

The ideology of al-Qaeda

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Hellmich, C. (2020) The ideology of al-Qaeda. In: Akbarzadeh, S. (ed.) Routledge Handbook of Political Islam. 2nd Edition. Routledge. ISBN 9781138353893 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86237/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Routledge

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading
Reading's research outputs online

The ideology of al-Qaeda

Since the attacks of 9/11, few issues have been more widely debated than the ideology of al-Qaeda – and numerous interpretations have surfaced. These include suggestions that the terrorists' actions are simply irrational; that the religious rhetoric is merely a veil for political ambition, or that the explanation lies in different theories of Islamic extremism: ‘Al-Qaeda not driven by ideology’ was the initial conclusion reached by a Pentagon intelligence team, while according to Rohan Gunaratna, ‘aiming to galvanize the spirit of its supporters, al-Qaeda corrupts, misrepresents or misinterprets the Koranic text’.ⁱ For Stephen Schwartz, ‘Osama bin Ladin and his followers belong to a puritanical variant of Islam known as Wahhabism, an extreme and intolerant Islamo-Fascist sect that became the official cult of Saudi Arabia’.ⁱⁱ Following these initial suggestions, a consensus emerged that al-Qaeda is the vanguard of what Marc Sageman refers to as the ‘global Salafi jihad, a worldwide religious revivalist movement with the goal of re-establishing past Muslim glory in a great Islamist state’.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, the notion of the global Salafi jihad has become a shorthand descriptor for al-Qaeda and its ideology in the media, government reports and a steadily growing body of academic writing.

However, the notion of the Salafi jihad as a distinct school of thought has been widely criticised as a superficial label: Salafi-jihadism, and Wahhabism, from which it allegedly seeks its inspiration, are concepts that are subject to much controversy in Middle East and Islamic studies and are by no means straightforward, monolithic schools of thought drawing on an ancient tradition that would readily explain the rationale of a contemporary movement.^{iv} The Salafi jihad is a concept founded on oversimplifications and misconceptions of the history of Islamic thought that lack an empirical basis, yet have nonetheless acquired political momentum and legitimacy in the contemporary discourse. But in contrast to popular perceptions of al-Qaeda as a group of radical Islamists on the fringes, if not entirely outside of the fold of Islam, much of bin Ladin’s rationale, albeit not his violent means, had broad appeal and resonated widely with Muslims around the world.^v Indeed the designation of al-Qaeda as the outworking of the

global Salafi jihad demonstrates many of the analytical shortcomings identified by Gunning and Jackson's critique of the popular concept of religious terrorism.^{vi} In line with their conclusion, this chapter argues that the ideology espoused by bin Ladin and subsequent leaders of al-Qaeda needs to be understood first and foremost as the manifestation of ideas and practices springing from the Islamic faith of a contemporary community of Muslims rather than a set of traditional beliefs or doctrines readily identifiable in ancient religious texts.

Listening to Osama bin Ladin

A meaningful inquiry into both the ideological basis for and the appeal of al-Qaeda's global jihad therefore begins with an examination of the rationale presented by Osama bin Ladin.

We declared jihad against the US government because the US government is unjust, criminal and tyrannical. It has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous and criminal whether directly or through its support of the Israeli occupation of the Land of the Prophet's Night Journey (Palestine). And we believe that the US is directly responsible for those who were killed in Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq. The mention of the US reminds us before everything else of those innocent children who were dismembered, their heads and arms cut off in recent explosions. (...) This US government abandoned even humanitarian feelings by these hideous crimes. It transgressed all bounds and behaved in a way not witnessed before by any power or imperialist power in the world. They should have been sensitive to the fact that the qibla of the Muslims (Saudi Arabia) raises the emotion of the entire Muslim world. Due to its subordination to the Jews, the arrogance and haughtiness of the US regime has reached such an extent that they occupied the qibla of the Muslims (Arabia) who are more than a billion in the world today.^{vii}

