

# Hearing of the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

## Terrorist Ideology June 12, 2007

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I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to appear at his hearing. I will limit my spoken remarks to five minutes, but I ask the Chairman that my full written statement be entered into the record.

My colleague, Kathleen Ridolfo, RFE/RL's Prague-based Iraq analyst, and I have recently completed a detailed report on how Sunni insurgents in Iraq and their supporters worldwide are pursuing a far-reaching media campaign to advance their agenda and influence perceptions of events in Iraq. The report, which devotes considerable space to al-Qa'ida in Iraq, is scheduled for public release on June 26, 2007. I will address the questions prepared by the Committee with a particular focus on al-Qa'ida in Iraq and the findings of our forthcoming report. The views expressed here are my own and do not represent an official position of my employer, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

### **How Well Do We Understand Terrorist Ideology?**

In the years since September 11, 2001, a significant body of research has emerged to augment previous scholarship and broaden our understanding of terrorist ideology. While there is more work to be done, we now possess a good understanding of the overall ideology that underpins the various iterations of al-Qa'ida. Al-Qa'ida's theorists and ideologues, through their prolific efforts to expound and disseminate their ideology, have provided us with abundant material to analyze.

Like other totalitarian ideologies, al-Qa'ida's ideology is based on a simplistic worldview that claims to offer a universally applicable and easily implemented solution to all problems. The "solution" is classically totalitarian in its attempt to regulate all spheres of human activity, encompassing personal life, domestic and international politics, the economy, and society.

Although the adherents of al-Qa'ida's ideology do not themselves accept any meaningful distinction between religion and politics, in practice their ideology focuses on what we in the West would define as religious and political issues. The core tenets of this ideology are as follows:

- **A global struggle between faith (iman) and unbelief (kufr):** The world is divided into two hostile camps, and all people must choose sides. On one side are the true believers, on the other the enemies of the faith. The opposition of faith and unbelief, or truth (haqq) and falsehood (batil), is absolute. Reconciliation is impossible, and the struggle will continue until faith triumphs over unbelief.
- **A backward-looking utopia (Salafism):** The first three generations of Muslims (al-salaf al-salih, lit., "the righteous ancestors") represent the model of a perfect society for al-Qa'ida, both in political organization and personal behavior. Using as primary sources a literal reading of the Qur'an and the recorded utterances of the Prophet Muhammad, adherents of al-Qa'ida's ideology fight for the restoration of this order.
- **Faith as the struggle for "make God's word supreme," and unbelief as a capital crime:** To be a true Muslim, one must go beyond the traditional "pillars of the faith" as those are currently understood in the Muslim world (the profession of faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and pilgrimage); one must actively strive to restore the society of the "righteous ancestors"<sup>1</sup>. In practice, only those who accept and advance all of the core tenets of the ideology are seen as true Muslims. All other so-called Muslims have strayed, either because they were misled, in which case they may yet return to the fold, or because they are the "stalking horses of unbelief," in which case their lives are forfeit.
- **The permissibility of killing Muslims who have knowingly strayed from the faith (takfir):** Muslims who knowingly violate the rules of the faith as defined by the ideology have committed the sin of apostasy and are no longer Muslims. The act of pronouncing a Muslim an unbeliever is called "takfir." In practice, the application of this principle gives adherents of the ideology a religious justification for killing political opponents. Al-Qa'ida in Iraq uses this principle to justify the killing of both Sunnis and Shi'a.
- **The legitimacy of violence (jihad):** Jihad, which adherents of the ideology understand as "holy war," is the first and foremost obligation of Muslims in a world threatened everywhere by unbelief<sup>2</sup>. The legitimate

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Salafism, see [Understanding Islamism](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3301&l=1), March 2, 2005, [International Crisis Group](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3301&l=1), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3301&l=1>. An informed discussion of jihadist Salafism can be found in Fu'ad Husayn, Al-Zarqawi: al-jil al-thani li-l-qa'idah [Al-Zarqawi: the second generation of al-Qa'ida], Dar al-Khayal, Beirut: 2005, pp. 53-59.

