

The militant Islamist call and its echo

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On the internet, in gymnasiums, bookshops and video-clubs, recruitment propaganda is viewed by and debated among prospective Islamist militants. This wide-ranging material contains four recurrent themes; understanding them is the first step to forming an effective counter-narrative to dissuade the next generation of would-be militants from embracing violence, and channelling their energies and ideas into democratic routes of political and religious persuasion.

These four themes are precedent, piety, perseverance and persecution. I will examine each briefly in turn, before suggesting the essential ingredients of a response.

The four Ps of rhetoric

The first theme is precedent. Islamist militant rhetoric refers to Islam's historic wars against injustice, dating back to the Prophet Mohammed [2]'s rebellion against the Meccan oligarchs. The great recruiter to the anti-Soviet *jihād* in Afghanistan, Abdullah Azzam [3], told prospective recruits in his book Join the Caravan [4] that the prophet himself "used to go out on military expeditions or send out an army at least every two months".

The young men of action of 9/11 exemplify this theme in their use of codenames that conferred the virtuous authority [4] of earlier heroes. The leader of the team on United Airlines flight 93 was named Abu Tareq al-Lubnani, probably after the Umayyad [5] conqueror of north Africa and Andalus. Abu Salman on American Airlines (AA) flight 11 was named after Salman al-Farsi, a contemporary of the prophet who devised the protective trench which foiled the Meccan cavalry attack on Medina in the "battle of the trench". Mohammed Atta, leader of the team on flight AA11, was named after a friend of the prophet. On flight AA77, bound for the Pentagon, Bilal al-Makki was named after a black slave who endured torture for his faith, and was bought and freed by Abu Bakr, the first caliph.

The second theme is piety. In order credibly to refer to past heroes, Islamist militants must appear to conform to appropriate standards of virtue. The most important of these - according to Osama bin Laden's statement of September 1994 - is "pure intention for almighty Allah". The Muslim attitude towards legitimate war was summed up by Hassan al-Banna [7], founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, in his book *Jihad*: "Muslims in war had only one concern and this was to make the name of Allah Supreme, there was no room at all for any other objective". The

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openDemocracy writers discuss the roots and character of Islamist ideology:

Malise Ruthven, "Cultural schizophrenia [5]" (27

author of a captured al-Qaida memo observes that accordingly, "our work is rooted in Allah's true law. ... the slightest aspect of our work should have this imprint. ... this will calm the hearts of the masses and the *mujahideen*".

The third theme is perseverance. Islamist militants use past victories to convince themselves and prospective supporters that they enjoy Allah's favour and will prevail irrespective of the odds. An intercepted letter to fighters in Somalia in 1993 (following the "Black Hawk Down" incident in Mogadishu) reminded them "when we are truly fighting in the name and on behalf of God, we have nothing to fear, even were we to be fighting thousands of battles against the most arrogant power on Earth, because the result is known in advance". The leading al-Qaida ideologue Ayman al-Zawahiri [8] recalled in 2001 that "the crusaders in Palestine and Syria left after two centuries of continued jihad. ... The British occupied Egypt for 70 years. The French occupied Algeria for 120 years".

The fourth theme is persecution. The World Islamic Front statement [9] in which Osama bin Laden declared war on the "Jews and Crusaders" in February 1998 lamented that "nations are attacking Muslims like people fighting over a plate of food". The concept of the west's persecution of Islam through history pervades militant rhetoric. A message posted on the al-Jihad internet discussion group following the uncovering of the Abu Ghraib abuses in 2004 observes: "history does indeed repeat itself. ... Several centuries ago, Muslim lands were overrun by the crusaders who did not waste anytime to kill men, rape women, steal money, and destroy properties".

While detailed references are rare, vague references to the similarity between past and contemporary Christian invasions or crusades are common, as in this excerpt from a Hizb-ut-Tahrir [10] communiqué: "Indeed the reality of the war waged by America, the head of *kufr* (unbelievers), and Britain and their allies from the *kafir* states on Afghanistan, is a crusade". The captured senior al-Qaida militant Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, at his appearance before a United States military tribunal in March 2007, testified [11] that in waging war in response to persecution "we derive from religious learning ... that we and George Washington are doing the same thing".

The birth of al-Qaida

The combination of precedent, piety, perseverance, and persecution in Islamist militant rhetoric is a potent one, but the call to violence that it entails must - and can - be countered. At its core, the al-Qaida doctrine of offensive *jihad* against both governments in Muslim-majority countries and against western states is vulnerable to rational counter-argument.

