The Vanguard: The Genesis and Substance of al-Qaeda's Conception of Itself and its Mission

By Christopher Angevine

Since September 11th, political leaders across the world have decried Osama Bin Laden and the less prominent members of al-Qaeda as terrorists and common criminals. Though they are indeed both terrorists and criminals, to envision the mission of al-Qaeda as a criminal syndicate or as a group designed simply to terrorize American citizens is to miss much of the point. Such a view fundamentally misconstrues the organization’s conception not only of itself, but also of the world around it. Members of al-Qaeda, and other fundamentalist Islamist groups, neither hate the West for its freedom, nor do they seek to kill innocent Westerners to express the outpouring of some unknown nihilistic rage. Instead, most ambitious Islamic radicals attack the United States and its allies because the US, as the sole global superpower, epitomizes both the global balance of power and international state structure. For al-Qaeda and its ideological fellow travelers, it is not simply American power but the entire international state system, that is unacceptable.

In place of this order, al-Qaeda seeks to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate. It yearns for a day in which the Muslim people will no longer be divided by racial, linguistic or geographic lines, but instead will be united as one umma living according to Islamic law, or the sharia, in accordance with God’s will. The very constitution of the organization declares al-Qaeda’s purpose to be “to establish the truth, get rid of evil, and establish an Islamic nation.”¹ This is a dramatically more ambitious cause than ridding the Middle East of American soldiers. Far from being a mere band of common criminals, al-Qaeda has set out on a consciously audacious strategy designed, over time, to eat away at the current state system and replace it with an Islamic Caliphate governed by the dictates of the sharia.

The modern system of nation-states pains Islamists, al-Qaeda and otherwise, not merely because it allows Muslim lands to be administered by apostates

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and occupied by infidel armies. In their minds, the international state system also unjustly divides men by race and geography, permanently relegating Muslims to a back seat in history. Rejecting this, Islamists strive for a world made safe for Islam: a world in which people across the globe live under the sharia, according to the precepts revealed to mankind in the Qu’ran. By incorporating the works of notable Islamists and al-Qaeda leaders, translated organizational manuals, and insightful secondary sources, this article will conduct an examination of al-Qaeda’s world view. The overall objective is to acquire a better understanding of the organization’s concept of both the state and the international state system, as well to suggest how such knowledge may improve American policy toward al-Qaeda.

This analysis will proceed in the following manner. The first section will provide an intellectual background for the ideas of al-Qaeda by examining the thought of the Muslim Brotherhood and two of its leaders, Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Building upon this foundation, the next section will discuss al-Qaeda’s ideological goals, contextualizing al-Qaeda’s world view within that of some contemporary Islamists, including the Taliban and Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudan. The third section will delve into the organization’s plan for managing the transition from the current system to the Islamic Caliphate by analyzing a strategy al-Qaeda terms “the Management of Savagery.” The fourth section will conclude by suggesting how a better appreciation of al-Qaeda’s self conception could enable future US policy to be more effective in defeating al-Qaeda.

Political Islam and the State

Al-Qaeda’s philosophy did not develop in a vacuum. Al-Qaeda, along with most modern jihadist groups, belongs to a group of Muslim fundamentalists called Salafis. Salafis are “Sunni Muslims who want to establish and govern Islamic states based solely on the Qu’ran and the example of the Prophet as understood by the first generation of Muslims close to Muhammad.” The term Salafis derives from the Arabic word salaf denoting the “pious ancestors” who surrounded the Prophet. As such, the movement is more than simply a conservative one. Instead, Salafism is inherently radical, for it proposes a wholesale reversal of centuries of history. Salafis believe the Muslim world has lost its way in the centuries after the Qu’ranic revelation. In particular, early Salafis worried that the disconnect between Islam and modern society might lead to the Westernization and secularization of the Muslim world. Seeing little to be gained from imitating the West, these philosophers declared that Muslim society must look to the past and organize itself according to the Word of God.
Hasan al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood

In the middle of the twentieth century, with the Middle East riven by the strife of decolonization and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Islamist ideas gained greater traction. In Egypt, these ideas transcended the Arab intelligentsia and entered wider society with Hassan al-Banna’s founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. For al-Banna, the “social principles upon which the civilization of Western nations has been built” were failed and bankrupt. The Second World War had revealed socialism and capitalism to be forces for ill rather than good. Islam presented a powerful third way: encapsulating the best of the communist and capitalist systems, fulfilling the word of God, and providing “all the fundamental necessities for the life of nations.”