Although bin Ladin's reasoning evolved over time to take account of socio-political developments, the central theme evoked throughout his statements – from open letters and video messages to interviews and training manuals issued from the late 1980s until his death in 2011 – is the suffering and humiliation of the *umma*, the global community of all Muslims, at the hands of the unbelievers, i.e. the US and its allies. At the core of his messages is a pan-Islamic worldview, according to which God's favoured community faces an existential threat from the modern archenemies of Islam: the United States and Israel, also referred to as the Zionist-Crusader alliance. The primary means of communicating this message is the enumeration of Muslim anguish by references to powerfully symbolic situations such as in Palestine, Iraq, Chechnya, Kashmir and, above all, Saudi Arabia, where American military forces occupy and control the holy places of Islam. Thus the ultimate reason for the miserable and indeed intolerable state of the *umma*, evinced in both the physical suffering of Muslims and the widespread decline of moral and religious standards and modes of conduct within the Islamic community, is found in the dual reality of US military occupation and US cultural domination. In the words of bin Ladin:

The Arabian Peninsula has never – since God made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas – been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts. For over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam, the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors (...).

The world is on fire. Endless suffering, increasing corruption, horrendous abuse. Just look at Iraq. Look at Palestine. Look at Kashmir. Atrocities are committed against our brothers and sisters. Yet they are part of our community, and they deserve our sympathy and our support.^{viii}

The only way to defend the *umma* against this perceived aggression is through military (in effect, paramilitary) confrontation with America, which bin Ladin used to

present in highly emotive terms as the rightful jihad of the present time against the principal enemy of God's favoured community, and even of Islam itself. The ultimate goal of this jihad is to reclaim the *umma* from the United States' painful hold. The by-now infamous Fatwa of 1998 made it unambiguously clear as to how this goal was to be achieved:

To kill the Americans and their allies – civilian and military – is an individual duty incumbent upon every Muslim in all countries, in order to liberate al-Aqsa mosque and the Holy Mosque from their grip, so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken and unable to threaten any Muslim.^{ix}

It is understandable in the light of these statements that many analysts focused on the call for violence, even if a glance at the history of Islam reveals many radical groups that separated from the established schools of thought and became famous for their use of violence against those who did not agree with their beliefs and practices. However, the same groups failed to survive for long due to their inability to attract and retain adequate support.^x In contrast to such factions whose manifestos were either so radical or so exclusive that they naturally alienated the vast majority of those they claimed to represent, bin Ladin's vision for liberating the *umma* achieved something that the campaigns of previous radical groupings did not: it managed to strike a chord in the hearts of ordinary Muslim citizens. The appeal of bin Ladin's message did not lie in the fact that it was radical but persuasive, because it spoke to something that was already felt by his listeners. Furthermore, rather than perceiving bin Ladin as too extreme to be taken seriously or too radical to be worth following, many Muslims around the world saw him as a sincere believer. In the words of a young Pakistani interviewed on Al-Jazeera, 'bin Ladin is not a terrorist. That is American rhetoric. He is a good Muslim fighting for Islam. I named my son Osama—I want him to become a believer just like him.' Does that mean that millions of ordinary Muslims condoned the use of violence against civilians as the righteous jihad of our age, or is there something else to bin Ladin's message that would explain its popularity?

As can be seen from his statements, bin Ladin stood by the acts of violence that were carried out in the name of the global jihad. Yet he was at pains to point out that his was a reactive kind of violence – an act of retaliation against what he perceived as the much greater form of aggression exercised by the West against the Muslim world over a far longer period of time. With the force of history on his side, it is difficult to deny, in principle, the legitimacy of his argument when bin Ladin recounts the impact of colonialism, from the first French invasion of Egypt to the artificial creation of state-boundaries that redrew the map of the Middle East, and decries the betrayal of the Arabs, the West’s unconditional support for Israel and American control of the entire region. This history of the unjust suffering of the *umma*, coupled with the ultimate goal of reclaiming the same from the unholy oppressors and curing Islam of its stagnation, amount to the core tenets of bin Ladin’s rationale. Thus bin Ladin was able to tap into a growing sense of Muslim solidarity that has become a prominent feature of the modern, globalised world.^{xi} Indeed, what set bin Ladin apart was his idealism, along with his truly transnational approach that was not bound to any particular nationalist project but united the entire spectrum of Muslim grievances as a single cause. And although not even the most legitimate grievances can justify the killing of civilians – if anything, the brutality of his conduct served only to undermine the morality of bin Ladin’s call – it was the universality of his appeal to Muslims’ sense of injustice, further stoked by the indifference of the West to the atrocities it has committed, that helps explain why he was, and to some extent continues to be admired by ordinary Muslims, however much they also oppose the murder of innocents. He effectively utilized Muslims’ sense of being united in their suffering as a launching pad for violent action.