Indeed, it is important to recognise that this doctrine only emerged from bitter ideological and personal dispute among leading Islamist figures, and that its legitimacy has long been contested within as well as beyond the movement. It was the crucible of contemporary *jihadism*, the Afghan *mujahideen*'s anti-Soviet struggle of the 1980s, that gave birth to al-Qaida; but the establishment of the organisation was the climax of one story as well as the start of another [12].

The earlier story was the rivalrous struggle between some of the Afghan *jihad*'s iconic figures - Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri on one side, and the aforementioned Abdullah Azzam on the other - over the meaning and direction of their campaign.

September 2001)

Murat Belge, "Inside the fundamentalist mind" [6] (4 October 2001)

Faisal Devji, "Osama bin Laden's message to the world" [6] (21 December 2005)

James Howarth, "Al-Qaida, globalisation and Islam" [6]" (20 January 2006)

Debora MacKenzie, "A prescription for terror" [6]" (30 July 2007)

Abdullah Azzam - a Palestinian legal scholar, whose assassination in 1989 has never been conclusively explained - was an immensely important leader who, more than any other individual, convinced Muslims around the world (including Osama bin Laden himself) [12] to join the *jihad* against the Soviets. Azzam believed that *jihad* should only be fought in the defence [13] of "land which was in the hands of Muslims but has been occupied by the disbelievers" - a category into which Afghanistan itself fitted perfectly.

In the course of the 1980s, as the loose alliances between the various *jihadi* factions became increasingly acute, a more ambitious project began to take shape. Ayman al-Zawahiri was its key architect: the radical Egyptian promoted a doctrine of offensive *jihad* which targeted what he declared "apostate" regimes of the Muslim world, and would ultimately extend to the "far" (or "distant") enemy [14] in the west. In this al-Zawahiri was in direct opposition to bin Laden's former mentor, Azzam - and he eventually won the Saudi's endorsement.

The argument about the legitimacy of offensive *jihad* [14] lies at the heart of al-Qaida's origins. One participant in an internet discussion forum in late 2006 claimed to have fought in Afghanistan and been a personal friend of Abdullah Azzam; "(there) is no way that a real *mujahid* ...like Abdullah Azzam ... would lower himself to the methods that bin Laden used", he wrote.

This significant theological-political dispute is only one example of how the most militant and intransigent interpretations of the Islamist message have only emerged after severe internal struggle [14]. Their victory is not immutable.

The argument of ideas

The promotion of religious discussion among Islamic scholars and the improvement of the quality of Islamic knowledge among young Muslims in diaspora communities is a vital tool in neutralising the appeal of militant rhetoric. Three aspects of this are particularly important.

The first is the judgment of authoritative Islamic scholars. This was illustrated in the mid-1990s by the outcome of Osama bin Laden's efforts to convince the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz bin Baz [15], of the virtues of his cause. The two men's theological disagreements erupted into a furious public argument which culminated in bin Baz's denunciation of bin Laden as a "Khariji" - an excommunication of one who opposes legitimate rulers, just as the late 7th-century Khawarij sect had revolted against the "right guided" caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib [16]. This denunciation still reverberates on Islamic chatrooms and web forums.

The second aspect is the improvement of the Islamic education of Muslim young people living in diasporas in Europe who might otherwise find themselves both divorced from their culture of origin and detached from the European cultures into which they have been born. Many of them have little or no religious training, and are ill-equipped to discuss points of doctrine with extremists who have mastered the art of indoctrination and (where necessary) seduction.

In the Netherlands, the militant recruiter Nouredine el-Fathni [17] provided a combination of remedial religious instruction (based on negligible knowledge of the Qur'an) and viewings of decapitation videos to prospective female supporters. In Britain, the cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri [18] similarly compensated for scant theology with persuasive rhetorical skills to become one of the most successful channels of influence of Islamist ideas. A firm basis of learning and awareness about Islamic ethics is required to distinguish real scholars and teachers from the ideas promoted by such figures.

The third important aspect in addressing the appeal of militancy is the internet itself. This is a vital field for the exploration of ideas, one where the exhortation to violence can be met countered on clear historical and religious grounds. The impact of web 2.0 technologies is daily proving that the net is now a venue where discussion and dialogue are key, and where no viewpoint goes unchallenged. Thus, net users committed to democratic ideas and the peaceful advocacy of political and religious causes - Muslim and non-Muslim alike - have an opportunity as well as an obligation to engage with the rhetoric of Islamist militancy on web forums, chatrooms, and in other platforms of the expanding new-media world. This effort will be greatly assisted by a more sophisticated understanding of the themes and vulnerabilities of the militant Islamist call to violence.

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