

## Articles

### Perception Challenges Faced by Al-Qaeda on the Battlefield of Influence Warfare

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#### *Abstract*

*Many kinds of entities—including terrorists and insurgents—seek to influence perceptions and behavior among various target audiences, and have become increasingly reliant on the Internet in their efforts, incorporating social media, blogging, public video sharing and other online tools. This article is focused on the ideological messages that terrorist groups use to convey with these tools. Drawing from a study of Al-Qaeda, this discussion illustrates how ideologies of violence have certain vulnerabilities that can be exploited in order to degrade a terrorist group's ability to achieve its objectives. While crafting and disseminating counter-narratives can be a critical part of a counterterrorism strategy, it is also important to identify ways in which terrorists undermine their own central narratives and exacerbate pre-existing "influence warfare" challenges.*

#### *Introduction*

On any given day, we are inundated with a flood of attempts to influence our thoughts and behaviors. A wide range of entities—including governments, charities, neighbors, and companies trying to sell us products and services—compete against each other for our attention, support, loyalty and money. They use a wide variety of narratives, concepts, themes, images, sounds and so forth in their efforts to elicit cognitive and emotional responses that help their messages resonate among members of their target audiences, with a goal of influencing different kinds of behavior. Political parties try to secure your vote for their candidate or platform, while civic organizations try to rally communities to come together over locally important issues, like education, health awareness, or voter participation. Religions have probably the longest history of any organized entity in terms of trying to influence our values, beliefs and behaviors. In the world of commercial marketing, the financial stakes are high: Coca Cola battles for market share against Pepsi Cola; Nike tries to convince consumers that its products are better than Reebok; in the skies, Delta competes against United and American Airlines for a larger percentage of the traveling public.

Radical extremists are also competing for our attention and influence. They use indiscriminate violence, fear and intimidation to influence the policies and actions of societies and their governments. Beyond the violence, modern terrorist groups also spend considerable effort trying to influence us using conventional means of communication—especially via the Internet. Bruce Hoffman notes that “virtually every terrorist group in the world today has its own Internet website and, in many instances, multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences.”[1] Gabriel Weimann has described how these websites provide an online forum for indoctrination as well as the distribution of terrorist manuals, instructions and data [2]—evolving into what Evan Kohlmann calls a “MySpace-like social-networking hub for

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[extremists] intent on becoming the next generation of terrorists, hijackers and even suicide bombers.”[3] In short, the Internet offers a variety of tools that terrorists and other violent non-state actors use to participate in the competition for influence.

All actors engaged in the competition for influence must, however, overcome a variety of challenges. To begin with, messages and messengers must be perceived by their target audiences as credible and legitimate. In order to influence our perceptions and behaviors, they must first get us to listen. Yet so many streams of information converging on our consciousness can be overwhelming and cause us to tune out: newspapers, radio, television, and even the Internet are basically channels that we can turn on or off. To preserve our sanity and avoid information overload/overwhelm, many of us have become selective of the communication channels we tolerate, especially when those channels make demands of us. Meanwhile, the goal of all these competing influencers is to keep us from turning to a different stream of information.

In this era of increasingly intense competition for limited attention span and limited time, the truth (which can be bland and unexciting) may be easily drowned out by a cacophony of fiction, conspiracies or mere entertainment, creating a distinct disadvantage for governments or educators. For example, a data-rich study will always get less attention among the general public than a dramatic scandal or a Hollywood star’s sordid exploits. When our lives become more complicated (through recession, unemployment, war, natural disaster, etc.), our patience and attention span suffers further. Many of us are drawn toward narratives that offer simplification of complex realities. In many cases, the “us versus them” narrative common among terrorist and insurgent groups resonates among individuals, especially those who are grasping for someone to blame for complex difficulties they face.

