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Al Qaeda's Rhetoric and Its Implications

Western experts and intelligence community analysts are still only just coming to terms with the nature of al Qaeda and the ways in which it differs as an organisation from the terrorist groups we were familiar with during the Cold War. One of the most obvious differences between the likes of the IRA and ETA and al Qaeda are the alleged end-states that they wish to achieve. Whilst the former groups strove, or still strive, to achieve goals that are at least theoretically possible and solely political in nature (such as the re-annexation of Northern Ireland to Eire, greater autonomy for the Basque lands), al Qaeda goes beyond the political into what one strategist, the provocative Ralph Peters, calls the transcendental, a vision informed by religion. Given the amount of exposure bin Laden has guaranteed for himself and the sheer amount of propaganda material he and his lieutenants have released in the last thirteen years it seems obvious that a closer examination of the group's rhetoric will afford a better insight into the minds of those people behind attacks are historically significant as September 11th and the March 11th Madrid attacks. In fact, in a recent statement made last year just prior to the US presidential elections, bin Laden himself emphasised how al Qaeda can only be understood through its statements.

The Messages – the evolution

Bin Laden and other key individuals, such as Ayman al Zawahiri, are not shy individuals. Whilst they may physically have removed themselves to one after another of their group's safehouse or camps, together they have supplied their enemies, 'the West' with a plethora of statements over the years in a large variety of media, from the internet to video and audio statements as well as other documents released via Arab printed media.

It is now well known that bin Laden's ideological beginnings were shaped at university and then by Abdallah Azzam and his experiences in the Afghan resistance

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to the Soviets. It was only with his failed attempt after the invasion of Kuwait to convince the Saudi royal family that he and his mujaheds should be allowed to protect his homeland from Hussein's army, that a real radicalisation becomes visible. At this point we move from concepts of a more limited 'defensive jihad' to targeting of US interests and the Saudi regime itself, given that the US and its allies are the aggressors, having attacked the integrity of the Muslim world with its actions in the Gulf and with its protracted support of Israel. Once stripped of his Saudi citizenship, the exiled bin Laden went further in solidifying his mantra until he issued a personal call to jihad in 1996, a struggle against the cabal of "Jews and Christians" and their proxies, foremostly apostate Arab/Muslim elites in non theocratic countries.

As the years progressed the end state became more and more apparent, as did the extent of the target audience. Interviews from the internet and the Pakistani media make it clear that the whole of the Muslim world is being addressed, that even the populations of secular states such as Iraq are allies in the battle against their own leaders and the West. Together the aim is for national borders to become meaningless as a new Caliphate-type structure develops in Central Asia and then the Middle East and as the 'crusades' of the Christians are halted. In this vision, repeated references are made to the Taliban regime of Afghanistan being the model for future universal theocracy. This was soon followed by bin Laden's issuance – without any reasonable clerical authority – of a fatwa against the US in which attacks against civilians were justified: "We call on every Muslim who believes in Allah and wishes to be rewarded to comply with Allah's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it." Then came the attacks on the World trade Center and the Pentagon.

Tactical Evidence

In addition to the dozens and dozens of first person statements, there exist now, especially after the invasion of Afghanistan and the investigation of several al Qaeda safe-houses and camps, more and more samples of al Qaeda's internal documents. These include the 'Super Bomb' guide found by a CNN team in Kabul and the so-called 'al Qaeda Manual'. These documents go beyond the purely operational to include the political and ideological. For example, the al Qaeda Manual makes the clear statement: "Islamic governments have never and will never be established through peaceful and cooperative council [*viz the Loya Jirga*]. They are established as they always have been: by pen and gun; word and bullet; tongue and teeth."

Some of these documents are interesting in that they gave forewarning to many later observed events. The Manual discusses in detail how it is justified to take hostages, to use violence against them and eventually even kill them, as we see now in Iraq. It discusses also the justifications behind breaking the Islamic religious codes relating to proper dress and prayer in the case of individuals functioning as covert al Qaeda operatives within Western nations and who need to be able to assimilate as much as is possible. Lest one think that these documents are vague concoctions of religious ideas and simple tactical guidelines, the truth is that many issues crucial to covert operations are dealt with in a systematic and clear-headed fashion, intelligence gathering and targeting providing some of the best examples to date with distinctions



being made between classified and open source materials and even the importance of culture and its effect on intelligence gathering.

Nor does Zawahiri himself shy away from giving very concrete instructions to potential fundamentalist operatives. In *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, published in London, he clearly enumerates in a very holistic sense the strategic tools that the West, including Russia, are using against the Islamicists. These include the United Nations, multinational corporations, international communications and data exchange systems, satellite media channels and international relief agencies, which are used to camouflage covert operations targeting the al Qaeda. The treatise also sheds light upon the new generation of al Qaeda recruits, 'mujahid youths' who have abandoned their families, country, wealth, studies and jobs in search of jihad". Many of these new recruits, as a results of the 'Jewish crusade' become "like orphans in a banquet for the villains". These comments confirm analyses from European members of the international intelligence community, especially the German BND, that the organisation is continually renewing its membership, with each tier having a different common denominator: Generation 1 linked by the Afghan resistance, Generation 2 by involvement in Bosnia and Chechnya and the newest 3rd Generation by shared experiences in the Middle East, especially at the more fundamental universities.

Conclusion: Rational and Irrational at the same time?

One signatures of al Qaeda rhetoric that is most problematic, is the way in which it has over time mingled the transcendental and irrational with the feasible or politically realistic. In the video statement bin Laden prepared for the invasion of Afghanistan, very concrete demands were made with regard to US troops withdrawing from Saudi Arabia and for the creation of a free and independent Palestine. Such classic demands, very redolent of Cold War terror groups, are difficult to associate with the far more extreme visions concerning the creation of a global Caliphate. More recent statements do however give clues to what could be happening.

The fact that is it known that al Qaeda has a communications council, means that such mixed messages are unlikely to be accidental. In the last 6 months several statements have been aimed at new audiences or made in a new voice. Statements clearly aimed at the governments of Europe before and after the Madrid bombings are meant to make bin laden look more moderate, more of a political leader. At the same time, other statements aimed clearly at the broader Muslim community or umma reflect an appreciation of the conflict that sees it as becoming one that is a protracted struggle, more and more against the economic strengths of the US and its allies. This does not diminish, however, the import of the more transcendental demands. To quote a recent study by the US Congressional Research Service:

"Bin Laden has outlined specific political demands that support the image of al Qaeda as a pliable, pragmatic political actor. Nevertheless, Al (sic) Qaeda's operational record seems to indicate that its leaders' commitment to specific national causes and strategic objectives are rhetorical tools designed to elicit support for their broader ideological agenda of confrontation with the West and puritanical reform in the Islamic world."



Given all the evidence to date, we would agree that despite an increase in worldly, immediate demands, the overarching aim of the organisation and its leaders remains the same and as a result al Qaeda is not a group to be negotiated with and is unlikely ever to become such.

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