The Muslim Brotherhood was most concerned with the state of affairs in Egypt. This was not because Egypt was singularly less Islamic than the rest of the Muslim world, but because it happened to be their native country. For the Brotherhood, Islam “promulgates the soundest principles” on “the life of the individual,” “the life of the family,” and “the life of nations.” If the “Islamic peoples” take comfort in Islam and refuse to “let themselves be swept along by the current of blind traditionalism” and by Western imperialism, they can create a society governed by the “prescriptions of the Noble Qu’ran,” guaranteeing its citizens a more meaningful existence.

According to al-Banna, that existence would begin under the nation-state system, but would eventually inspire “every Muslim to believe that every foot of ground supporting a brother who held to the religion of the Noble Qu’ran was a portion of the larger Islamic homeland.” The Brotherhood vowed to ensure that the “horizons of the Islamic fatherland expanded and transcended the bounds of mere geographical and ethnic patriotism to one of... truths which God set down as a guidance and light for the world.” This was not simple nationalism. Rather, al-Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood summoned mankind to renounce the world as it was presently constituted. To them, the nation-state represented a form of social organization fundamentally inferior to a community built on the ideals of Islam. Success for the Muslim Brotherhood thus meant—and still means—more than the overthrow of a given regime. Ultimately, victory requires a fundamental reordering of the international state system.
Sayyid Qutb: “The Martyr”\textsuperscript{17}

Al-Banna did not live to see his vision fulfilled. He was gunned down in 1949, leaving Qutb, another Egyptian, to take up his radical mantle. Today, forty years after Gamal Abdel Nasser executed him, Qutb remains one of the most influential figures in Islamist thought. Some American students of the Islamist movement have even suggested labeling the entire jihadist movement “Qutbism.”\textsuperscript{18}

Qutb reminded the Muslim world that God did not send the Qu’ran through the Prophet in an effort to reinforce narrow divisions of blood, race and ethnicity. Islam shattered the ties of kinship: Muhammad himself was forced to disavow some of his cousins and uncles when he emigrated to Medina.\textsuperscript{19} In the company of the Prophet, “there was no tribal partnership… the pride of lineage was ended” and “the voice of nationalism was silenced.”\textsuperscript{20} Muhammad counseled his followers that “he is not one of us who calls toward partisanship, who fights for partisanship, who dies for partisanship.”\textsuperscript{21} Qutb reminded his readers that Islam “freed [man’s spirit] from the bondage of flesh and blood and the pride of soil and country.”\textsuperscript{22} To be Muslim is not to be an Egyptian first, for “the Muslim’s country [is] not… a piece of land but the Dar ul-Islam—the homeland where faith rules and the Shari’ah of God holds sway.”\textsuperscript{23} The message is clear: the modern Muslim must not choose patriotism over loyalty to Islam and his fellow Muslim.\textsuperscript{24}

Qutb’s disgust with the global order ran deeper. Like al-Banna before him, Qutb viewed the world as corrupt, decadent, and oppressive.\textsuperscript{25} Many Egyptians of the era had adopted Western ways or embraced modern trends such as Arab socialism. Qutb believed that these philosophies were useless, for, unlike Islam, they could not answer man’s fundamental questions. True Muslims should “reject” such movements as “retrogressive and in opposition to the direction toward which Islam intends to take mankind.”\textsuperscript{26} The Muslim community needs not to compete with Europe in terms of material progress; its comparative advantage lies in having embraced Islam, that “faith and…way of life”\textsuperscript{27} that combines progress with the basic fulfillment of human needs.