Today, these narratives can be offered by anyone via the Internet, using websites, blogs, *YouTube* videos, *Facebook* pages, e-mail distribution newsletters and various other forms of social media. [4] In essence, anyone can be a potentially powerful “influencer” of perceptions and behavior; this greatly expands and complicates the competitive landscape. Further, the globalization of communication technology provides opportunities for one influencer to weaken or discredit another. One way of doing so is to draw attention to an adversary’s counterproductive mistakes, things that are said or done on their behalf that can undermine their legitimacy and credibility. Another is to offer a more compelling narrative, drawing potential supporters away. These are the kinds of things that take place in the arena of “influence warfare”—the struggle to shape perceptions in a war of ideas.[5]

For the counterterrorism community, the question becomes one of identifying the aspects of a terrorist group’s challenges in this arena that can be made more difficult for them. Dell Dailey, until recently the State Department’s counterterrorism chief, once commented that “terrorists’ center of gravity lies in the information domain, and it is there that we must engage it.”[6] A terrorist group must promote a compelling narrative that resonates among their target audiences, and must be perceived as more legitimate and credible than other competing forces within the same milieu. Their failure to do so dramatically reduces their chances of success or longevity; as Audrey Cronin and other scholars have noted, a loss of credibility is one of the key ways in which a terrorist group meets its demise.[7] In essence, combating a terrorist group should

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include an attempt to see the world through the eyes of the organization's leaders and see what they fear most, particularly in terms of their ideological vulnerabilities.

### *The Case of Al-Qaeda*

Al-Qaeda offers an interesting case study of vulnerabilities and challenges that a terrorist organization faces in on the battlefield of influence warfare. Previous research has described how Al-Qaeda has pioneered new online efforts for strategic influence, from distributing its propaganda in dozens of languages to creating a central clearinghouse (*as-Sahab* or “the clouds”) in order to coordinate the global effort.[8] Al-Qaeda leaders, supporters and what Jarret Brachman calls “jihobbyists”[9] all utilize multiple channels of communication to disseminate and reinforce one of its core messages: “think globally and act locally.” Clerics have played a prominent role as well in this influence effort, e.g. Anwar al-Awlaki, whose online lectures and *Inspire* magazine articles promoted Al-Qaeda's ideology to a broad, English-speaking audience. Other so-called Internet imams of infamy include Abdullah el-Faisal, who was deported from Britain in 2007 for inciting racial hatred, but still preaches online, urging his followers to kill Hindus, Christians, Jews and Americans; Sheikh Khalid bin Abdul Rahman al-Husainan of Kuwait, who encourages his followers to pursue martyrdom; and Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan cleric who escaped from prison in Afghanistan in 2005, and is considered a key inspirational leader among Al-Qaeda members.[10]

These and other prominent voices of Al-Qaeda consider managing perceptions to be a vitally important effort, as Ayman al-Zawahiri explained in a July 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a race for hearts and minds of our *ummah*.”[11] Al-Qaeda attempts to manipulate perceptions of legitimacy and the way people think and talk about it. Its leaders have different messaging strategies to support recruitment, coalition or affiliate relationships and, of course, trying to demoralize the enemy. Al-Qaeda also spends a great deal of time trying to deflect attention away from its own shortcomings (and as a terrorist organization that kills innocent people, the organization certainly does have a few shortcomings). Further, as a decentralized network organization, Al-Qaeda sometimes has to engage in “damage control” to protect its image from ill-conceived activities and mistakes caused by individuals acting in its name. The actions of al-Zarqawi in Iraq are one of several examples in recent years. Not only were the videotaped beheadings deemed repulsive throughout the Muslim world; his group's attack on three hotels in Amman, Jordan on November 9, 2005—which killed 54 people including many who were attending a wedding party—was particularly damaging to Al-Qaeda's image and provoked a massive public demonstration. In his statement responding to the public outcry, a defensive al-Zarqawi argued that Muslims should not have been at the hotels, which he called “centers of immorality.”[12]

Because Al-Qaeda is decentralized, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and others in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region had and have little if any control over the violence carried out in its name elsewhere around the world.[13] Thus, the risks of counterproductive violence are greater than for other, more hierarchical terrorist groups. The same is even more true for challenges in the non-violence influence warfare arena. Anyone can promote the Al-Qaeda image online in his or

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her own way, but this reduces Al-Qaeda's ability to ensure message consistency and cohesion of effort. Although its leaders want to exercise control, they cannot control what people say and think about them. Further, the Internet allows other voices to be heard, including those whose messages pose a direct challenge to Al-Qaeda's credibility and ideological resonance.