The question which follows is whether support for bin Ladin was based purely on agreement with his political rationale. In other words, does his position as the most radical anti-imperialist of the 21st century explain his appeal? Clearly, this view is not without merit. According to sociologist Michael Mann, ‘Despite the religious rhetoric and bloody means, bin Ladin is a rational man. There is a simple reason why he attacked the US: American imperialism. As long as America seeks to control the Middle East, he and people like him will be its enemy.’^{xii} Indeed, in an interview with the American

network ABC, bin Ladin effectively engaged with the idea of terrorism in a distinctly secular manner:

Terrorism can be commendable and it can be reprehensible. Terrifying an innocent person and terrorizing him is objectionable and unjust, also unjustly terrorizing people is not right. Whereas, terrorizing oppressors and criminals and thieves and robbers is necessary for the safety of people and for the protection of their property. There is no doubt in this. Every state and every civilization and culture has to resort to terrorism under certain circumstances for the purpose of abolishing tyranny and corruption. Every country in the world has its own security system and its own security forces, its own police and its own army. They are all designed to terrorize whoever even contemplates to attack that country or its citizens. The terrorism we practice is of the commendable kind for it is directed at the tyrants and the aggressors and the enemies of Allah, the tyrants, the traitors who commit acts of treason against their own countries and their own faith and their own prophet and their own nation. Terrorizing those and punishing them are necessary measures to straighten things and to make them right.^{xiii}

Here bin Ladin called into question the meaning of ‘terrorism’ in the broader context of the question of who has the right to use violence in the international system, an argument that is likely to appeal to many in its own right. To see bin Ladin’s cause as a matter of political philosophy, however, separated from religious concerns, is to see only one side of the story. As Akbarzadeh clearly showed in the Introduction, all Islamists see themselves as true believers. An approach to bin Ladin’s messages that focuses exclusively on the political leaves no room for the inherently religious dimension. What this position of simple duality, itself a reflection of an inherently secular perspective, fails to acknowledge is the intricate relationship between religion and politics in the history of Islam, as well as the intensifying controversy surrounding questions of the interpretation of Islamic scripture and the fragmentation of religious authority to date.

The separation of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ and the ideal of Muslim unity

Most discussions of this issue – and this holds for both Western and, to a significant extent, Muslim scholarship – assume that Islam makes no distinction between religious and political matters. This is based on the assumption that all aspects of the lives of Muslims should be conducted according to the will of Allah, and thus there is no sense of matters of state lying without the purview of religion. Indeed, this widely held view of the inseparability of religious and political spheres finds support in over 40 references in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet, at once a spiritual leader and the head of a political community.^{xiv} Closer examination shows that this is an idealized version of Islam, denoting what should be rather than providing an accurate description of what it is or indeed ever was. In practice, as several authors have illustrated, the two spheres became separated soon after the death of the Prophet. The union of politics and religion only existed during the lifetime of the Prophet while he was able to provide direct guidance for the conduct of daily life. With his death, the community of Muslims descended into a crisis of both political and religious leadership, and the complete union of religious and political spheres would never exist again.

Notwithstanding the historically complex relationship of the two spheres, the fundamental principle that all Muslims should live by the will of Allah and that, by way of necessity, the *umma* should be governed by Islamic principles as prescribed by the Qur'an and the sunna of the Prophet has always been seen as both legitimate and important. Thus the ideal stipulates that there is no contradiction between religion and politics, despite the fact that their union has never been fully realised in practice. In fact, the Muslim world has not been insulated from global socio-political trends and has therefore moved further away from the ideal of Islamic unity and become more and more fragmented over time. In the face of this trend towards increasing secularism and division, the goal of contemporary Islamists is the fulfilment of what is perceived to be the most authentic and desirable state of existence: a return to the golden age of Islam, expressed in political terms as the recreation of the caliphate, in which there will be the

least possible divergence between the two spheres.^{xv} While a detailed examination of the relationship between religion and politics in the history of Islam is beyond the constraints of this chapter, in order to appreciate both the rationale and the appeal of bin Ladin's message it is crucial to acknowledge that he advanced a concept of Islam that not only saw no contradiction between religious belief and political action, but actually considers political action as a necessary outworking of belief. For Islamists, and this holds for religious fundamentalist across the faiths, political participation in the broadest possible sense is seen as advancing the will of God on earth and thus considered an act of faith.