While Islam declared that God was the only true sovereign and all men should unite in submission to him, the modern nation-state creates an artificial hierarchy among men. The nation-state thus usurps God’s authority and relegates mankind to a perpetual state of ignorance.\textsuperscript{28} As such, a true “Qutbist” cannot tolerate modern state structures; they are “inherently evil.”\textsuperscript{29} Instead, such a Muslim must seek to put into place the sharia, eliminating modern state structures and effectuating the unification of the umma. In
Qutb’s mind, Islam could not abide secularism, even if this meant nothing more than the separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{30} State and religion, just like the mind and the soul, are indivisible, for “in Islam...divinity could not be diminished without being destroyed.”\textsuperscript{31}

Preaching such a radical message did not bode well for the messenger in the Middle East of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Nasser realized the danger Qutb’s ideas presented and executed him in 1966. Yet, Qutb’s thought only gained greater prominence after his death, influencing Islamists to assassinate Anwar Sadat and inspiring the jihadists who would become al-Qaeda.

**The Return of the Caliphate: A Call to Action**

Al-Qaeda was born of the combination of the ideas and organizations of two men: Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Each is driven by a perfect storm of two ideological currents running deep through their souls. Al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden are both Salafis, heavily influenced by the philosophy of al-Banna and Qutb. They are, like al-Banna and Qutb, ideologically opposed to the extant state system in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{32} Yet, it is doubtful that al-Zawahiri and Bin Laden would have devoted their lives to al-Qaeda if not for an intense personal hatred of the leaders of their native countries. Salafism provides al-Qaeda’s theoretical foundation; the perceived apostasy and atheism of the Middle Eastern governments provides the fire.

Al-Qaeda’s hatred of the Saudi regime has been well discussed and need not be examined at length here. Bin Laden feels that the Saudi family has “desecrated its legitimacy” by abusing its position of authority vis-à-vis its people while, at the same time, abdicating its authority to protect the Holy Land from non-Muslim outsiders.\textsuperscript{33} According to Bin Laden, Middle Eastern regimes suffer from “neglect of religion and weakness of faith.”\textsuperscript{34} The “Islamic umma has sunk, in its government and in the feebleness and cowardice of many of its scholars in the face of its enemies,” into “degradation and corruption.”\textsuperscript{35} The presence of American troops in the Arabian Peninsula awakened in Bin Laden a profound determination to do all that was in his power to, quite literally, change the world.\textsuperscript{36} He declared war on the United States in 1996, because he felt he had nothing less than a “moral obligation” to do so as long as the Americans posted troops in the Peninsula and supported regimes which failed to live up to their obligations by suspending “the rulings of Islamic law.”\textsuperscript{37}

Despite his profound influence on al-Qaeda’s strategy and philosophy, al-Zawahiri’s thought has received significantly less attention than that of Bin Laden. Before joining forces with al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri headed Egyptian
Islamic Jihad ("EIJ"), a Salafi group bent on the overthrow of the Egyptian regime. In the early 1970s, al-Zawahiri’s public career took an ambitiously radical track. Contrary to the Muslim Brotherhood and many other Egyptian Islamists, who had begun to work within the extant state system to effect policies friendly to Islam, al-Zawahiri campaigned not only for the overthrow of the Egyptian regime but also for “a complete overthrow of the existing order.”

Al-Zawahiri thought that the Brotherhood had surrendered to the Egyptian regime by renouncing violence. The Muslim Brotherhood, sensing that its radical behavior was proving counterproductive, decided to soften its ideological edge for tactical reasons. It therefore accommodated itself, at least for the short term, to the Egyptian regime. The Islamic Caliphate, they likely reasoned, had to begin somewhere. First, the Brotherhood would gain a stronger foothold in Egyptian society through peaceful means; it could overthrow the Egyptian government at a later time. Once in power, the Brotherhood could implement the sharia in Egypt before expanding its rule beyond Egypt’s borders. Many Islamists take this approach today, working within the political process to bring about Islamist change in their home societies.

Al-Zawahiri refused to accept this. For him, as for Bin Laden, the destruction of the Egyptian state and the resurrection of the Caliphate was a moral obligation. He began to actively expand a group of underground Islamist cells under his control, eventually creating the stand alone group EIJ. EIJ and other Islamist movements grew quickly after the historic 1979 peace deal between Egypt and Israel. However, events soon overtook them. In 1981, a group of Islamists, unallied with al-Zawahiri, assassinated Sadat. In the ensuing roundup, the Egyptian government jailed and tortured al-Zawahiri, forcing him to flee Egypt and set out on a journey that ended in his alliance with Bin Laden. No longer in Egypt, al-Zawahiri was forced to adopt new tactics. Yet, his long term strategy remained the same: to realize the return of the Caliphate by bringing down the international state system.