The remainder of this article explores a relatively simple premise: What kinds of things do Al-Qaeda's leaders want people – especially potential supporters – NOT to hear, think or believe? If we could read its leaders' minds, or hear their thoughts, what would we find them worrying most about? From a review of Al-Qaeda-affiliated websites, discussion forums, videos and other online resources, this analysis identifies 6 themes that reflect major concerns of the network's senior leaders and propagandists: (1) religious authority; (2) strategic authority; (3) group integrity and cohesion; (4) competing voices; (5) operational capacity; and (6) relevance. I shall discuss them in this order.

### *1. Religious Authority or Apostasy?*

For Al-Qaeda's leaders, perceptions associated with religious legitimacy are absolutely critical. They must constantly convince themselves, their supporters, and those they are trying to recruit that Al-Qaeda serves God's will. In order to project an aura of pious and pure holy warriors, holding true to authentic Islam, they rely heavily on *fatwas*—religious rulings and decrees—issued in support of salafi-jihad ideological tenets. They often select specific passages from the Koran and try to use them (out of context) to justify their ideology.[14] Further, like all religiously-oriented violent groups, they make every effort to convince others that this is an epic struggle between good and evil, with God on their side (and of course, there can be no compromise allowed when it comes to doing what God demands). In their propaganda, they draw on a sense of crisis within the Muslim world, and argue that Islam is under siege—one that can only be lifted by true believers willing to join a global violent jihad.

Monitoring salafi-jihadist web forums reveals a wide range of religiously-oriented debates among the members. There is a huge issue of clerical credibility here; with so many self-declared religious “authorities” in the mix, we see a multidimensional competition for legitimacy. This competition leads to arguments and attempts to discredit others. Often, questions of legitimate interpretations of the Koran are raised. At the core of this is the reality that Al-Qaeda suffers tremendously when its members or supporters—not to mention prospective recruits—begin to doubt that God wants them to do the things that Al-Qaeda does.

In essence, Al-Qaeda's survival requires gaining and maintaining legitimacy within the Muslim world; failure to do so will inevitably doom their cause and the future of the movement. Thus, Al-Qaeda's leaders became noticeably defensive when Saudi Arabia's top cleric, Grand Mufti Shaykh Abdul Aziz al-Asheik, gave a speech in October 2007 warning Saudi citizens not to join unauthorized jihadist activities [15] - a statement directed mainly at those considering going to Iraq to fight U.S.-led forces. In May 2010, Saudi Arabia's top religious leadership, known as the council of Senior Ulema, issued a *fatwa* that denounced terrorism, including the financing of terrorist acts.[16] Also in Saudi Arabia, a government-supported program has enlisted hundreds of Islamic scholars-turned-bloggers to fight online radicalization by challenging the jihadist interpretations of the Koran on extremist social-network forums.[17]

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Similarly, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a top leader of the armed Egyptian movement Islamic Jihad and a longtime associate of Ayman al-Zawahiri, published a book that renounces violent jihad on legal and religious grounds.[18] In his heated rebuttal, Zawahiri questions the timing of the book (as its author was in an Egyptian prison at the time), and claims that “it serves the Crusaders, Zionists and infidel Arab leaders by attempting to anesthetize the mujahideen and force them out of the jihadi field.”[19] Abu Yahya al-Libi issued a statement indicating that Muslims ought to just dismiss this as a result of torture, brainwashing and blackmail.[20] As Abdul Hameed Bakier noted, this kind of response “demonstrates that al-Qaeda is seriously alarmed by the possible negative consequences the document might inflict on their ideology and the jihadi movement.”[21]

In Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province, Mufti Zainul Abidin issued a *fatwa* that declared the Taliban to be “out of Islam” as a result of its violence, its failure to follow Islamic teachings, and its pursuance of a *takfiri* ideology (the latter referring to the Salafi-jihadi practice of declaring fellow Muslims “infidels” if they oppose jihadist dogma).[22] These and other instances cause far greater problems for Al-Qaeda’s leaders than any U.S. or Western leader’s condemnation of their violent attacks. It also explains why several clerics in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other countries have been murdered by Al-Qaeda members over the past decade. In essence, Al-Qaeda’s leaders and fellow jihadists fear *fatwas* more than bullets.

