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ATTACKING AMERICA: AL QAEDA'S GRAND STRATEGY IN ITS WAR WITH THE WORLD

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Defining what precisely is meant by grand strategy and how al Qaeda, in particular, views grand strategy is vital for our national security. In fact, grand strategy is intertwined with every policy debate over al Qaeda that is currently ongoing in Washington, D.C.

The questions of *what* is al Qaeda, and *who* is al Qaeda have been debated since 2001. More recently, questions have arisen about affiliates and what is their relationship with al Qaeda. Is there any command and control between al Qaeda and its affiliates? What is the proper way to deal with these groups? And can we actually win against them? This talk will seek to add to this debate by offering answers to the questions of what al Qaeda is and what the group hopes to achieve.

WHAT IS GRAND STRATEGY?

We must begin by defining "grand strategy" and by defending the existence of this concept. Grand strategy is the highest level strategy that an organization or country possesses for dealing with a specific problem. Given this definition, grand strategy is related to policy, but policy often is simply a set of objectives. For instance, under the George W. Bush Administration, a policy objective was to spread democracy or democratization around the Middle East. Yet, stating this objective does not detail how the country would go about achieving it. A grand strategy has much more to it than just an objective. Rather, it sets a variety of *ways* and *means*—the plans that one might use to achieve those policy objectives. Specific strategies are then subordinate to, and seek to support and fulfill, this top-level plan. These strategies would encompass military, political, economic, and diplomatic aspects, among others that are necessary to achieve the over-all grand strategy. Under the specific strategies would be operational art and tactics as well—working out the plans, ways, and means in far greater detail, theoretically all the way down to

specific groups, units, or even individuals, perhaps on a particular battlefield or in one embassy and what each is supposed to do on a daily or weekly basis in order to achieve the grand strategy.

Given this level of detail, some observers are skeptical about whether grand strategy can even exist. Can an entire nation really have bold ideas about what they are going to achieve, work out a finely detailed plan and then implement it in any serious way? Yet, if one looks at the United States, it is possible to tease out the existence of several grand strategies. There was Manifest Destiny, which was the grand strategy for expansion of the country. During the Cold War there was a grand strategy that included deterrence and containment. But other experts and scholars contend that these were simply pieces of a real grand strategy; they did not include a fully worked out concept about economics, scientific knowledge, industry, and other important concerns, nor did they include the finely worked-out details for operational art or tactics that were actually followed by the United States as a whole. Others would argue that the United States has at times developed a grand strategy but it has been implemented very poorly.

As we can see, grand strategies, in general, are contested. Thus, there is a significant disagreement amongst experts about whether al Qaeda, as a non-state actor, with no real territory under its control, can have a grand strategy. Based on my research, I contend that al Qaeda not only has a theoretical grand strategy that they have discussed in statements, speeches, and written documents, but that since the 1990s, al Qaeda has been seeking to achieve parts of their grand strategy. And they plan to achieve the rest of it over the next 200 years, their grand strategic time frame.

Most experts believe that in grand strategic planning, one must begin with an objective—the *ends* that one wants to achieve known today, in general, as policy objectives. At the very highest level, what do we want to accomplish as an organization or a nation? But in order to achieve the objectives, an organization actually needs to start somewhere more basic and understand certain key starting points: Where are we starting from? What are we? What are our strengths, our weaknesses? Who are our friends, our allies? And who are our opponents or enemies? There is, as well, an important set of assumptions that must be made explicit rather than implicit so that they can be questioned and critiqued. Then to get from the starting point to the objective one must elaborate a pathway called the *plan*. This plan will include the *means* that will be used in order to progress from the starting point to the objective.

It is important to note that assumptions are always adjusted along the way. The organization (or nation) should have a mechanism that convenes on a regular basis to consider what was done right and wrong; what can be learned from experiences; and what should be changed about the organization or its way of doing business so that it will be better at achieving its objectives. Al Qaeda is, above all else, a learning organization. It has gone through a tremendous evolution since its formation in 1988 to its current incarnation. This shows an impressive ability to adjust, to learn, and to evolve over time in reaction to what the United States and others have been doing to stop it.

HOW WILL WE KNOW IF AL QAEDA HAS A GRAND STRATEGY?

