

Understanding al-Qaeda's Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work

by Tom Quiggin

Abstract

In order to counter the process of radicalization, it is necessary to understand the attraction of the narrative or the “messages” of al-Qaeda and its inspired followers. This article, based on a combination of wide ranging research and front line experience[1], examines the key points in al-Qaeda's ideology and its narratives which have gained so much attention and following. Central to this ideology are eight main themes or concepts which appear consistently in the narratives of al-Qaeda. These have been used to indoctrinate and twist young minds, many of them feeling attracted to such violent ideas. Based on a better understanding of the ideology and the underlying concepts of radical narratives, counterterrorism efforts can be enhanced by more effectively targeting the counter-narrative message.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda (and its ideology) did not spring from the ground wholly formed in 1988/1989 as it is sometimes portrayed. Much of what passes for al-Qaeda's own views owes its origin to others who came before them. In addition, the concepts and ideas that underlie al-Qaeda's body of literature have continued to develop after the initial foundations in the late 1980s. Individuals such as Hassan Banna and Sayyid Qutb laid much of the earlier groundwork. Especially Sayyid Qutb's works such as *Social Justice in Islam* and *Milestones* are required reading for understanding the early thinking of jihadists.

In order to comprehend the current ideology and objectives of al-Qaeda, it's necessary to dwell on a number of their key works. Al-Qaeda and its adherents, like most revolutionary and terrorist organizations, have gone to considerable lengths to ensure that their message has been sent out both to their followers and their enemies. In terms of “propaganda” that is sent to its enemies, al-Qaeda has been both prolific and clear. There have been a series of messages to the “Crusaders” which detail the objectives of al-Qaeda. Prominent among these are the 1996 *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places* and the 1998 *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders World Islamic Front Statement*.

At the same time, al-Qaeda and its adherents have published an extensive series of books and essays that are primarily intended for Muslim audiences. No attempt has been made to hide these works, but neither are they distributed as broadly as the “propaganda” that al-Qaeda intends for Western consumption. It should be noted that most of its documents have proven to be consistent over time; but these have evolved in a manner that parallels al-Qaeda's operational realities. In other words, they are worth reading as they are an accurate reflection of belief structures and resulting practice.

The list of works by al-Qaeda and its sympathizers is extensive; not all of them can be highlighted here. Among the most relevant and influential[2] works that should be reviewed are:

1. *Join the Caravan of Martyrs*, by Abdullah Azzam. This is probably the single most quoted (and misquoted) piece of jihadist literature[3] that has been written. It contains many of the key phrases and ideas that are used and misused by jihadist all over the world. Abdullah Azzam was the key ideological mentor of Osama Bin Laden up to Azzam's death by assassination in November 1998 (it is still not clear who ordered

his assassination but it most likely was an internal operation ordered by Ayman al Zawahiri or Bin Laden himself). In addition to his work on *Join the Caravan*[4] Abdullah Azzam also made an important statement concerning what he viewed to be the mission of the future:

“ Every principle needs a vanguard to carry it forward and, while focusing its way into society, puts up with heavy tasks and enormous sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does not require a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself. This vanguard constitutes Al Qa’idah al-Sulhah for the expected society.”[5]

2. *Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places* by Osama bin Laden. This article was published in the open press in London (UK) in August 1996. It appeared originally in the *Al Quds al Arabi* newspaper.[6] The “Declaration” outlines bin Laden’s views on the “Zionist-Crusaders alliance” and provides the reader with a list of grievances suffered by Muslims and concludes with appeals for an uprising.

3. *Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders World Islamic Front Statement* (23 February 1998) by Usamah Bin-Muhammad Bin-Ladin, Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, Emir of the Jihad Group in Egypt, Abu-Yasir Rifa’i Ahmad Taha, Egyptian Islamic Group, Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan, Fazlur Rahman, Emir of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh. The “World Islamic Front” that takes responsibility for the statement can be considered to be a synonym for al-Qaeda. This brief, but rather direct, statement sets out al-Qaeda’s arguments against various actions of the Crusaders (American government) and how al-Qaeda’s members should respond.[7]

4. *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner* by Ayman al Zawahiri. This extensive volume containing 21 chapters was published[8] in a serialized format in late 2001 and 2002. Ayman al Zawahiri, the deputy to Osama bin Laden, was the leader of Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* (EIJ). The EIJ may have been the most ruthless of all the Sunni militant and terrorist groups of the 1990s before it merged with al-Qaeda. This volume outlines many of the key historical views and beliefs of the man who is regarded as the key figure in al-Qaeda, second only to Bin Laden himself. This includes his justifications for suicide bombings and his hyper-critical views on the Muslim Brotherhood.