## 2. Strategic Authority or Ineptitude?

Al-Qaeda’s core leaders also want to project (to their supporters and their enemies) an image that they are the competent vanguard of a powerful movement, with tentacles and cells all around the world. An occasional terrorist attack in some corner of the world—whether it kills dozens, hundreds or thousands—feeds this perception. For Al-Qaeda to remain viable, the group is not required to conduct a steady drumbeat of attacks against the United States or other Western countries; it just needs to conduct—or convince a small group of individuals to conduct—a terrorist attack at some location in the world that can be claimed as an Al-Qaeda initiative. At the same time, well-publicized failed attempts and disrupted plots (e.g. recent plots in Denver, Dallas, New York, Chicago, Detroit, Washington, DC and major cities in Europe) also feed this perception of a vibrant enemy with global reach. Encouraging this perception aids them by generating fear and causing governments to overextend and overspend on homeland security and counter-terrorism efforts, reflecting a core Al-Qaeda strategy that draws from Paul Kennedy’s theories on how empires decline.[23] As Bruce Hoffman recently noted, “A key dimension of Al-Qaeda’s strategy is economic warfare . . . it seeks to undermine our economy” through a prolonged war of attrition.[24]

This strategy is reflected in various kinds of Al-Qaeda propaganda, suggesting strategic agreement. However, analysis of Al-Qaeda documents captured in safe houses throughout Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq and in a number of other countries (and now stored in the Department of Defense’s “Harmony” database) have brought to light a number of ideological and strategic debates among Al-Qaeda’s top leaders.[25] These debates are mirrored by thousands of participants on jihadi-salafist web forums, whose doubts about strategy and tactics also lead to questions about leadership and integrity. In one captured document, the author, ‘Abd al-Halim

Adl, expresses concern that Al-Qaeda is “experiencing one setback after another,” and placed the blame for this squarely on the shoulders of Osama bin Laden.[26] In a recent analysis of Al-Qaeda web forums, Gabriel Weimann noted that in 2007, members of the password-protected Al-Qaeda-affiliated forum *al-Boraq* began discussing why Al-Qaeda does not strike Iran, believing that doing so would fit within the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites.[27] There have also been debates between various Salafi Islamist ideologues, using websites and discussion forums as a means for airing their strategic disagreements. In one example, described by Weimann, prominent Sheiks Hamed al-Ali and Abu Basir al-Tartusi had an open disagreement about the strategic utility of attacking Arab regimes.[28]

Perhaps the most well-known example of strategic disagreements within Al-Qaeda is over the question whether the 9/11 attacks might have been a big mistake. Before 9/11, bin Laden and his close colleagues had convinced themselves and supporters that the U.S. was a paper tiger; that because the U.S. had pulled out of Beirut in the 1980s and pulled out of Somalia in the 1990s, we would just be beside ourselves with grief and anarchy after a major attack on our homeland. That, of course, was a huge miscalculation. But instead of admitting their mistake, Al-Qaeda’s leaders have to continue this false narrative that the enemy is weak, and that the Jihadists will eventually win this struggle, again in part because God is on the side of the true believers. The truth, of course, is that the West has proven far more resilient and far less vulnerable than Al-Qaeda wants to admit. And this suggests that Al-Qaeda really does not understand Americans as much as its leaders sometimes think they do. If that is the case, the strategy it pursues against the U.S. is based on incomplete intelligence, at best.

Another strategic mistake that Al-Qaeda does not want to admit is that promoting terrorist activity in Muslim countries has not been a way to mobilize the Muslim world. On the contrary, it has created coalitions between governments, and in some cases with other Muslim networks, who want to stop the jihadists. Al-Qaeda is trying to build a populist movement, and yet their terrorist attacks kill or alienate potential supporters throughout the Muslim world. Further, some Al-Qaeda members and supporters are troubled by the rather inconvenient truth that they have killed eight Muslims for every one non-Muslim infidel they have killed, as noted in a study by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point.[29] The last thing that a Muslim radical group wants people to believe is that they don’t really value Muslim life. A litany of prominent jihadist spokesmen, including Adam Gadahn, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Shaykh Atiyatallah, Tariq Azzam, and Hakimullah Mahsud, have all issued statements specifically addressing the issue of Muslim civilian casualties, often incorporating arguments about strategic and operational necessity. One of the most prolific Al-Qaeda ideologues, Abu Yahya al-Libi, offered a theological justification known as “Hukm al-Tatarrus” in his book *Human Shields and Modern Jihad*. Yet as Jack Barclay has noted, “the deployment of obscure religious concepts to explain the slaughter of large numbers of their co-religionists is unlikely to convince the wider Muslim public, particularly at the local level where communities are forced to continue their daily lives amid a climate of repeated bloodshed.”[30]