While it may be easy to concede that bin Ladin himself saw his mission as first and foremost Islamic, given that religious fundamentalists of any faith regard themselves as true believers, the question as to why others should regard it in the same way remains more problematic. By curtailing any meaningful discussion from the outset, the post-9/11 political climate that divided the world into the forces of good and evil – ‘If you are not with us, you are with them!’ – has allowed for only one legitimate answer to the question of whether bin Ladin represented Islam: a definite ‘no’. Yet reality does not fit this starkly defined dichotomy. In fact, the only definite statement one can make about the term ‘Islam’ is that it means different things to different people. While it has been argued that Muslims agree to the profession, ‘There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet’ as an article of faith that is incapable of sustaining differing interpretations (and even this has to be taken with a degree of caution) the meaning of all other principles and beliefs is a different matter altogether. The obvious, and indeed frequently encountered response would be to ‘look at the Qur'an,’ but, like all documents, the meaning of the message is not immune to interpretation. And while scriptural interpretation is problematic in all religions, it is especially difficult in the case of Islam.^{xvi}

The first observation to be made in this regard is that the Qur'an itself, (despite the fact that generations of Muslim jurists have argued that no further legislation is possible in the face of the definitive guidance the Qur'an provides) encourages some degree of questioning by planting doubts as to the immutability of the revelation. It specifically states that certain verses are obscure and that only God knows what they

really mean (Qur'an 3:7). Moreover, the idea of the immutability of the revelation is challenged when it confirms that the message could change with divine whim: 'If We willed, We could take away that which we have revealed to you,' (Qur'an 17:86) – and the challenge becomes even more apparent when it is considered that there were, in fact, systematic revisions to the Qur'an, as shown in verses 2:106, 13:37, 16:101 and 22:52. Furthermore, there is near-universal agreement among Muslims that, in interpreting the Qur'an, custom based on the example of the Prophet (*sunna*) both clarifies and supplements it. However, the very pragmatism that defines the *sunna* means that justifications of widely varying and even mutually exclusive positions occur in practice. Although this variability and inconsistency have attracted criticism, the great majority of Muslims accept the authority of the *sunna* as a whole and see nothing wrong with the Prophet having changed his positions and principles with the circumstances. Such precedents support the general idea in Islamic jurisprudence that whatever is *daruri* (necessary) and *maslaha* (in the public interest) can be deemed to be Islamic. At risk of oversimplification, the question of whether something is 'Islamic' may be said to depend on whether it is in the interest of the *umma*, and it is thus clear that this in turn may become subject to the interests and prejudices of the individual or group in charge of making political decisions.

Notwithstanding the flexibility which is reflected in the practice of the Prophet and the interpretation of the Qur'an, the question remains as to how and by whom the issue of what is 'necessary' and 'in the public interest' is to be decided. Indeed, the problem of who decides is further complicated by the fact that 'although the individual's membership in the community of believers is emphasised, the sense of a definite spiritual authority over him is missing.'^{xvii} Islamic legal scholarship builds on this idea with the concept of *ibaha*, whereby the individual's freedom of action outside the area of specific divine commands is acknowledged. Therefore, as long as the individual believes that there is only one God and that Muhammad is His Prophet and follows explicit scriptural injunctions, that individual ultimately becomes the arbiter of his own faith. Although the '*ulama* (Islamic legal scholars) may be prepared to exercise their independent judgement (*ijtihad*) to determine what the Word means – all the time following the same principle of

there being no intermediaries between God and man – no ecclesiastical authority exists to settle disputes between them.