5. *Loyalty and Enmity* (Al Wala wal Bara). This extensive essay was released by Ayman al-Zawahiri in December 2002. In Zawahiri’s view, the world is divided into two warring camps, true Muslims and the rest of the world. True Muslims must, according to this account, be in a constant state of *wala* or being ‘loyal’ to one another at all times. At the same time, true Muslims must also be in a state of *bara* or ‘enmity’ where they are either in a constant state of hatred or at least being distant from everyone else.[9]

6. *Moderate Islam is a Prostration to the West*. In this essay, which was either authorized or written directly by Osama bin Laden, a general description is made of how “moderate” Muslims are in fact aiding and abetting the “Crusaders” of the West – at least in the eyes of al-Qaeda. The essay also explores the highly controversial subject of offensive *jihad* and whether it is obligatory for all Muslims to participate in this activity. While the overall concept of offensive *jihad* has been abandoned or decried by most Muslims, (including Abdullah Azzam), Osama Bin Laden uses a number of cherry-picked verses from the *Qur’an* and the *Haddith* to try to justify it.[10]

7. *Jihad, Martyrdom and the Killing of Innocents*. This essay was either written or authorized by Ayman al-Zawahiri. It lacks the usual obligatory references to the attacks of September 11, 2001, so presumably it was written before that date. In this essay, Zawahiri tries to tackle the tricky issues of martyrdom or suicide bombers as well as the killing of innocents. While classical Islam has rejected both of these concepts, Zawahiri uses a combination of *Sunnah* and *Haddith* passages and analogies to justify the unjustifiable. To the theologically uneducated, this work makes a case for the justification of suicide bombings and the killing

of innocents.[11]

8. *Sharia and Democracy*. Around 1991 a book first appeared with the title *The Bitter Harvest: The Muslim Brotherhood in Sixty Years*. The book itself was a repudiation by Ayman al-Zawahiri of the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to forego violence as a political tool and participate in the electoral process instead. While the book itself continues to circulate among military jihadists, an extract of it has also been widely circulated under the title *Sharia and Democracy*. In this short extract from the book, Zawahiri describes why he feels that anyone who claims to be both democratic and a Muslim is in fact an apostate or non-believer.

9. *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*. In January 2005, Mustapha al-Suri released this massive treatise numbering some 1,600 pages in its original form. While not directly a part of al-Qaeda, al Suri provides a number of insights on matters of ideology, strategies, tactics and organization. A book entitled *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al-Qaida Strategist Abu Mus'ab Al-Suri*, written by Brynjar Lia of the Norwegian Defense Institute sheds some light on this. [12]

The Ideology of Al-Qaeda

What is an ideology? Many academic or public discussions on ideology are often confusing because authors tend to talk about ideology when they are in fact discussing objectives and strategy. In my view, an ideology is primarily a set of beliefs that are characteristic of a group or of an individual in that group. These beliefs are the non-material glue that binds that group together as it seeks to obtain its goals.

What then can be said about the ideology of al-Qaeda based on its literature, various other statements and its activities?

First, it is necessary to note the worldview of al-Qaeda that forms the basis of its ideology is as follows:

- 1: Muslims are under attack everywhere.
- 2: Only al-Qaeda and its followers are fighting the oppressors of Islam.
- 3: If you are not supporting al-Qaeda, then you are supporting the oppressors (note the exclusionary nature of these statements – this is key).

Second, al-Qaeda sees its mission to be the vanguard of the uprising of the oppressed. Al-Qaeda knows it cannot achieve these goals by itself, so it needs to inspire the masses with an uplifting message intended to create a revolution.

Third, it is clear that the basic grievances of al-Qaeda (real and imagined) are political, not religious. The window dressing that is used in their documents is almost always religious, as are the justifications for violence. However, the problems raised in the texts are those of classic identity politics: oppression, poverty and exploitation are common themes.

Fourth, in terms of how it spreads and justifies its world views, there are a number of ideological ideas and concepts that constantly reappear in al-Qaeda's literature and statements.[13] After the Singapore Religious Rehabilitation Project (RRP) had conducted some 500 interviews[14] with jihadist detainees and their families, the researchers noted that eight main themes were persistent surfacing in almost every case. What struck them the most, however, was the widespread variance in how the young jihadists interpreted the concepts when compared to their meanings in mainstream Islamic circles. The differences allowed the RRP researchers to gain insight into the minds of the young jihadists and understand better how they viewed al-Qaeda in ideological terms.