Having laid out this elaborate vision for a grand strategy, perhaps we need to ask an even more basic question: how will we know if our enemy has a grand strategy? At times the U.S. has been very lucky and had an enemy who is eager to share its grand strategy with the world. For instance, Adolf Hitler had a grand strategy that he was perfectly happy to share. In fact, he wrote an entire book about it, which was widely distributed and available for any government to buy and read. Unfortunately, few people read this book outside Germany or thought that anybody would be crazy enough to seek to achieve these insane objectives using such violent ways and means. Basically, the book was ignored until far too late.

In the same way, al Qaeda has been perfectly happy to publish books and issue written statements about their grand strategy. In fact, there are multiple such “Mein Kampfs” in which they go into great detail about what they hope to achieve and how they are going to achieve it. But not many people are paying attention to what the enemy itself is writing about what they want to achieve and how they are going to go about doing it.

Another way that one can know if an enemy has a grand strategy is through speeches, lectures, and so on, as Hitler gave during the 1920s and 1930s. As with its writing, al Qaeda has been very willing to give hundreds of public audio and video statements since the 1990s about their grand strategy. The reason that they have been so verbose is because they are hoping to convince people to join them, and these lectures and speeches are an attempt to

persuade them that their objectives are sound and can be achieved, and that their ways and means can be supported. They also believe that they are starting from a very strong position with a firm idea about who they are and who the enemy is that shows that they can achieve their objectives. This is why they have been happy to share their grand strategy with the world.

Beyond this, it is also possible to compare what people are saying with what they actually do. After all, it is entirely possible that the organization could just be insane or braggarts spouting nonsense, and they either do not really mean to achieve all these goals, or they simply do not have the capabilities to do so. To understand if a nation or organization has a grand strategy, one must always compare what their public documents and statements say with what they are actually doing in the real world.

Finally, if a company, for example, is going to spread globally, open affiliates or branches all over the world and they seek a uniform strategy that every one of these affiliates will follow, then one could look at these affiliates around the world and analyze whether these branches are following uniform ways and means to achieve the same ends. On a global scale, one would seek to understand if it is just here in the United States that they are following this playbook or if it is guiding their actions in every country that has a branch of the company. If one can see a broadly unified strategy—including specifics that no other company has adopted or tactics that seem actually counterproductive but are followed in any case regardless of local circumstances—then we can conclude that this company might actually have a unified strategy on a global scale. On the other hand, if only one of the branches is actually doing what the company says is their strategy and others are explicitly contradicting the strategy in their words and actions, then we can be skeptical about whether this is actually occurring on a global scale as they claim.

AL QAEDA'S GRAND STRATEGIC VISION

Having provided this background, it is now possible to turn to Al Qaeda's grand strategy and see how fully articulated it is through its own statements and documents. Then, we will see how they have been following up on this with their own actions on a global scale. We begin with the starting points, that is the opponent's ideology as well as their assumptions about themselves and the people they consider to be their enemies. Having laid out the starting conditions for Al Qaeda's grand strategy, we will consider their objectives and then the means that they are using to achieve these objectives. Finally, we will look at the plans they are using to put everything together to achieve their objectives.

Al Qaeda's basic ideological vision is something that they have been more than willing to share with the world from the time the group was founded. One of the first statements issued by Osama bin Laden, in 1996, provides a detailed explication of al Qaeda's ideological vision and, in fact, its grand strategy as a whole. The statement is a very thick document called "Declaration of Jihad on the United States." Most Americans know about the 1998 Declaration of Jihad, but the 1996 one was ignored. I believe that, at 22 pages and no bullet points, it was too long for most Americans. It was also confusingly written. Bin Laden began by talking about Saudi Arabia and half way through his statement suddenly addressed the United States. Most importantly, the document was issued in Arabic. The result was that most Americans did not pay any attention to this statement of al Qaeda's objectives and grand strategic vision. One has to wonder who, in fact, this was written for if not the United States.

