying victory to guerrilla warfare over a Russian convoy, the Chechen guerrillas distributed video footage with the sequences of the assault.
- <sup>22</sup> In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 conspiracies, stories denying that planes crashed into the Pentagon have been circulated; also, that the CIA and Mossad were behind the attacks but blamed Arabs; that calls were made to forewarn Jewish employees of the World Trade Center; or that Israeli agents supplanted the identity of Arabic citizens to carry out the suicidal attempts, so as to deliberately conceal government and media reports detailing the real nature of the attacks.