The list of eight themes is not just unique to South East Asia or adherents of the local *Jammah Islamiyah*. For instance, convicted terrorist Momin Khawaja of Ottawa, Canada, had written extensively about his

beliefs before he was arrested. During the course of legal proceedings against him, six of the eight themes emerged in name while a seventh (*al Wala Wal Bara*) appeared in all but name only.

The eight themes that appear on a regular basis in jihadist discourse are; *Jihad*, *Bayat*, *Daru Islam*, *Ummah*, *Takfir*, *Shaheed*, *Al-Wala Wal Bara*, and *Hijrah*. Each of the eight themes/terms has two major interpretations, that of al-Qaeda and/or its followers and a more classical, mainstream interpretation of the concept. It is instructive to juxtapose how each term is perceived by al-Qaeda adherents as opposed to how each term is used by mainstream scholars.[15]

Jihad or Struggle (al-Qaeda's View)

Jihad is war, according to al-Qaeda's perspective. It is an obligatory act for all Muslims. This obligation is described as being "*fardh ain*". Permission from parents or other relatives is not required if the jihadist is of an age of understanding. The aim of *jihad* is to achieve Muslim dominance over *Daru Islam*. Armed *jihad* is the highest form of *jihad* and should be undertaken against all enemies of Islam. This includes infidels, polytheists, as well as those who support them.

Jihad or Struggle (Islamic Scholars' View)

According to mainstream Islamic scholars, the concept of *jihad* refers to 'striving for excellence'. There are multiple goals for *jihad*. Among them are *jihad* for goodness (*al khair*), human development, prosperity, education, family, friendship and nation-building. There is also *jihad* against the human condition as well. This includes *jihad* against evil (*asy-syarr*), one's inner self, and intrusions upon one's laziness, stupidity, hatred and arrogance.

Bayat or Pledge (al-Qaeda's View)

A *bayat* is a pledge of obedience given to the *Emir* or leader of a group. The *bayat* to the leader of the group is the same that one would give to the Prophet Mohammed. Once a *bayat* is given, it cannot be broken. Anyone who breaks the pledge is guilty of an exceptionally grave sin. One who does so is not only guilty of sin, but then becomes a *kafir* (non-believer) as well. If you have not made a *bayat*, you can be considered less pious and less Muslim than those who have.

Bayat (Islamic Scholars' View)

The status of the permissibility of a *bayat* must be ascertained by the majority of the leaders of society, i.e. the *ulama* (scholars), *umara* (rulers) and other respected people. It cannot be decided by just one self-appointed leader. The *Emir* of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, does not represent the majority of the Muslim community or its leaders. Therefore, he does not have the authority to take a *bayat* from anyone. The al-Qaeda interpretation of a *bayat* is invalid and does not carry any religious weight.

Daru Islam (al-Qaeda's View)

The concept of *Daru Islam* or an 'Islamic state' is a constant theme within al-Qaeda's propaganda. It holds that in order to establish the religion, it is first necessary to establish an Islamic state, which, in turn, will then lead to the re-establishment of the *Caliphate* (Khilafah Islamiyah). It is obligatory for all Muslims to contribute both financially and physically to this end.

Daru Islam (Islamic Scholars' View)

Islamic scholars believe that the term *Daru Islam* is a relative term. It does not have a precise or exact meaning. There are no clear injunctions towards *Daru Islam*. Therefore, the justification of killing or spilling blood to achieve this vague notion is considered dangerous.

The Ummah (al-Qaeda's View)

The *Ummah* is the collective community of all Muslims. The rules for the *Ummah* are those of the “rightful way.” Anyone who follows the “rightful way” is a member of the chosen community. Anyone who does not believe or follow the rules is a non-believer. Every Muslim must follow the *Ummah*, but if the states in which they live are run by non-believers, Muslims do not have to follow the laws of those states.

The Ummah (Islamic Scholars' View)

No one can claim that their community is the “one and only” true community. There is no single authority in Islam that can make such a declaration; that would be an expression of arrogance. Islam encourages the creation of Brotherhood (*Ukhuwwah*) among all Muslims. Within Islam there is the Medina Charter, which believes that there must be peaceful co-existence among Muslims, Jews and Christians. Islam also advocates that a good Muslim should be a good citizen as well.