It is thus hardly surprising that the quest for the true way of Islam, from the appropriate conduct of daily life to the establishment of formal modes of governance, was a task that led to turmoil after the death of the Prophet. Islamic history testifies to the many differences that have gone unresolved: not only has there been the division between Sunni and Shi'i 'ulama, but there have been several divisions within each group. The controversy over who speaks authoritatively for Islam, far from ever being resolved, only intensified with the processes of modernization and the advent of mass education. Of the many implications of these global trends, from the development of modern political societies to the creation of new identities, opportunities and inequalities, two interrelated issues are of particular importance for the assessment of bin Ladin's rationale. One is the ongoing fragmentation of religious authority. With authoritative sources once confined to the educated few now readily available to the literate masses, the meaning of sacred scripture no longer needs to be interpreted by the 'ulama but is now available for interpretation by each individual.^{xviii} These new 'ulama make up for what they lack in terms of formal religious training with the eagerness that marks their restless attempts to voice their opinion – in print, on Arabic news channels, or on YouTube – speaking of general principles and modern concerns without making specific reference to the principles of the established Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i or Hanbali schools of Sunni law (*madhhabs*) and citing few of the classical works of jurisprudence. The consequence of this development is what Hallaq has described as the 'demise of the *shari'a*'.^{xix} As individual Muslims increasingly interpret Islam for themselves, a broad spectrum of interpretations emerges that provide alternative opinions to those of the traditional religious establishments, making it more and more difficult to say with reassuring finality what is Islamic and what is not. This would appear to constitute both the biggest dilemma and the greatest challenge for Islam in the modern, globalized world.

Related to this combination of a gradual decline of traditional structures, the development of new identities as a consequence of globalization and the increasing

fragmentation of religious authority is a phenomenon that Eickelman and Piscatori have termed the ‘objectification of Muslim consciousness’, a process by which basic questions such as the actual meaning of Islam and how it should affect one’s conduct come to occupy the minds of believers.^{xx} ‘What does it mean to be Muslim in a world that bears no resemblance at all to the days of the Prophet?’ The search for the true Islam in the modern world is destined to yield an abundance of different answers across the spectrum of existing interpretations that evade easy classification. Given that Islam has no equivalent of the papacy, final judgment lies with the conscience of individual believers.

If the answering the question about the ‘proper’ meaning of Islam was difficult during the early 1990s, it has become even more problematic by 2019. Indeed, it is worth considering the consequences of new trends and developments that are transforming the nature of social reality such as the unprecedented access to online information and instantaneous, continuing participation in arguably trivial activities (i.e. ‘the Facebook generation’) that have led some observers to declare the area of Post-postmodernism. Taking a rather unflattering view, Kirby describes the resulting intellectual consequences of the hyper-engagement in the virtual world as ignorance, fanaticism and anxiety with the potential of producing trance-like states.^{xxi} Without wanting to overstate the issue, these observations lead to a couple of important, if perhaps uncomfortable conclusions: First, in practice, if not in theology, there are as many Islams as there are Muslims. And secondly, many of these new interpretations are of increasingly limited intellectual quality.

The competition for sacred authority

The increasing number of (un)scholarly opinions on what Islam has to say about the present state of world affairs offers those in search of spiritual guidance an unprecedented level of choice. This in turn means that those wishing to share and establish their views as the true meaning of Islam are in direct competition for sacred authority by which to win hearts and minds. Each attempts to persuade his audience of

the righteousness of his agenda by means of religious symbolism, whereby all Muslims should be able to identify that his interpretation amounts to nothing less than the true will of Allah. Bin Ladin might not have been a terribly original thinker nor a formally trained religious scholar, but he did have a gift of rhetorical brilliance that turned his messages into what Lewis described as ‘a magnificent piece of eloquent, at times even poetic Arabic prose.^{xxii} This image of his piety was reinforced by, for example, his wearing the traditional clothing of a devout Muslim and the air of heroism and personal sacrifice conferred by stories of the rich businessman who has forsaken the pleasures of a privileged life for the sake of his faith. In today’s fast-paced environment where superficial impressions all too often replace nuanced, in-depth assessment, he had all the qualities of an inspirational religious leader: he looked like a true believer; he sounded like a true believer – he was a true believer.