On December 16, 2007, al-Zawahiri posted an open invitation for journalists and jihadists to ask him questions via the primary jihadist web forums. Thousands of questions were posted to popular password-protected websites like *Al-Ekclass* and *Al-Hesbah*. On April 2, 2008, *As-Sahab* Media released the first part of Zawahiri’s response in the form of a one hour, forty-three minute

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audio statement, which was accompanied by Arabic and English transcripts. Al-Zawahiri was very selective about the questions he chose to respond to. He also seemed to be particularly defensive in response to questions about killing fellow Muslims, arguing “We haven’t killed the innocents; not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else.”[31] The inconvenient truth for Al-Qaeda, however, is that its members routinely promote, orchestrate and celebrate the murder of hundreds of innocent Muslim men, women and children each year. As President Obama noted in his June 2009 speech in Cairo, “more than any other, they have killed Muslims.”[32] When debates erupt about this issue, the response from Al-Qaeda’s leaders has been to try and discredit the source as illegitimate, a conspiracy promoted by the infidel enemies. They also routinely blame others for the killing. But the reality is that through its actions, Al-Qaeda has generated and strengthened an anti-jihadist response from Muslim populations worldwide.

### *3. Group Integrity and Cohesion or Self-Interested Criminals?*

Al-Qaeda documents and web forum debates also reveal that there are individuals within the network who get preferential treatment—like better salaries and leadership promotions—for reasons that have nothing to do with merit. For example, there has for a long time been an undercurrent of resentment among Pakistani, Indonesian and other Southeast Asian members of Al-Qaeda who feel that the Arab members (especially the Saudis, Egyptians and Yemenis) are treated differently than the rest. In his recent testimony before Congress, Evan Kohlman notes that “As early as 1990, at Al-Qaeda’s own guesthouses in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, mujahideen fighters began to loudly grumble that too many Egyptians—primarily al-Zawahiri’s cronies—were being appointed to senior positions in Al-Qaeda.”[33] Former Al-Qaeda lieutenant Jamal al-Fadl also noted during testimony in a U.S. federal court how Egyptians were viewed as receiving preferential treatment.[34] This sentiment was echoed by an angry Libyan fighter named Abu Tamin, who posted on a jihadist web forum “why [is] everything run by Egyptians?”[35] By the same token, some observers have noted that family members of Al-Qaeda’s leaders have rarely been chosen to become martyrs or sent out on dangerous operations. These things challenge the notion of Al-Qaeda as an inclusive network representing the interests of all Muslims, and undermine the perceptions of fairness and integrity that the network’s leaders want to convey.

And on a related note about perceptions of integrity, we know from court records, interrogation interviews and captured documents that there are various levels of corruption and malfeasance within Al-Qaeda’s rank and file. These information sources have revealed numerous cases of embezzlement, counter-productive violence, insubordination, criminal activity (including drug running) and other activities that undermine the desperately promoted perception of Al-Qaeda members being devout Muslim “holy warriors.” The aforementioned Jamal Ahmed Al Fadl stole money from Al-Qaeda, got caught, went on the run, and approached the U.S. government in an attempt to save himself and his family. Khalid Shaykh Muhammad—the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks—was a flamboyant, globe-trotting womanizer and drinker who spent lavishly and stayed in plush hotels until his 2003 capture in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.[36] A Saudi militant captured in Iraq complained that he had been falsely promised there would be long lines of Iraqi

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women willing to service him,[37] inadvertently suggesting that his motivations for joining the jihad may have been self-interest rather than defense of the *ummah*.