In this document, supplemented by multiple statements, including a terrific book by a man named Abu Bakr Naji, al Qaeda begins its ideological vision by stating that the main objective of the organization is to create the "caliphate" or an Islamic state in order to practice its version of Islam correctly. Second, they want to force the entire world – beginning with ordinary Muslims – to follow their extremist version of Islam and Sharia. Third, they argue that they are the only true believers in the entire world—this tiny group of a few hundred and then later a few thousand people. All other people who call themselves Muslims are just "nominal Muslims." They are not real Muslims. And, in fact, al Qaeda call themselves the "saved sect," or the "victorious party" to set themselves apart as a group that is guaranteed paradise, unlike the rest of the Muslim community, who may be going to paradise but may also be going to hell. They believe too that hostile unbelievers control the world. The international system was set up and is being run by these hostile unbelievers whose main purpose is to prevent the creation of an Islamic state, divide the Muslim-majority world into tiny statelets, and destroy Islam. According to al Qaeda, this has been the main goal of U.S. foreign policy from the beginning. And they actually have written histories of the United States to prove that this is true. That is why war against the United States and its allies is justified in their grand strategy.

THE IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS OF AL QAEDA'S GRAND STRATEGY

Al Qaeda's starting points and specifically their ideology are extremely important for understanding this basic vision. They have six different concepts that are foundational for explaining why they are the saved sect, why their version of Sharia is the only right and true one, and why other Muslims are not really real Muslims. Four of these six foundational concepts have a place within Islam as a whole. It is best in explaining them to contrast al Qaeda's views with those of the vast majority of the Muslim world so that we can see how ordinary Muslims think about these principles and the great differences between these views and those of Al Qaeda's. The result will be a clear distinction between al Qaeda and the broader world of Islam. These foundational concepts include:

- I. *Tawhid*. Ordinary Muslims understand *Tawhid* as the center of their entire religion. It means quite simply that there is only one God and only he should be worshipped. The term is usually translated as monotheism. Tawhid is as central to Islam, as the notion of the Trinity is for Christianity.

Al Qaeda has taken this core principle of Islam and given it a twist. They say that it is true, there is only one God and only he should be worshipped, *but* worship includes obedience to *all* of his laws because God is the only lawgiver and the only one with sovereignty.

This has two implications with which other Muslims do not agree. First, al Qaeda's version of Tawhid implies that if a Muslim does not obey all of God's laws, then he is not actually a Muslim. The second implication that al Qaeda draws is if God is the only lawgiver, the only one with sovereignty, anyone who attempts to make laws other than those that God has given humanity is not just making a political statement. Rather, they are actually making a statement about religion, i.e. that they believe in divinities other than God himself. Al Qaeda in fact argues that democracy, which begins with the proposition that sovereignty lies with the people of a nation, and which grants legislative power to the people, puts man in the place of God who should be the only lawgiver.

Other Muslims think this is insane: how can the notion that there is just one God lead a Muslim to the conclusion that democracy is a foreign religion? Yet, there is an entire book, written by a member of the ulama who supports al Qaeda, which states that democracy is a foreign religion. This simply does not make sense to other Muslims. A good analogy would be if a sect of Christians argued that the Trinity implies that a nation must have three branches of government: God the Father is the president, God the Son would be the legislature, and God the Holy Spirit inspiring all would be the Supreme Court. That is how crazy that sounds to other Muslims, and yet this notion lies behind a great deal of what al Qaeda is doing in the world today. It has forced them to conclude that they cannot work through democratic means, including elections or a political process, to achieve their ends. To do so would be to leave the religion of Islam and to join a foreign religion.

- II. *Jihad*. Instead, al Qaeda is committed to changing society through a violence that they call "Jihad." Again, this term is understood very differently by ordinary Muslims, who believe that Jihad means first and foremost a spiritual struggle to overcome evil either within oneself or within one's society. Ordinary Muslims also believe that defense of the nation is a God-given right, and this lawful physical struggle, when declared by the state, is also called "Jihad." The internal Jihad is, however, given priority by ordinary Muslims, who quote a well-known saying (hadith) of Muhammad in which he said that the internal struggle is the "greater Jihad," while the physical struggle is the "lesser Jihad."

In al Qaeda's ideology, Jihad is interpreted as fighting and fighting alone, and the internal struggle is not the greater Jihad. Instead, fighting and dying on the battlefield, whether in an offensive or defensive war, are considered the greatest sacrifice and the only way to transform society. Al Qaeda also argues that this violence is commanded by God and, if an ordinary Muslim refuses to join their "Jihad," he is sinning and perhaps not a "real" Muslim at all.