<sup>2</sup> The term "jihad" can have various meanings. For more, see "What Does Jihad Mean?" by Douglas E. Streusand, Middle East Quarterly, September 1997.

means of fighting jihad include "martyrdom-seeking operations," or suicide attacks, against non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

- **The need to target the United States, Israel and "apostate" rulers in the Muslim world:** The "Jews and crusaders" -- Israel and the United States -- are spearheading a charge to obliterate Muslim identity and subjugate Muslim lands to pillage their wealth. Their allies in this nefarious conspiracy are the quisling "apostate" rulers of the Muslim world. For truth to be victorious over falsehood, all of these enemies must be defeated.

While available evidence suggests that the total number of committed adherents of al-Qa'ida's ideology is small, quantitative criteria are not of the essence. Al-Qa'ida does not recognize electoral democracy as a valid political model and seeks instead to overthrow fragile, corrupt regimes by force. Moreover, a willingness to engage in suicide attacks against soft targets and the skillful exploitation of the media have given al-Qa'ida undue international prominence, and the group's ideology is exerting an outsize influence on mainstream political discourse in the Arab-Muslim world.

Poor social and economic conditions in and of themselves do not cause terrorist organizations to spring fully formed from a morass of societal decay. The Middle East is not the most repressive or impoverished place on earth, yet it has witnessed a proliferation of terrorist movements in recent decades. Fertile soil for extremism results from the confluence of festering social and economic problems, misgovernment, and an ideology that presents itself as a panacea. All three factors are present in today's aggrieved, undemocratic, and restive Middle East. Additionally, jihadist ideological treatises indicate that the United States has become a target in the region not because of its democratic tenets, but rather because of the perception that it supports and uses corrupt Arab regimes.

## **Is It A Global Ideology?**

In theory, al-Qa'ida's ideology is global -- the division of the world into camps of faith and unbelief does not recognize other boundaries. The ultimate goal of "making God's word supreme" transcends national borders. In practice, however, the profusion of local "franchises" of al-Qa'ida -- from al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq -- points to the continued importance of regional factors and the implicit recognition of this fact by the ideology's various adherents.

We can and should take into account both the division of al-Qa'ida into regional "franchises" and the resulting distinctions between their ideological outlooks. While all of the "franchises" broadly accept the core tenets of the ideology as described above, they are embroiled in a variety of localized struggles. As all of these groups aim to seize power, their respective agendas are political, and their

adherents are often motivated as much by local political factors as by the allure of a global struggle.

Overt U.S. involvement appears to exert a "globalizing" influence on jihadist motivations. The conflict in Iraq, for example, attracts volunteers from other Arab countries who openly state that they are drawn by the opportunity to take up arms against U.S. forces. There are no reports of equal numbers of foreign fighters traveling to participate in the struggles undertaken by the various al-Qa'ida "franchises" outside of Iraq.

We will not be able to reach an accommodation with any group driven by al-Qa'ida's ideology, but we can and should focus on local factors in each particular case. There are two reasons for this. First, it undermines the global pretensions of the group's ideology. And second, individual members of regional "franchises" are inevitably motivated by varying combinations of regional and global factors -- the better we understand the interaction of regional and global motivations in each case, the more appropriately tailored our response will be. If al-Qa'ida's current mantra is to "think globally, act locally," we stand to benefit by factoring this into our efforts to counter it.

### **Are There Fissures In Al-Qa'ida's Ideology?**

There are fissures in al-Qa'ida's ideology, as well as serious differences between the various al-Qa'ida "franchises" and other groups with similar agendas. This is particularly evident in Iraq, where the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq has clashed with other Sunni insurgent groups, both in polemics over ideology and tactics and in fighting on the ground.

The greatest fissure in al-Qa'ida's ideology is internal, and shared by all regional affiliates. The doctrine of "tawhid," which all branches of the network accept, affirms the absolute singularity of God. The strict application of this doctrine holds that only God has ultimate authority. The concentration of all authority in the divine, to which humankind's only access comes through the text of the Qur'an and the recorded utterances of the Prophet Muhammad, has severely impeded the ability of al-Qa'ida's theorists to formulate convincing answers to modern political questions. Jihadist Salafists have written numerous books on the political implications of tawhid, but they have proved unable to present a coherent paradigm for leadership and legislation. In practical terms, the result has been a movement that is very clear on what it opposes but maddeningly obtuse about what it supports beyond violent opposition to the many things it condemns.