The Vanguard of the Caliphate

Realizing that their ideas require a great departure from the status quo, Islamists have for some time understood that success would come incrementally. Regime change in one state is difficult; eliminating the entire state structure in a region is nearly impossible. As Qutb himself acknowledged, there is a “vast” difference “between the revival of Islam and the attainment of world leadership.” Yet, the longest journey begins with the first step.
For this reason, Islamists style themselves as the vanguard of the Islamic revolution.⁴² They purport to be leaders of a great movement in a Muslim world bereft of vision.¹¹⁷ Al-Qaeda has filled this void, becoming, for many of its supports, “legitimate and romantic heroes” brave enough to resist Arab dictators and the West.⁴⁴ In many ways, al-Qaeda remains popular throughout the Arab world not for its ideas, but simply for its sheer audacity. Yet, the organization’s ideas are what drive its leaders, and dictate where it will go. If the United States and its allies seek to defeat al-Qaeda, their leaders must understand that which drives the organization: its self conception as the vanguard of the Caliphate. As the military meaning of “vanguard” implies, al-Qaeda leads the Islamist movement from the front. However, the organization represents more than simple leadership. It is also a harbinger of greater forces to come.

The idea of the Islamist vanguard begins, at least in the modern age, with Qutb. For him, and for all Salafis, Islamic society must be restored to its “original form,” if it is to reclaim its rightful place as the leader of mankind.⁴⁵ For this revival to occur, Qutb declared, “it is necessary that there should be a vanguard which sets out with… determination” to effect change.⁴⁶ To succeed, this vanguard must not only know the basis for its actions (the Qu’ran and the traditions of the Salaf), but it must also understand the purpose of this “long journey.”⁴⁷ They must, as the title of al-Zawahiri’s memoir declares, envision themselves as “Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet.”⁴⁸

Once a group such as al-Qaeda has taken it upon itself to lead the revolution, the question soon becomes how to best achieve the revolution’s goals. For Qutb, if the Caliphate was to ever be reestablished, the vanguard must initiate its achievement by replacing the government of one state with an Islamic regime. By initiating “Islamic revival” in one Muslim country, Islamists could demonstrate to the world “the beauty of this new system” in a “concrete form.”⁴⁹ Then, it would move to spread Islamic law beyond its borders. Qutb never passed the point of arguing first principles, for the Egyptian government executed him before Islam could “fulfill its role” in Egypt.⁵⁰ Al-Zawahiri avoided execution; instead, he fled to the Sudan and then to Afghanistan, two states seemingly much closer to establishing themselves as the first outpost of the Islamic revolution.

**Paradise Regained?**

In the wake of the Gulf War, the Saudi regime expelled Bin Laden and subsequently stripped him of his Saudi citizenship.⁵¹ At the invitation of Sudan’s new Islamist regime, Bin Laden emigrated to the African nation in
1992. There he found a regime inspired by Hasan al-Turabi, a prominent Islamist theorist.\textsuperscript{52} Like Qutb before him, al-Turabi envisioned his nation as the vanguard of a coming Islamic caliphate. He saw a future in which the umma was headquartered in the Sudan, gradually expanding the reach of Islam into neighboring countries in “ever-widening circles.”\textsuperscript{53} For Bin Laden, the Sudan seemed, at first glance, to be the epitome of the first step on the long journey toward the Caliphate.

Al-Turabi gave relatively little thought to the form an Islamic government might take in any particular country. Instead, his work focused on the ideal characteristics of a universal Islamic state, i.e. the Caliphate.\textsuperscript{54} ThoughBin Laden vehemently disagreed with al-Turabi about exactly how puritanical in form this universal Islamic state should be, the two were in concordance in their conception of the structure of the universal state itself. The “ideological foundation” of an Islamic state is “\textit{tawhid} - the unity of Allah and human life.”\textsuperscript{55} An Islamic state “cannot be isolated from society” in the way that a Westerner might conceive of it; there can be no division “between public and private” or “the state and society.”\textsuperscript{56} Thus, to understand the Islamic “state” that al-Qaeda seeks to create, Westerners must fundamentally reassess government and state structures in light of this view.