In order for Al-Qaeda to convince its intended audiences of its status as a vanguard of jihadists defending the global Muslim community, it must establish and sustain a perception of integrity, worthy of trust and respect. The words and actions of those who have answered the call to jihad have, at times, created difficulties in shaping these kinds of perceptions. As many of us will recognize in our personal experiences, trust is much easier to break than to build. On an organizational level, Al-Qaeda has a significant challenge with regard to building and maintaining trust within the Muslim community.

#### *4. Righteous Confidence or Fear of other Prominent Muslim Voices?*

Further complicating its relationship with the Muslim community is Al-Qaeda's apparent superiority complex, which is manifest in the many ways that its leaders are constantly criticizing other radical Islamist groups, like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, calling them stupid and ineffective. Ayman al-Zawahiri in particular has repeatedly criticized Hamas for its embrace of democratic politics, among other things.[38] As a result, many extreme Islamists—including Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood—have a deep animosity toward Al-Qaeda. Pundits and politicians too often lump all “radical Islamists” into a single category, implying that they are all of the same mindset. This is dangerously misleading. It is a fact that Hamas has consistently rejected even the suggestion that they align with Al-Qaeda, while leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in several countries have consistently condemned Al-Qaeda's actions and leadership.

Indeed, attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda affiliates in Pakistan, Indonesia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and elsewhere have not mobilized a unified Muslim *ummah* to the cause. Instead terrorist attacks have driven wedges of ideological disagreement that only serve to benefit nations prosecuting the global war against them. Moreover, Al-Qaeda has failed to gain traction in Syria, Lebanon, or the Palestinian Territories, and it has lost its tenuous footholds in Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. For years, Al-Qaeda leaders have courted the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) as an attempt to gain another affiliate group in the Maghreb, but leaders of the LIFG have consistently rejected such overtures. In 2009, the group even released its own doctrinal statement, a “New Jihad Code,” which challenged several core tenets of Al-Qaeda's religious ideology. According to the 417-page document, “Jihad has ethics and morals because it is for God. That means it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like. Betrayal is prohibited and it is vital to keep promises and treat prisoners of war in a good way. Standing by those ethics is what distinguishes Muslims' jihad from the wars of other nations.”[39] As CNN's Nick Robertson and Paul Cruickshank reported, the code was circulated among some of the most respected religious scholars in the Middle East and has been given widespread backing.[40]

A superiority complex is usually a symptom of deep fears and insecurities. This also appears to be the case with regard to Al-Qaeda's leaders. They fear the power of competing voices in the Muslim world, particularly those whose credibility exceeds their own. Al-Qaeda's leaders despise the Muslim Brotherhood and other major organizations in the Islamist milieu precisely

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because they are listened to by—and have influence over—millions of Muslims throughout the world. These organizations compete against Al-Qaeda on the battlefield of influence warfare and can make it more difficult for Al-Qaeda to achieve the level of global support in the Muslim community that is necessary before its strategic objectives can be achieved.

Counterterrorism policymakers in the West have recognized the importance of drawing potential support and attention away from Al-Qaeda and its messages of violent extremism. As a consequence, we have seen in recent years increasing support for grassroots efforts to promote alternative narratives. Prominent examples include the *Alliance of Youth Movements*, *Sisters Against Violent Extremism*, *Global Survivors Network*, and the *Quilliam Foundation*.<sup>[41]</sup> Another notable effort is the *Radical Middle Way* - an organization of young British Muslims who have rejected the Salafi-jihadist interpretation of the Qur'an and are trying to consolidate a mainstream response to fundamentalist Islam. Their public events and Internet activities are funded by the sale of music videos, and are being touted as an example of how to weaken the resonance of al-Qaeda's ideology among youth.<sup>[42]</sup> Similarly, in Indonesia, Ahmad Dhani—the leader of the immensely popular rock band Dewa—has used music to influence millions of fans, encouraging them to resist the tide of religious extremism. As Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid—former president of Indonesia—observed, “Dhani and his group are on the front lines of a global conflict, defending Islam from its fanatical hijackers [and helping] to rescue an entire generation from Wahhabi-financed extremists whose goal is to transform Muslim youth into holy warriors and suicide bombers.”<sup>[43]</sup> In sum, many Muslim political and grassroots organizations challenge Al-Qaeda's ability to dominate the influence arena, and Al-Qaeda despises them for it.