The profusion of regional affiliates reflects the crisis of temporal authority engendered by the doctrine of tawhid. A recent dispute between the Islamic Army in Iraq, a Sunni insurgent group with a religiously inflected but nationalist outlook, and the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qa'ida's latest iteration in that country, showed

that al-Qa'ida's opponents in the Arab world are keenly aware of the jihadist Salafists' leadership problem.

In an April 5, 2007, statement, the Islamic Army in Iraq challenged the diffuse organizational model espoused by al-Qa'ida in its various iterations throughout the Arab world. After criticizing the Islamic State of Iraq for a variety of excesses and outrages in Iraq, including the murder of unarmed Muslims and attacks on soft targets, the Islamic Army in Iraq appealed directly to Usama bin Ladin:

He and his brothers in the al-Qa'ida leadership are responsible on Judgment Day for what is happening on account of their followers. It is not enough to wash one's hands of their actions; one must also correct them. In the two collections of utterances of the Prophet by Abdallah bin Umar, the Prophet said, "Is not each of you a shepherd, and is not each of you responsible for his flock? The imam must look after his people, for he is responsible for them." And Al-Faruq<sup>3</sup> says, "If a beast of burden should stumble in the mountains of Iraq or the Sham<sup>4</sup>, then I feel that God would call me to account for it and ask, 'Why did you not pave the road?'"

The implication of this passage is that al-Qa'ida is out of control in Iraq, its parent organization is unwilling or unable to bring it to heel, and Usama bin Ladin is failing to live up to Islamic standards of leadership. It is a charge that the subsequent polemic, which has lasted for more than two months and included responses from the Islamic State of Iraq, failed to disprove, in large part because Usama bin Laden remained conspicuously silent throughout the debate.

### **Is Ideology A Motivating, Legitimizing, Or Recruiting Instrument?**

Ideology performs all three functions, albeit in different ways for different segments of al-Qa'ida and its affiliates. For regional leaderships and the al-Qa'ida core that fled Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, ideology is a motivating factor. Individuals who occupy higher levels in the organization(s) are more likely to have a strong commitment to the global aspect of al-Qa'ida's ideology and to think in terms of a larger, worldwide struggle.

Ideology serves to legitimize acts of violence for all levels of the network. Internally, the individuals who commit violent acts can reassure themselves that they are doing the right thing for the right reason. Externally, ideology underpins public statements taking responsibility and expressing support for violence. Both internally and externally, it is ideology that performs the function of proclaiming that the horrific violence perpetrated by al-Qa'ida is not terrorism, but rather legitimate warfare undertaken in the service of a divinely sanctioned cause.

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<sup>3</sup> Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second of the four "rightly guided" caliphs (634-644).

<sup>4</sup> Roughly equivalent to present-day Lebanon, Jordan, Israel/Palestinian Territories, and Syria.

Ideology is a particularly effective instrument in the recruiter's toolbox. While other tools, from financial incentives to the skillful exploitation of individual psychology, have their place, only ideology can answer questions. Most recruits are young men with burning questions about the world around them. Al-Qa'ida's ideology provides simple, direct answers to those questions, replacing doubt with surety and unformed striving with hardened purpose.

## **Are The Components Of Al-Qa'ida Motivated Primarily By Ideology, Power Politics, Or Criminality?**

While criminality may motivate many rank-and-file members of the al-Qa'ida terrorist network, leadership cadres are caught in a quandary, with some concerned primarily with ideological purity, and others power politics. This divergence has been evident in views of the Shi'a, with al-Qa'ida in Iraq choosing ideological purity while representatives of al-Qa'ida's original leadership opted for power politics.