This is not just superficially effective, however. Bin Ladin’s messages reached deeply into the collective consciousness of Muslims around the globe. For example, ‘Saudi Arabia’ and ‘Palestine’, central and repeating themes in his many statements, are charged with emotion and symbolism in the Muslim political imagination. Home to the holiest cities in Islam, they form the setting in which the Prophet lived his life and from which Islam originated. As Piscatori explains, ‘both Arabian and Palestinian lands are thus special preserves, and, because of this, they take on a wider importance, particularly in the competition for legitimacy that characterizes politics in the Middle East.’^{xxiii}

Thus, when bin Ladin called for the liberation of Al-Aqsa mosque and the Holy Mosque, he was destined to strike sentimental chords with his Muslim audience. It would, however, be misleading to accuse him of exploiting these emotionally charged symbols for other purposes. Unlike Saddam Hussein, whose linkage of the Palestinian cause to his own withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991 was, above all, a strategically smart move to attract otherwise unlikely public support across the Arab world, bin Ladin considered the liberation of the holy lands of Islam to be a significant milestone towards the ultimate goal of reclaiming the *umma* and restoring the glory of Islam.

Reclaiming the *Umma*: the origins of Pan-Islamic sentiment

By addressing contemporary issues of grave concern to the Muslim world, formalizing the return to the traditions of the golden age as a straightforward solution, and authoritatively addressing the entirety of the Muslim community, bin Ladin managed to both powerfully indict the waywardness of Muslim societies and to set out a simple blueprint for action. The likelihood of his succeeding in achieving his ultimate goal of restoring the unity of Islam (*tawhid al umma*) by means of a personalized jihad remains questionable at best, bin Ladin nonetheless succeeded in polemicizing modern-day Islam. By calling so forcefully for a return to fundamental Islamic traditions and values, and seeking to interpret them in such a way that they can be applied effectively to the present-day situation, bin Ladin set a benchmark by which the status quo can be measured and criticized, and in so doing, not only provides religious guidance for the faithful but also brings religious – and, by his standards, righteous – judgment upon a world that currently bears no resemblance to his vision of the golden days of the caliphate. By this light, a meaningful way to identify the ideological foundation of al-Qaeda would be to place it in the context of those issues that have contributed to the emergence of political Pan-Islam and Muslim solidarity.

Pan-Islam developed as a response to two key challenges in the late nineteenth century: imperialism and the decentralization of the Ottoman Empire. While different proponents like Sultan Abdulhamid (1842-1918), polemicists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), and Western apologists such as Wilfred Blunt (1840-1922) all contributed to make a vague idea of Islamic unity a symbol of the modern Islamic condition, it was the Turkish Grand National Assembly that challenged believers and nonbelievers alike when it abolished the caliphate in 1924. Kemalists predicted the inevitable secularization of Muslim societies; devout believers thought it would weaken Muslims in their interaction with the West; colonial offices feared that it would stimulate a broad uprising of the worldwide Muslim community. Although none of these have actually occurred, the lingering appeal of the notion of Muslim solidarity began to

manifest itself and eventually assumed its place both in the formation of modern Muslim states and in attempts of challenging and resisting state authority.^{xxiv}

Inevitably, a number of different perspectives emerged on the continued significance of the caliphate as a necessary condition or expression of Muslim unity, ranging from those wishing to re-establish a purified religious-political institution to those who thought the fusion of religious and political authority was counterproductive, and to accommodationists who saw the creation of an international organization among sovereign ‘Muslim states’ as being the best way of adapting to post-war conditions. In the face of such diversity, and with no prominent political leadership to develop the Pan-Islamic sentiment into a concrete reality, ‘Pan-Islam seemed at its nadir.’^{xxv} ‘Ironically’, as Landau observed, ‘among the few who thought that Pan-Islam represented a potent force were foreign officials and military officers whose duty it was to forestall a Pan-Islamic threat.’^{xxvi} However, although little agreement was reached by the unionists as to how the *umma* was to be constructed, the perception of the spiritual unity of the *umma* remained and firmly established itself as an unquestioned given, readily accepted in line with Qur’anic references to *umma wahida* (one community; e.g. 5:48/53; 16:93/95). In spiritual terms, the idea (and the ideal) of ‘unity’ (*ittihad-i Islam, al-wahda al-islamiyya*) was cast as essential to Islam, now posited as integral and largely divorced from the canonical articulation of concepts such as *khilafa* (the caliphate), *dar al-islam* (the juridical realm of Muslims), and *dhimma* (non-Muslim subjects). Indeed, as Piscatori reminds us, scholarly discussions were remarkably thin on these topics.^{xxvii}