##### *5. Operational Capacity or Amateur Hour?*

Similar to the challenge of promoting perceptions of strategic competence and personal integrity, Al-Qaeda is also constantly struggling to project an image of robust operational capabilities. In order for Al-Qaeda's leaders to get people to believe in them, they have to project an air of confidence and competence. They really do not want anyone to think that they are amateurs, not warriors. Hence, when newspapers report on amateurish tactics and failed plots, this is worrisome to Al-Qaeda. Further, there are already widespread concerns about potential ineptitude (or perceptions thereof) among Al-Qaeda's rank-and-file. To be sure, the Arab mujahidin had little to do with Soviet troops leaving Afghanistan in 1989, but they did acquire useful skills in conducting irregular warfare against a superior enemy. Many of these veterans formed the core of Al-Qaeda at the turn of the century, and have been the focus of various post-9/11 intelligence and military actions. But since then, the consistent call “come join the global jihad” has rarely yielded recruits with practical skills, military training or experience, or specialized knowledge of value to the organization. Most often, these new recruits do not even bring money or useful intelligence—all they offer is a desire to join the cause and do something. This is why many of them were put into the pipeline for training as suicide bombers, particularly in Iraq. Some jihadists can avail themselves of opportunities to learn in rudimentary training camps in Pakistan, but more often it appears that events in Iraq and Afghanistan have provided much-needed “on the job training” for these recruits.

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Another concern about Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities stems from a lack of knowledge about their declared principal enemy, the United States. This lack of knowledge is reflected in several publications, such as the Al-Qaeda training manual *The Encyclopedia of Jihad*. Under the "Assassination Training" section, the author advises that a good way to suffocate an American in public is through a pretend pie fight where instead of using a pie, the attacker uses quick-drying foam, which can then be thrown "at the opponent's face as if [he] is having a food fight." Nobody will notice, the author writes, "because [Americans] will be laughing at what they think is a pie throwing food fight game, which is a scene they are accustomed to." Even some of the most ambitious efforts to analyze the United States have fallen short. For example, in 2006 Muhammed Khalil al-Hakaima published a 152-page study of how the U.S. intelligence system works, and what the intelligence community can and cannot do legally under U.S. law.[44] However, he relied mainly on information gained from conspiracy websites and other dubious sources. As a result his report contained bogus information—e.g. how South Korean intelligence allegedly influences America's national security agencies through the *Washington Times*, a newspaper controlled by the Unification Church.[45]

Similar to the challenges of manipulating perceptions of capabilities, Al-Qaeda's leaders ask for money *all the time* because they are desperate for cash; none of them have jobs, after all. Al-Qaeda's central organization is becoming increasingly reliant on local and regional affiliate groups, like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, not only to conduct operations, but also to collect and transfer money. A recent story in *Forbes* magazine highlighted how these affiliate groups mainly engage in criminal activity, from trafficking to kidnapping, in order to raise money for the cause.[46] At the same time, Al-Qaeda's leadership needs people to believe that it's all about pursuing God's will; they do not want people to believe that a *primary objective* of the organization is to acquire money and political power, without which the organization is likely to decay and fall apart, just like most terrorist groups throughout history.

Overall, a key challenge for Al-Qaeda involves trying to advance the organization's objectives with constrained financial resources and a restricted knowledge base among its personnel. At the same time, they need to project an image of competence and capability, in order to attract new recruits. Doing so in the midst of evidence to the contrary is a major challenge for Al-Qaeda's propagandists.

#### 6) *Relevance*

Finally, at a core level, Al-Qaeda's leaders fear that the Muslim world will someday view them as incapable of doing anything relevant. As Brian Jenkins recently observed, "these virtual jihadists are locked into a closed-loop discourse on the Internet that is increasingly irrelevant" and their biggest fear is that one day, no one will really be listening.[47] A catalyst for the attacks on 9/11 was that Al-Qaeda's leaders felt a need to prove themselves to the Muslim world that they could support their words with deeds. Having captured center stage, they reaped the whirlwind of military-led responses and intelligence gathering that has seriously degraded Al-Qaeda's operational capabilities. Since then, Al-Qaeda's leaders have tried mightily to keep a spotlight on themselves and their self-appointed vanguard group of "knights" by issuing periodic

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audio and video statements and encouraging a viral marketing campaign to support the global spread of their ideology. They clearly recognized the risk that, having been unable to orchestrate a follow-on attack equivalent (or greater) in scope and scale as 9/11, perceptions of their prominence and capabilities within the Muslim world are likely to diminish. Combined with the concerns described earlier about organizational ineptitude and opportunities squandered, this impatience among its followers may pressure Al-Qaeda's leaders into hasty, desperate and sloppy decision-making, or even to a rapid downward spiral toward atrophy and disintegration.