- III. *Dawa*. This third concept is also extremely important for understanding al Qaeda's actions in the world today, as well as their grand strategy. Dawa, for ordinary Muslims, is an integral part of their faith and a good deed to support with time or money. Dawa for them is about preaching to those who are outside the faith to bring them in, to explain what the religion is like, why one should become a Muslim, and

how to become a Muslim. Some ordinary Muslims also understand *Dawa* as social action—feeding the poor, educating the disadvantaged, or fighting for justice for the oppressed.

Al Qaeda, on the other hand, has again taken this foundational concept and transformed it. The group believes that *Dawa* is about converting “nominal” Muslims, to bring them into the al Qaeda fold and especially to convince ordinary Muslims to join in their “*Jihad*.” The advent of *Zawahiri* as head of the organization seems to have also led al Qaeda to change its views of *Dawa* as social action, and to support working with the oppressed and disadvantaged in order to convince them to support al Qaeda and eventually to join in the organization’s violence.

- IV. *Sharia*. The term “*Sharia*” is much in the news these days, although there seems to be some misunderstanding about what constitutes *Sharia*. There is no set of books marked “*Sharia*” that one can take off a shelf. Rather, *Sharia* is a legal system that has developed and changed over 1,400 years. It is not 30 or even 100 volumes in a legal corpus that is tightly bound, so that one might take down volume 32 to understand, for instance, what inheritance means within Islam. In fact, it includes thousands of volumes and four diverse schools of law that disagree with each other over a variety of issues within the Sunni tradition. Shia Muslims have their own schools of law. *Sharia* also includes a great deal of commentary, interpretation, and legal rulings that would take a lifetime to understand. But for most ordinary Muslims *Sharia* is Islam, and following God’s law is the religion, although for many Muslims, this is less about specific details and more about justice or morality. If another Muslim does not follow this moral code, ordinary Muslims do not see it as their duty to correct him; this is the responsibility of the state.

Relatedly, when I see very poorly worded polls in the Muslim-majority world asking: “Would you like to have *Sharia* implemented in your country?” and people answer “yes,” I think that this is a very misleading way to ask the question. One might as well ask: “Do you believe in morality?” And the answer is obviously going to be yes.

Al Qaeda has a very different view. They begin by saying that *Sharia* is the entire religion, but beyond this point of agreement they say that there is just one correct version of *Sharia*, a very specific and extreme version, which they have been empowered to interpret and impose on other Muslims. If ordinary Muslims do not agree with al Qaeda, the organization believes that they have the God-given right to use violence to “correct” other Muslims and force them to follow this extremist vision of the law. The actions taken by al Qaeda affiliates in northern Mali, Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere, where resistant Muslims have been forced to follow this version of *Sharia*, show just how little other Muslims support this interpretation of *Sharia*.

- V. Finally, there is a concept known as *al-Wala’ wa-l-Bara’*. This is based on two terms that can be translated as allegiance and disavowal or friendship and enmity. Within the broad world of Islam, this concept is not recognized, and is associated most nearly with a particular version of Salafism. The concept basically argues that everyone who is with al Qaeda, who agrees with the group completely, follows their extremist version of *Sharia*, believes in their ideas about *Tawhid* and *Dawa*: these are *their* people, and al Qaeda will support and have friendship with them. But anyone who disagrees with al Qaeda, both ordinary Muslims as well as the unbelievers, must be shunned, separated from, and hated by al Qaeda members.
- VI. This leads to something called “*Takfir*,” that is declaring other Muslims to not really be Muslims. This has implications within their version of *Sharia* that are quite severe. One’s blood becomes “*halal*,” that is, one can be killed. All property can be taken away. You are divorced. You are disinherited. An ordinary Muslim becomes, in fact, a non-person. That is what al Qaeda has been doing to most of the Muslim-majority world. And by the way, this concept is of course completely unacceptable to ordinary Muslims.

This discussion leads to the inescapable conclusion that the vast majority of al Qaeda’s ideology is aimed at other Muslims and has nothing to do with the U.S. In fact, justifying the attack on the United States was a departure for them, and one that was predicated solely on removing the U.S. from world affairs so that they would be able to proceed with the rest of their strategy. Al Qaeda’s entire vision is actually focused on taking over the religion of

Islam and twisting it for their own purposes and ends. This explains, for instance, what has been happening to Muslims in northern Mali, Syria, Yemen and Somali, or any place where al Qaeda has attempted to implement its world view.