The Islamic Caliphate is, for those nonbelievers and apostates under its control, a religious dictatorship. With Islam integrated with society at every level, little space exists for those who are not Muslim or, worse, those Muslims who do not believe. From the perspective of a believer, however, the Islamic Caliphate is far from a dictatorship: the Caliphate is “not an absolute or sovereign entity” – the regime itself is subjected to the objective dictates of the sharia and the will of God.\textsuperscript{57}

The Islamic Caliphate is so distinct from Western conceptions of the state that “the phrase ‘Islamic State’ itself is a misnomer.”\textsuperscript{58} The Caliphate is not a separate entity; it is merely the “political dimension of the collective endeavor of Muslims.”\textsuperscript{59} In other words, it is the means through which the umma expresses itself and achieves its goals, both for life on Earth and the hereafter. This is representative, participatory government to the very core, but with the individualist emphasis of the West removed. Ideally, the Caliph is “freely elected by the people” and subject to both Islamic law and the will of the electors.\textsuperscript{60} Under al-Turabi’s theory, Muslims can check their leaders via the demand for consensus (\textit{ijma}) and the consultative powers of the \textit{shura}. An individual caliph might usurp or abuse his powers, but the umma, acting in concert, would replace him with one who lived up to his responsibilities.
The Devil is in the Details

In the fifteen years since al-Turabi explained his thoughts on Islamic government, sharia has not been implemented in the entirety of the Sudan, let alone expanded across the Muslim umma. Al-Turabi’s dream is far from a reality. At the same time, a great “schism” has developed between al-Turabi and al-Qaeda on ideas of theology. Even if Bin Laden and al-Turabi could agree over the future structure of an Islamic Caliphate, they could not agree on the form of Islamic law under which it was to govern. From al-Qaeda’s viewpoint, al-Turabi’s “neglect of some of the sharia commandments and its corruption of some others make [the Sudan] a secular state; there is no Islam in it save trade in its name.”

Disappointed by the Sudan, Bin Laden soon found a regime that shared his view of both the structure and the policy of a future Caliphate: the Taliban. The Taliban instituted a harsh form of Islamic law throughout their territory, embracing corporal punishment, eliminating foreign influences and activities, while prohibiting women from public life. In the mid-1990s, following American pressure on the Sudanese government, Bin Laden emigrated to Afghanistan. There, he found a home under the authority of Mullah Omar, who, after a vision of the Prophet, had declared himself the Commander of the Faithful. In exchange for Bin Laden’s monetary support and fealty to Omar’s religious authority, the Taliban extended their protection to Bin Laden.

In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda could train and prepare to set out on its mission as the vanguard of the Islamic Caliphate. The organization embarked on a plan it named “The Management of Savagery,” through which it would foment discord across the globe in the hopes of breaking down both the American-led global balance of power and the entire international state system.

The Management of Savagery

In their speeches and actions, the members of al-Qaeda have made their objectives in declaring war on the United States very clear. Intending to bring down the apostate dictatorships across the Middle East, the organization has targeted the United States. If it can bring down the United States or force it to remove its support for various Arab regimes, al-Qaeda believes that these regimes, and perhaps their entire state structures, will crumble. This general outline of al-Qaeda’s thought has been available since at least 1996. The details have become clearer over time through the translation of some important al-Qaeda internal documents, the most important of which
is a strategic treatise entitled “The Management of Savagery.” Written by an unknown figure under the *nom de guerre* of Abu Bakr Naji, the piece details the rationale behind many aspects of al-Qaeda’s tactical and strategic decisions. Most relevant for our purposes is the work’s description of the stages through which the organization proposes to lead the umma on the road to the Caliphate. This is crucial to our examination of al-Qaeda’s self-conception, for it reveals the group’s understanding of the state system, the Caliphate, and the group’s perceived role in bringing about the collapse of the former and the realization of the latter.