The perception of increasing irrelevance has become more pronounced following events in the Arab World this past year, the so-called "Arab Spring." A core argument of Al-Qaeda has been that corrupt, Western-backed regimes can only be changed through the use of terrorist attacks to mobilize the *ummah*. But in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, change has taken place without any meaningful involvement whatsoever by Al-Qaeda. This, in essence, discredits Al-Qaeda's ideology, as John Brennan has noted.[48] As Eric Schmitt and Thomas Shanker have highlighted in their recent book *Counterstrike*, the U.S. counterterrorism effort has tried to seize the opportunity this provides to engage in the influence warfare arena. The Department of State's new Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications produced an online video, posted to *YouTube* in February 2011, which spliced together scenes of jubilant protesters celebrating the resignation of president Hosni Mubarak with a videotaped statement in 2008 from Ayman al-Zawahiri insisting that "there is no hope to remove the corrupt regimes in Muslim countries except by force." When Zawahiri asked "Let anyone who disagrees give me a single example," the video clip shifted to the jubilant throng in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Forty-eight hours after the video was posted, it had garnered 42,000 hits.[49]

Individual doubts and fears within any organization undermine confidence. Within Al-Qaeda, there are already a wide variety of faults and ideological contradictions that make it difficult to attract new recruit or financial support – let alone achieve their aspiration for an Islamic caliphate. When major events serve to further undermine the credibility and resonance of the professed ideology, such difficulties are exacerbated. And when such difficulties become insurmountable, the propagandists will have nowhere to go, no capacity for influencing the Muslim world in any way beneficial to Al-Qaeda. It will cease to be relevant, like so many terrorist groups before them who lost contact with their purported constituencies.

### ***Conclusion***

To sum up, terrorists compete for attention and support against all other entities (including other terrorists) that seek to influence their target audiences. While it is critical to appreciate the central tenets of a terrorist organization's ideology and strategy (and the ways in which their leaders try to manipulate perceptions in support of it), it is also important to understand how the organization's leaders try hard to protect their image, and control what people say and think about them.

The case of Al-Qaeda represents an example of influence warfare. Counterterrorism efforts should seek to understand what terrorist groups do to try and shape perceptions, and what the group appears to be most defensive or concerned about. The goal should then be to exploit ideological vulnerabilities, reducing potential for ideological resonance, diminish the group's

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influence capabilities, and drive wedges in the solidarity of the movement that can help undermine and discredit its mobilizing ideology.

The Internet provides new opportunities to exacerbate a terrorist group's influence warfare challenges. Al-Qaeda strategists like Abu Musab al-Suri have consistently encouraged the followers of the movement to use the Internet for mobilizing the *ummah*, arguing that communications via open source channels empowers the movement by distributing the ideology as well as strategically or tactically useful knowledge. However, the ability for virtually anyone to communicate on behalf of the movement introduces a potential struggle for the power to shape the message and the direction of the movement. This has emboldened some individuals from within the community of radical muslims to voice their disagreements with Al-Qaeda tactics or strategy.

Overall, we should keep in mind the benefits that can be derived by influencing the "street perception" of a terrorist organization. A counterterrorism communication strategy could include damaging perceptions of the organization's strategic authority, religious credibility, operational competence, financial integrity, and so forth. In many cases, the truth is what the terrorist groups should fear most. And the truth is that throughout the history of terrorism, across the entire spectrum of violent ideologies, it has been extremely rare for an organization to successfully achieve its strategic objectives through the use of terrorist violence. By effectively engaging Al-Qaeda in the influence warfare arena, we can diminish its ability to survive, and thus help them more rapidly to meet its inevitable demise.

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