Takfir (al-Qaeda's View)

Takfir is the action of accusing others of being infidels or non-believers. This is considered a very serious act. Al-Qaeda, however, has regularly employed the term in an attempt to discredit or disparage other Muslims who oppose them. By doing so, fellow Muslims are now turned into enemies.

Takfir (Islamic Scholars' View)

Muslims are forbidden to declare others to be *takfir*. If a Muslim does this, then that individual casts an infidelity upon him- or herself.

Shaheed or Istisyhad (al-Qaeda's View)

Al-Qaeda advocates becoming a *shaheed* or ‘martyr’ by the act of suicide bombing. This *istimate* (suicide act) is part of their *hirja* or migration to God. They believe that they will be rewarded in heaven for this action.

Shaheed or Istisyhad (Islamic Scholars' View)

Suicide is an act that is strongly forbidden in the *Qur'an* and the *Haddith*. Allah has granted you a body. Only Allah can decide when the body will be taken back. There are no justifications for exceptions to this rule. Lives, be they human or others, are sacred, and must be honoured. Whoever commits suicide will be considered eternally committed to hellfire. Once in hell, the individual will spend the rest of eternity dying again and again in the same way they committed suicide. Therefore, suicide bombers will spend the rest of eternity having their arms, legs and head pulled off.

Al-Wala' Wal Bara' (al-Qaeda's View)

Al-Qaeda fosters an atmosphere of “us versus them” through the use of the term *Al-Wala' Wal Bara*. *Al-Wala* means “those to whom they are loyal” or simply, “their friends”. *Al-Bara* refers to those whom they hate or their enemies. This concept becomes their tool to categorize people into friends and enemies. Those they hate are the enemy and those they like, or agree with, are their friends. Their enemies are non-Muslims and many Muslims as well.

Al-Wala' Wal Bara' (Islamic Scholars' View)

There is not, nor should there be, an “us versus them” mentality in either Islam or in humanity. All human

beings are creatures of God and we therefore must show respect to each other. This implies a multi-racial, multi-religious society. Islam must be seen as a *Rahmah* (Blessing) to the Universe.

Hijrah or Migration (al-Qaeda's View)

According to the al-Qaeda view of *Hijrah*, volunteers should leave their homes, properties, jobs and families for the sake of God. They do not need permission from their families to do this. Al-Qaeda also advocates that they should disregard the needs of their parents, wives and children for the sake of their struggle. They believe that the volunteers should migrate (*Hijrah*) from worldly inclinations to heavenly goals. They can achieve this heavenly goal and obtain beautiful virgins through suicide bombings.

Hijrah or Migration (Islamic Scholars' View)

The concept of Migration (*Hijrah*) relates to the spirit of continuous life-long progress, opportunity and change. In classical Islam, those who would migrate must also take into consideration their family. Parents and children must be taken care of before *Hijrah* can be considered. A physical migration should only be considered in a dire situation when one fears for one's religious freedom, personal rights, dignity and wealth. Muslims should be able to prosper in their birthplace as a sign of thankfulness to God. It is even compulsory for a Muslim to remain in his country when he can enhance the progress of the Muslim community in that country.

What is a Story or Narrative?

Terrorists at all levels in al-Qaeda, from the leaders of organizations down to the inspired home-grown jihadists tell stories. These stories, or narratives, are used to reinforce their views on global grievances, recruit new members, justify their own actions, and develop new ideas on organization and tactics. Terrorist extremists also use narrative stories to maintain group cohesion, especially among smaller groups or cells that operate in isolation.

Much has been written about what constitutes a story or a narrative. It is not the intent of this article to enter into that debate. In general terms, however, it can be said that a narrative must have a beginning point, a middle part and an end. The beginning is the set-up for the narrative or recalls a grievance or difficult situation. The middle part then must have a hero or agent or potential solution to the problems. The end of the narrative either shows the solution or challenges the recipients to act for themselves on what they now know is the problem. This tri-part structure of a set-up, a climax, and a resolution is a recurring theme.[16] The videos produced by *As Sahab* (al-Qaeda's media arm) frequently use it. Other terrorist groups have followed a tri-part structure, such as the series of five "Russian Hell" videos produced in Chechnya.

