Democratisation of Hate: The spread of Al Qaedaism

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In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, New York Times journalist Thomas Friedman states that there are three "democratisations" driving globalisation in today's world: information, technology and finance. These three democratisations expedite the rapid flows of information and capital that enable the world economy to function.

It can also be said however that the very same forces have given rise to globalised multinational terror networks like Al Qaeda. As numerous terrorism experts have pointed out, Al Qaeda has been able to operate in a decentralised fashion globally by leveraging on global electronic banking, email and satellite television to directly or indirectly communicate directives, transfer funds and co-ordinate operations. However, thanks to much-improved international intelligence exchange and co-operation between security agencies, most analysts would agree that at this point Al Qaeda's capacity to plan, co-ordinate and execute attacks has been seriously impaired.

However, globalisation has also had another, less recognised, impact: it has enabled the virulent radical worldview animating Al Qaeda to not only survive but also thrive. This worldview draws on Islam but is more akin to a power-driven political ideology than a traditional religion. British journalist Jason Burke has called this radical Islamist ideology "Al Qaedaism". Al Qaedaism asserts that a cosmic battle is going on between Islam and an amorphous "Jewish-Crusader" axis spearheaded by Israel and the United States. In particular, Al Qaedaism claims that Islamic communities everywhere desperately need defending against attempts by the Jewish-Crusader axis to subjugate, humiliate and even exterminate them.

This prevailing orthodoxy prompted Osama bin Laden to cobble together the so-called World Islamic Front for Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders, of which Al Qaeda is a part, in 1998. A common, and emotionally resonant refrain amongst Al Qaedaists is that in Zionist-Crusader eyes, the "blood of Muslims" is "cheap". Al Qaedaist ideology promotes a hate-filled, violent mindset and programme in response. Islamist militants soaked in Al Qaedaism are so consumed by quasi-religious hate that they tend to see all Westerners and other "infidels", whether civilians or combatants, as an amorphous "them" to be "cleansed" from the face of the earth. The unique individuality - and innocence – of their intended victims are ignored. Terrorist attacks involving massive civilian tolls like those in New York, Bali and Madrid, were all motivated at root by Al Qaedaism.

It would be a grave mistake to assume that eliminating Al Qaeda's senior leadership and disrupting its organizational cohesion would rid the world of Al Qaedaism. Thanks to the Internet and global satellite television, as well as the "political oxygen" generated by egregious US policy errors and military action, Al Qaedaism has transcended the physical

limits of the original Al Qaeda organization based in Afghanistan. The ideology has metastasized, radiating outwards from a small radical Islamist elite to virtually underpin a transnational ideological movement of like-minded individuals and small groups with no necessary institutional connections to Al Qaeda. We might say therefore that globalisation processes have inadvertently produced a fourth democratisation: that of Al Qaedaist hate.

Evidence of this democratisation of hate is increasingly evident. As the authoritative US-based research firm *Stratfor* reported recently, "many independent jihadist groups had surfaced since the Sept. 11 attacks". Commenting on the killings of Western oil company employees by four Islamist militants in the Saudi port city of Yanbu on 1st May, it expressed concern that the jihadi "phenomenon might be entering a new phase in which individuals acting alone or in small groups carry out attacks". *Stratfor* attributed this trend to the fact that the "ideology of jihadism" is being decentralized into a "grassroots phenomenon". In like vein, psychologists have pointed out that thanks to the Internet, geographically scattered global ideological communities of hate are being created. Some observers even suspect that the extremely potent hate discourse easily accessible on Al Qaedaist or related websites may have in part a strategic function: of inciting psychologically pliable individuals to buy into the Al Qaedaist perspective and commit acts of terror on their own.

This is precisely why the ideological contest within Islam is so important. In this respect it has often been said that moderate Islamic scholars should speak out more strongly to delegitimise radical Islamist ideology. While this is important, it is not sufficiently recognized that the moral authority of the moderates depends a great deal on that of the US and its allies as well. Rightly or wrongly, moderate Islamic scholars, in ordinary Muslim eyes, tend to associate with America. Hence if American stock is high amongst Muslims, the moderate voice can be strong. Conversely, when the image of America is poor, moderate Islamic scholars are rendered vulnerable to radical accusations of "apostasy".

Unfortunately the balance of ideological influence may be tilting in favour of the Al Qaedaists. This is especially because recent US mistakes have inadvertently empowered the radical Islamist narrative. The deaths of hundreds of civilians during US military operations against Iraqi insurgents in Fallujah in April fostered the further spread of Al Qaedaist cosmic war perspectives. Lately news of sexual and physical abuse of Iraqi prisoners by ill-trained and badly supervised US military police have had a similar effect. From the Middle East to Southeast Asia, scores of ordinary Muslims have become disillusioned by the yawning gap between US ideals and actual behaviour. A small minority may already have found themselves unable to resist the "logic" of Al Qaedaism and its call for global jihad.

As the recent Yanbu attack shows, not all terror strikes require a level of precision and sophistication on par with September 11. Regular, small-scale, relatively unsophisticated attacks on office buildings, shopping malls and other aspects of everyday life, mounted by individuals or very small groups inspired and instructed by on-line jihad manuals, may well be sufficient to bring social and economic intercourse in many major cities to a virtual standstill. These disruptions might even spark inter-religious, inter-ethnic conflict. Vulnerable regions like Southeast Asia must thus guard against the possible emergence of low-impact but potentially more frequent terrorist attacks. That is the real threat posed by the democratisation of hate.

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