AL QAEDA'S VISION OF ITSELF AND THE WAR

Since al Qaeda's vision is fundamentally about transforming other Muslims and Islam, much of the group's identity is based on seeing themselves as people who are renewing the religion. How precisely they would act to transform the religion led to two separate views of their role: before 9/11, the leadership of the group talked about themselves as a vanguard, as a group that was going to charge ahead and others would follow. They would show other Muslims what Islam should be and the community would imitate them. But since 9/11, the leadership of al Qaeda has changed the way they talk about themselves. They are no longer depending on others to follow them. Rather, they are going to command others, to order people to do what they want and to have forces on the ground that they call branches who will do their bidding and act as their hands and feet out in the world.

This self-image of al Qaeda as divided into two pieces – a command structure and branches – is also reflected in current thinking in Washington about the group. Many experts and the U.S. government itself use the terms al Qaeda “core” and al Qaeda “affiliates,” reflecting the language that is used by al Qaeda in talking about what it is and what it is attempting to accomplish. But the terms “core” and “affiliate” do not get at the functionality of the terms “command” and “branches.” Just as branches are organically part of the tree, so al Qaeda's branches are viewed as integral parts of the overall organization and working in harmony with each other to achieve the leadership's grand strategy. In addition, the leadership of al Qaeda believes that they are in charge: they command and the branches obey. It is this latter contention that is most debated in Washington today: just how much control does the leadership of al Qaeda have over the affiliates? At stake in this debate is whether al Qaeda is “on the run” and nearing defeat or expanding its areas of influence throughout the Muslim-majority world as the U.S. withdraws.

Al Qaeda's assumptions about the current war are also quite telling. The organization believes that this is an existential fight, not a limited conflict or a war of choice. They believe the war is about the very existence of Islam and they have made strenuous efforts to convince ordinary Muslims that the U.S. is waging a war on Islam. In this total war there can be no bystanders—“you are either with us or against us”—and any means are justified. This view of the war can be contrasted with the opinion of our government that this is indeed a limited conflict: one where we have the choice to engage or to disengage; to stay in Afghanistan or to withdraw and end that war; to arm rebels in Syria or to refrain from doing so; and choosing to withdraw will not harm our national security.

CATEGORIES OF ENEMIES

Al Qaeda's grand strategy is built as well on a series of assumptions about their enemies that flow from their ideology. Most importantly, they believe that all their enemies have one main purpose: to prevent the establishment of an Islamic state and thus to destroy Islam. The books that al Qaeda has written explain the history of the United States through this lens, beginning with the fight against the Barbary pirates, right through the foundation of Israel, and the “unprovoked attack” on the Taliban (founders of the first “real” Islamic state) after 9/11.

Al Qaeda divides its enemies into four categories, each of which has weak spots that they can exploit with different strategies.

First, al Qaeda names its primary enemy as “the Jews and Crusaders.” The Jews—that is Israel, the Crusaders—any Christians who fight them (and especially the United States and Britain), as well as their allies (i.e., France, Germany, and so on), are the biggest threat and the one that has to be dealt with first, in their view. This is because the Jews and Crusaders have the means to stop them from creating an Islamic state and have been trying to for hundreds of years. The center of gravity for this enemy, in their current view, is public support and the American economic system. This is also a development since 9/11 and shows some interesting learning on their part. Before 9/11, Bin Ladin believed that the United States was a paper tiger and a media mirage. All that his group had to do was carry out a few attacks and the United States would run for it. Since 9/11, al Qaeda has adjusted their thinking. They now are prepared for a longer-term battle to push the United States from “their” land, and are using attrition, especially, to carry out this vision.

The second enemy is the so-called “apostate rulers.” These are the heads of state of every Muslim-majority country. In al Qaeda’s view, these leaders are puppets, agents that have no real agency of their own and are propped up solely by the United States. If this is true, then convincing the United States to leave the battlefield will allow them to defeat the “apostate rulers” through prolonged guerrilla warfare.