In one such video, the Chechen mission commander is introduced as he does a military style briefing. He identifies the problem (the Russian occupiers), outlines a plan of attack for his followers (ambushing a convoy), and then they all successfully carry out an attack on a Russian convoy. These videos were widely circulated on the Internet and on DVDs and were known to have played a direct role in recruitment, even at the level of home-grown jihadist cells. [17]

Many of the narratives told by al-Qaeda follow this simple structure. It is reflected in and consistent with al-Qaeda's overall narrative:

- 1: Muslims are under attack everyone (set-up);
- 2: Only Al Qaeda and its followers are fighting the oppressors of Islam (climax);
- 3: If you are not supporting al-Qaeda, then you are supporting the oppressors (resolution/challenge).

Countering the Terrorist Narratives

Many observers and leaders in the West are not even aware of the types of various competing narratives that are being told. The conflict in the former Yugoslavia provides an interesting example. To many government leaders and citizens in the West, the narratives they hear are about peacekeeping, humanitarian aid and conflict intervention. For many followers of the al-Qaeda ideology, the conflict there is lumped together with Chechnya and Kashmir. The narratives they tell are about oppression of Muslims, which is either portrayed as being ignored by the West (Chechnya) or worse still, carried out by the West (ex-Yugoslavia).

To counter such narratives, it is critical to know which aspects of al-Qaeda's ideological appeals are working. As has been demonstrated in both extensive empirical research and first-hand experience in investigations and convictions, these themes and concepts are persistently recurring. The ideology as outlined above and the eight recurring themes are therefore key areas that need to be addressed.

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NOTES:

[1]The author was directly involved in the investigation and conviction of Momin Khawaja on terrorism charges. This case was known in Canada as *Operation Awaken* and in the UK as *Operation Crevice*. The author testified twice in the proceedings and was qualified as a court expert during this testimony. The author has also testified as an expert in National Security Certificate cases in control order cases in the Federal Court of Canada.

[2]In this context, "influential" should be taken to mean works that have been quoted or used by those who have taken the path of violent jihad.

[3]The concept of al-Qaeda was first noted in the principal journal of the Afghan Arabs – *Al Jihad*. In 1987, Abdullah Azzam, the ideological father of the movement, outlined its mission.

[4]A copy of *Join the Caravan* is available at: www.islamistwatch.org/tests/azam/caravan/preface.html

[5]For a more extensive explanation of this text and its importance, see Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda – Global Network of Terror*, Berkley Books, New York, 2002, pp. 4-5.

[6]This statement is available in English on line at a number of places including the Public Broadcasting Service's website at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/fatwa_1996.html.

[7]This statement is available in any number of places in English, including the *Federation of American Scientists* website at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>. It is also available in the original Arabic at: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/fatw2.htm>.

[8]A translation of this book is available on line or through FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service). The document number at FIS is FBIS-NES-2002-0108. The document date is 02 Dec. 2001. The sourceline is GMP20020108000197. It was originally serialized in Arabic in London's *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*.

[9]This essay is available on line on a number of sites under the title *Al Wala Wal Bara* or *Loyalty and Enmity*. It is also available as a chapter in the book *The Al Qaeda Reader*, by Raymond Ibrahim (New York, Doubleday, 2007).

[10]This essay is also available in *The Al Qaeda Reader*, op.cit.

[11]This extract is also available in *The Al Qaeda Reader*, op.cit.

[12]For an overview of al-Suri's work, see also *Al-Suri's Doctrines for Decentralized Jihadi Training (Parts 1 and 2)* which is available on the *Jamestown Foundation's* website at: <http://www.jamestown.org/>.

[13]I am greatly indebted to *Ustaz* Hannif Hassan from the S.Rarjaratnam School of International Studies (NTU) for his continuous assistance and explanations over a period of several years. I am also indebted to the RRG for its work as well as to *Ustaz Mohammed Bin Ali* from the RRG for his explanations and understanding.

[14]The Singapore RRG project started informally in 2002; it was formalized in 2003. The project includes more than 800 interviews. Their website can be viewed at: <http://www.rrg.sg/>.

[15]There is no absolute agreement on the use of these terms either within Al Qaeda itself or among mainstream scholars. The definitions presented here are generalizations provided for a basic understanding of the nature of the problem.

[16]For more detailed information on narratives and storytelling, see: *The Stories Terrorists Tell: A Neurobiologically -Informed "Counter-Narrative Strategy" for Diminishing Terrorism's Effectiveness*. This article can be viewed online at: http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/9/9/1/7/pages99174/p99174-4.php.

[17]In the case of Momin Khawaja, court evidence was entered to show that he used these videos as part of a successful effort to recruit another individual to assist his terrorist cell in its financing operations.