With the emergence of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi as the leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, the organization adopted a viciously anti-Shi'ite line. Al-Qa'ida's unyielding ideology provides ample theological justification for such a position. Nevertheless, in a 2005 letter to Al-Zarqawi from Ayman al-Zawahiri, often termed the ideological leader of the original al-Qa'ida, the latter urged the Jordanian parvenu to soften his stance on the Shi'a for reasons of political expediency<sup>5</sup>. Al-Zawahiri wrote that

...many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shi'a. The sharpness of this questioning increases when the attacks are on one of their mosques, and it increases more when the attacks are on the mausoleum of Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib, may God honor him. My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue.

## **Conclusions**

The report my colleague, Kathleen Ridolfo, and I have just completed devotes considerable space to the issue of al-Qa'ida's ideology in the context of the ongoing struggle in Iraq. I close with two of the report's findings that have a direct bearing on this issue.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the tension between ideological purity and power politics in al-Qa'ida's reaction to the war between Israel and Hizballah in the summer of 2006, see *Al-Qaeda Addresses The Jihad-Versus-Resistance Conflict*, by Daniel Kimmage, RFE/RL, July 31, 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/07/96bd70d7-07bd-4862-8751-41f30aa14028.html>.

**1. While the majority of Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq do not espouse jihadist ideology, the media products they create are a boon to global jihadist media and advance the global jihadist ideological agenda.** There are two reasons for this. First, the general context of the conflict in Iraq fits in perfectly with jihadist ideology, which posits a titanic struggle between the forces of unbelief, led by the United States, and the forces of faith. Second, the images produced on a daily basis by the insurgency in the form of attack videos are grist for the jihadist propaganda mill, which relishes any and all depictions of "crusader" soldiers targeted in the Arab world.

This is especially true in light of negative Muslim views on al-Qa'ida attacks against civilians, which evoke strong disapproval<sup>6</sup>. Arab respondents to a recent poll overwhelmingly supported attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, however<sup>7</sup>. Thus, insurgent media products showcasing attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq reinforce an aspect of the jihadist message that is viewed positively in the Arab world. In this light, it seems entirely logical that jihadist forums, which are ideologically closer to Al-Qaeda than to most insurgent groups, are among the primary distribution channels for the text, audio, and video products created by virtually all insurgent groups across the ideological spectrum.

**2. There is a growing rift between nationalist elements in the Sunni insurgency and al-Qa'ida in Iraq.** Ideology lies at the root of this split, with nationalist insurgent groups limiting their aims to Iraq, while al-Qa'ida views Iraq as part of a larger, global struggle. A recent polemic between the Islamic Army in Iraq and al-Qa'ida in Iraq highlighted these ideological differences.

Ibrahim al-Shammari, the official spokesman of the Islamic Army in Iraq, defined his group's struggle in national terms in an April 11, 2007, interview with *Al-Jazeera*. Interviewer Ahmad Mansur asked, "Do your goals include causing America to fail abroad or does your goal relate only to Iraq?" Al-Shammari responded, "No, our goal is the liberation of Iraq from the occupation it is experiencing – the Iranian occupation and the American occupation...."

By contrast, a mid-April 2007 address by Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, leader of the al-Qa'ida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq, advanced a starkly different vision. Summarizing gains and losses on the fourth anniversary of the fall of the Hussein regime, Al-Baghdadi stated, "Let everyone know that our aim is clear: the establishment of God's law, and the path to that is jihad in its wider sense." Earlier in the address, Al-Baghdadi made it clear that "the outlines of the gains

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<sup>6</sup> See *Muslim Public Opinion On US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda*, World Public Opinion.org, [http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START\\_Apr07\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: "Majorities in Egypt and Morocco expressed approval for attacks on US troops in Muslim countries. Egyptians were those most likely to support such actions. Nine out of ten Egyptians approved of attacks on US military troops in Iraq (91%) and in Afghanistan (91%). Four out of five Egyptians (83%) said they supported attacks on US forces based in Persian Gulf states. Substantial majorities of Moroccans were also in favor of attacks on US troops in Iraq (68%), in Afghanistan (61%) and slightly smaller majorities supported attacks on those based in Persian Gulf states (52%)."

and losses in the past four years" indicate that "jihad has been adopted as the primary solution to drive out the unbelievers and apostates from Muslim countries."