To enable al-Qaeda to reestablish the Islamic Caliphate, Naji proposes a three-step process. If al-Qaeda and its fellow Salafis are to bring down “the order that has governed the world since the Sykes-Picot era,” they must first embark upon a “stage of the power of vexation and exhaustion.” This is the stage in which some notable Islamist groups, such as Hamas in Palestine or the Islamic Group in Egypt, are currently operating. By bombing sensitive targets, such as the oil or tourism industry, Islamists can force regimes to spend a great deal of time and money protecting sensitive areas of infrastructure. As governments have limited resources to provide security against the “chaos and insecurity” created by al-Qaeda, this will eventually free up the more remote areas of the country and allow Islamists to operate with impunity there. Bold actions such as these will also inspire more volunteers to join the cause.

Once the “vexation and exhaustion” operations render these regions beyond government control, the areas will inevitably collapse into near-anarchy, or as Naji terms it, “savagery.” Iraq without American forces could conceivably lapse into such a state. Parts of Somalia may currently fit this definition. In theory, this “savagery” will result in one of two possibilities: either an Islamist group will take over the region, i.e. manage the savagery, or the region will fall into the hands of “non-Islamic groups” such as “the remnants of ruling regimes” or “organized gangs.” Since it is a crucial turning point in the development of the Caliphate, the “management of savagery” is, as the subtitle of Naji’s piece points out, “the most critical stage through which the umma will pass.”

In this second stage on the road to the true Islamic State, the Islamists must create the outlines of some sort of governing structure. Such an entity would likely approximate what a Western reader might recognize as a “failed state” or a “failing state.” Afghanistan under Taliban control and Somalia under the rule of the Union of Islamic Courts both provide rough examples of this phenomenon. These “administrations of savagery” focus on providing the
basic needs of any society: they provide the minimal requirements of food and health care, establish security and justice in the society with some sort of police and court system, and defend the state from outside invaders.\textsuperscript{78}

The “management of savagery” is thus a holding pattern in which al-Qaeda procures the good will of the inhabitants by providing them with their basic daily needs while biding its time and building its capacity to expand its influence into other areas.\textsuperscript{79} It is nothing more than an intermediate step toward the final “power of establishment,” when the Islamic Caliphate will be created.\textsuperscript{80} While “raising the level of faith” and administering “savagery” in their own territory through sharia courts, Islamists must continue to “expand and attack [their] enemies.”\textsuperscript{81} Naji reminds Islamists that, to succeed, they must do more than simply kill their enemies; they must also learn the art of governance. al-Qaeda, like its Salafi predecessors, seeks to return Islam to the glory of the Caliphate. To do so successfully, it must do more than kill Westerners and it must not end its struggle with the destruction of the international state system. Ultimately, al-Qaeda must build something to replace that which it has destroyed.

\textbf{Knowing is Half the Battle}

By understanding the motivating force driving al-Qaeda, Westerners will be able to see al-Qaeda as it sees itself, instead of how they imagine it from afar. Al-Qaeda is neither a band of common criminals, nor a pack of bloodthirsty misanthropes. The organization is much more ambitious and, thus, much more dangerous. It employs its indiscriminately murderous tactics not as an end, but as a means to a very tangible end. To be sure, al-Qaeda seeks to expel the United States from the Middle East and to eliminate secular regimes across the Muslim world. But, these are simply the first few steps on the journey to their ultimate goal: the resurrection of the long-lost Caliphate of their noble forefathers, the Salafs. To understand its mission, American policymakers must comprehend al-Qaeda’s thinking. By listening to what its leaders are saying and contextualizing it within the past half century of Islamist philosophy, America and its allies can better grasp al-Qaeda’s sense of moral purpose.

Though the “Global War on Terror” may not often resemble traditional war, Clausewitz’s maxim that war is the continuation of policy by other means still holds true. To shape its military and diplomatic response to al-Qaeda, America’s leaders must know precisely which goals America seeks to accomplish. Similarly, in order to choose the correct aim, policymakers must first understand the nature of al-Qaeda’s long term objectives. Thus,
miscomprehending al-Qaeda’s mission will inevitably lead American policy to failure.

Acquiring an accurate perception of al-Qaeda’s goals and self-conception is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for victory. American policymakers must also build on this knowledge to craft effective policies. A fuller understanding of al-Qaeda’s philosophy and self-conception should likely have little effect on the tactics of those military forces immediately confronted by al-Qaeda fighters. Similarly, it should have little bearing on most of the tactics used to stabilize Iraq. However, this knowledge should impact two areas of American policy: intelligence and public diplomacy.