The Shia are the third enemy, to be dealt with after the “apostate rulers.” In a very interesting letter that Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, he says that eventually al Qaeda will have to come to blows with the Shia state. He adds in the same vein that they will also “eventually” have to destroy the Jewish state that is Israel. But, he continues, for now al Qaeda should be dealing with the Shia as two groups. There are the sheep, the ordinary Shia, who have to be re-educated and their leaders, who must be killed off.

And finally, they have a very large group of people who must either convert to al Qaeda’s extremist version of Islam or face death. This group—called “polytheists” and “apostates,” includes all Hindus, Alawites, Druze, and other Muslims who follow a version of Islam that they despise. One al Qaeda leader put out a statement about six months ago in which he told fighters in Syria not to even ask for another Fatwa to kill the Alawites, since they all need to die. The Druze also will be given the choice of conversion or death. The results of this view of the enemy are seen in Syria, where al Qaeda affiliated groups are implementing these genocidal ideas through massacres of civilian populations.

One might be tempted, in thinking about al Qaeda, to compare them to the Bolsheviks, or our current struggle with them to the Cold War. After all, they are a small conspiratorial group hoping to take over a state and then carry out an ideologically inspired vision of world conquest. Because their vision is so driven by a distinction between real human beings and sub-human, however, a far better analogy would be the Nazis. In al Qaeda’s formulation, real humans follow only their version of Islam: all others deserve death or second-class citizenship in their “utopia.” It is a genocidal view of the world that compares not with the cold and rational Bolsheviks, but rather the emotional and insane Nazis.

AL QAEDA’S OBJECTIVES

Al Qaeda’s ideological vision, views of the war and the enemy, as well as their own self-image, set the foundation for the rest of their grand strategy. The objectives that they seek to achieve are quite clear and have been stated repeatedly over the past twenty years by Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and many other leaders of the group. The first objective is to rid the Muslim-majority world of all non-Muslim occupiers, including all “apostate rulers,” that is all the current leadership of these countries. Their definition of “occupation” makes this first objective quite different from what one might assume. Rather than speaking just of military forces, they define occupiers as all non-Muslims, and specifically list diplomats, tourists, businessmen, and scholars as the “occupiers” who must be removed from “their” countries.

The second objective is about their extremist version of Sharia and has two parts. They have repeatedly stated that they will impose their version of Sharia and that they will force—through violence if necessary—ordinary Muslims to follow it. It is interesting that dissent and resistance to their version of Sharia will not stop them: implementing God’s law is so important for al Qaeda that they would rather anger the vast majority of the Muslim world than fail to follow through on this objective.

Al Qaeda’s determination to fight Jihad—and to ignore every peaceful method for change—should also be considered an objective as well as a means for achieving other objectives. From its foundation in 1988, al Qaeda has defined itself as a jihadist organization, and has stated on many occasions that it is impossible to transform Islam or other Muslims through peaceful methods alone: only fighting, dying, and killing will lead to the “utopia” that they desire.

Al Qaeda plans to build on Jihad and the implementation of Sharia to set up Islamic governance. They believe that fighting Jihad and imposing Sharia—and the institutions that will be created in the process of doing so—leads naturally to their minimalist vision of a state. Their state has only two purposes: to make certain that citizens are following al Qaeda’s version of Sharia and that Jihad is being fought to spread their ideology and state. They are in the process of creating these institutions and the state right now in places like Syria. Out of the creation of states in multiple locations will somehow come the Caliphate, a mega-state that will cover the entire Muslim-majority world

and every piece of land that al Qaeda believes was stolen from Muslims. This would include Spain, Portugal, and most of Eastern Europe.

Al Qaeda's final objective is to "make God's word the highest." This expression means many things to other Muslims, such as to uphold the glory of Islam, but for al Qaeda what it means is: "We will force the entire world to follow our version of Sharia."