In addition to standard intelligence gathering techniques (reconnaissance, interrogation, etc.), much attention should be paid to open source intelligence about al-Qaeda’s mission. Since American forces have disrupted jihadist organizations in both Afghanistan and Iraq, al-Qaeda sympathizers have dispersed across the globe, without direct communication with one another. As a result, the internet has become a main means of disseminating Salafi propaganda and information about al-Qaeda to members and potential recruits. It is likely that much of this information, especially when viewed within the context of the Islamist philosophy inspiring al-Qaeda, could prove useful to predicting al-Qaeda’s future strategy. Al-Qaeda members and sympathizers speak to one another with reference to a shared cultural and ideological milieu, that of Salafi Islam. Understanding this will undoubtedly enable America and her allies to better combat Islamist terror.

America’s public diplomacy stands to benefit greatly from a deeper perception of al-Qaeda’s self conception. America’s leaders must realize that al-Qaeda has engaged the United States in a battle not only for the hearts and minds of Muslims across the globe, but also for the fate of the international system. There is no purely military solution to the problem; victory will come from a combination of military triumphs and diplomatic successes. American political rhetoric must distinguish between al-Qaeda’s Islamist goals and the goals of other Islamist groups, terrorist or not, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Leaders have internalized the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists. But, they also must not mistake all Islamists for terrorists, or
even all Islamist terrorists for al-Qaeda. America must understand that it is engaged in a global struggle not against terror, but against al-Qaeda and its Salafi allies. As al-Qaeda’s very success demonstrates, with the knowledge of one’s purpose and the resolve to achieve it, half the battle is already won. Yet, American political leaders must also win the rest of the battle by demonstrating to the world, particularly to the Muslim world, that the U.S. comprehends the nature of its enemy and will act accordingly. By doing so, America and its allies will better prepare the ground for victory over al-Qaeda.

-Elizabeth Sterling served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES
4 Ibid., 6
5 Ibid., 6
6 Of course, like many other terms, there is much dispute about the term Salafi. It covers many Islamist groups, all of whom do not agree with each other. I shall try to distinguish between the various groups who can consider themselves Salafis, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda. However, many of the larger differences are beyond the scope of this paper, which seeks to examine their conception of the state (something upon which Salafis, by their very nature, tend to agree upon). Suffice it to say that significant disagreement exists between Salafis on the nature of Islamic Law and the tactics for bringing about Islamic rule.
10 Ibid., 60.
11 Ibid., 60-2.
13 Ibid., 87.
14 Ibid., 87-8.
15 Ibid., 94.
16 Ibid., 94.
17 Naji, Management of Savagery, at 8; Lawrence Wright, The Looming Tower, at 7
18 McCants and Brachman, Militant Ideology Atlas, at 10
19 Sayyid Qutb, Milestones, (Damascus: Dar Al-Ilm), 123
20 Ibid., 123
21 Ibid., 123
22 Ibid., 123
23 Ibid., 123
24 Ibid., 124
26 Qutb, Milestones, 137
27 Ibid., 10.
29 Ibid., 3.
30 Secularism can have many meanings, from the removal of religion from politics alone, to the removal of religion from all spheres of public life to, even more harshly, state sponsored atheism. Some Islamic thinkers could tolerate the removal of Islam from politics. Qutb, who viewed Islam as an intrinsically political religion, could do no such thing.
31 Wright, Looming Tower, 24.
The vanguard is not the only group that must understand whence it comes and to where it is headed. Observers, whether they are policy makers or academics, must also understand the true nature of al-Qaeda’s mission, if we are to understand and combat the group’s efforts.

See Wright, Looming Tower, 158-160


The Northwest Provinces in Pakistan would be a good example of such an area.

This is a formula copied by many Islamist groups, particularly in light of the incompetence or viciousness of Middle Eastern secular governments. Hamas and Hezbollah both gained significant credibility with their local populations by providing certain elements of public infrastructure, such as hospitals, while at the same time engaging in insurrections. Similarly when Mogadishu recently fell under the control of Islamists, many in that city were said to be thankful for the Union of Islamic Courts’ restoration of order and elimination of gang warfare.

See Osama Bin Laden, “Declaration of Jihad.”