MATCHING MEANS AND ENDS

In every grand strategy, naming objectives is just a first step. Achieving these goals will require appropriate *means* that must be carefully matched with each of these ends, and al Qaeda's grand strategy is no different. Thus, "attacking America" is the means that Al Qaeda is using to force the U.S. out of the greater Middle East so that the group can have a free hand to implement its vision. To fight its Jihad, the group is "inciting the entire Muslim community to join them in their war." Al Qaeda has also devised a separate complex strategy to bring diverse Jihadist fighting groups into their orbit. This explains how they were able to take over the fighting in Iraq when they began in that country as a tiny minority of all the groups fighting there. It answers the question of how they were able to take over the fighting in Syria when they began as a small minority there as well. Mali, Yemen and Somali are also great examples of al Qaeda beginning as a tiny group and gradually co-opting all the other jihadist organizations into its orbit. This particular means is called "unifying the ranks." "Commanding right and forbidding wrong" is the means that they employ to force people to follow their version of Sharia. To create their perfect Islamic states and ultimately the Caliphate, al Qaeda is "setting up shadow governance"—creating institutions, taxing ordinary Muslims, setting up governors and other political leaders, and drafting young men into their armies. And finally the ultimate means is "eternal Jihad" with believers. While they foresee a mere 200-year war with the United States and all the "occupation forces," the fight will go on far longer. In fact, al Qaeda believes that they will be engaged in a war until they conquer the entire world for their version of Islam and time comes to an end.

AL QAEDA'S PLANS

Al Qaeda's plans take these means and seek to apply them to achieve their ends. The plans that al Qaeda has adopted have evolved over time, but seem to consistently include stages, following a vision taken from both their reading of the life of Muhammad and from Mao. By looking at what al Qaeda is doing in the world, and by carefully reading their published documents (such as a lengthy book by Abu Bakr al-Naji) as well as listening to their public statements and speeches, it is possible to distinguish some of the stages of their current plan.

Al Qaeda's plan seems to begin with preparation and training for Jihad, a concept similar to the Maoist first phase of guerrilla warfare. During this stage, Mao recommended that guerrillas prepare for war, but secretly, and not engage in actual warfare. This stage would also consist of seeking to win over the population through ideological education. For al Qaeda, this would be known as "dawa."

Once the guerrilla forces are beginning to take shape, al Qaeda moves on to attacking American and allied targets in each country, whether one that they view as occupied by the U.S. and its allies (such as Iraq or Afghanistan) or one that is occupied by an "apostate ruler." If this leads to open warfare they also encourage what they call *hijra*, that is a migration, by foreign fighters to travel to the occupied country.

The next stage, whether open warfare has begun or not, seems to consist of imposing Sharia with the Hisba—a term that they use for the institution that will command right and forbid wrong—and with Sharia courts.

Abu Bakr al-Naji's book argues that the central governments—if they have refused to engage in open warfare up to this point – will now be forced to begin fighting the mujahidin. This will lead to a stage of protracted guerrilla war in these countries. Good examples of this occurring just as he proposed are Yemen, Somalia, Mali, and the Sinai in Egypt.

Al-Naji calls the next phase "the management of savagery." By this he means setting up institutions that will take the place of the government so that the government will eventually be displaced across huge tracks of land. Various leaders of al Qaeda have also talked about unifying all the groups that are fighting in order to declare the kernel for

the state. At this point, the al Qaeda affiliate would have all the institutions created to take over and begin running its own state. At some point during this stage, al Qaeda linked groups have also usually begun to fight and work across borders. Al Qaeda's leaders have repeatedly stated that borders are meaningless, since they were set up by their enemies to confine the spread of "real Islam."

The next stage would apparently be the creation of the Caliphate, but since al Qaeda has not yet gotten to this stage, even they may not know what this means yet. I have seen no discussion of how precisely they are going to go about creating this nearly global state.

And finally, there will be all out war with the unbelievers until the end of time. This confrontation, they believe, will end with the return of the Mahdi and Jesus, who will convert everyone to Islam.

HOW WELL IS AL QAEDA DOING?

How well are they doing? From al Qaeda's perspective, they believe that they are doing quite well. The U.S. understands events over the past few years very differently. The homeland has not suffered a major attack since 9/11 and we have ended the war in Iraq and are ending the war in Afghanistan. But in al Qaeda's view, attacking the homeland was always about getting the U.S. out of "their" territory. And haven't we withdrawn from Iraq? Aren't we about to leave Afghanistan? So for them, it is time to turn to the rest of their plans, which are not about us at all.

My view of al Qaeda has shifted considerably since 2003 and 2004, when I wrote my first book on this topic. I still thought it was about us. But now I understand. Al Qaeda's grand strategy is primarily about other Muslims; it is primarily about the rest of the world and not about us at all. Yet, my fear is that we will understand this seminal fact and decide to keep ourselves safe, but at the cost of losing the rest of the world.

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