In the second half of the twentieth century, the caliphate’s political mission gradually disappeared; however, the idea of Islam’s political mission did not. In the eyes of many, the *umma* required some form of political expression. Yet whatever broad consensus was created, it had to compete with the emergence of single-state nationalism (*wataniyya*) in Muslim societies, or at least the consolidation of dynastic rules and regimes. In the context of these structural developments, the political goal of a unitary Islamic state resembling the caliphate was soon to be replaced by the goal of unity in Islamic state politics.^{xxviii} And although Islam has always had a global dimension, it is

here that the concept of Islamic, or maybe more appropriately, Muslim solidarity, emerged: even if Muslims were not to be united under a single ruler, concern and indeed some form of responsibility for the wellbeing of all members of the faith, regardless of citizenship, became an article of the modern Islamic condition. Thus, when bin Ladin decried the global suffering of Muslims, he spoke to the core of Muslim consciousness.

In the sphere of state politics, the new sense of Islamic solidarity was expressed in the development of state-based organizations such as the Muslim World Congress, the Muslim World League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Yet despite outwardly signalling their support for the ideal of Muslim solidarity, closer examination shows that national elites invoked pan-Islam for everything other than pan-Islamic purposes, keeping one eye on their domestic publics and the other on rival states as they sought to serve as the new patrons of Islam in order to consolidate their individual claims to national power and global leadership. Notably, Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas, despite vehemently criticizing their respective national leaders for their ‘un-Islamic ways’, largely did the same, seeking not so much to restore the caliphate as to establish themselves in power within the by now firmly-established political form of the nation state.^{xxix}

Yet, away from the visible theatre of state politics, yet as a consequence of the developments there, pan-Islamist sentiments continued to spread and developed a more distinct transnational character. In part, this was brought about by the repression and exile of some of the most vocal and dedicated pan-Islamists such as Muslim Brotherhood activists in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, and their subsequent migration to other countries. ‘With limited prospects for domestic political influence and an opportunity to work internationally, these activists devoted themselves to transnational activism and vigorous promotion of populist pan-Islamism.’^{xxx} Particularly noteworthy is the case of Abdullah Azzam, a disciple of Sayyid Qutb, who formulated much of the doctrine of the jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s and also served as mentor to bin Ladin. Yet, the novelty of his call to jihad was his conceptualization of the rationale for what may be described as privatized warfare: To him, coming to the defence of a Muslim

country against invasion by non-Muslim forces was a clear case of personal obligation (*fard 'ayn*), which presented a remarkable shift from orthodox Islamic views on jihad. Mainstream Islamic scholars maintained that while it was possible for jihad to be declared in cases of aggression against Muslim countries by non-Muslim powers, they stressed that the responsibility for fighting (the individual duty) rested with the local population. For outsiders, fighting was a collective duty (*fard kifaya*) that had to be met by the community as a whole and did not present a personal obligation.^{xxxii} Although Azzam was an aggressive advocate of jihad, demanding the return of formerly Muslim lands, it is important to note that he refrained from demanding the overthrow of secular Muslim governments on the grounds of apostasy and strongly rejected internecine Muslim conflict. His arguably moderate views would later clash with the ambitions of Ayman al-Zawahiri and other members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, who aimed to overthrow the Egyptian government and in whose minds condemnation of the apostasy of secular Muslim states was inseparable from true Islamic faith.^{xxxiii} However dramatic a departure Azzam's rationale on jihad was from mainstream views, it was still at a distance from bin Ladin's call for the global jihad: While Azzam advocated conventional military tactics in confined locations of war, bin Ladin's infamous 1998 Fatwa issued in the name of the World Islamic Front sanctioned all means in all places:

To kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.^{xxxiv}

Recognizing these complex developments at both state and sub-state levels, Landau contemplated a renewed surge of Pan-Islamist expression. Writing in late 1989, he concluded, 'as large parts of the world are moving towards more concrete forms of association, Pan-Islamists too may well turn a 120-year-old dream from what seemed to have become a utopia into a political reality.'^{xxxv} Taking the analysis into the new millennium, Piscatori observed:

As the pan-Islamic dimension appeared to recede, some ‘radicals’, if you will, have sought to fill the void. They seek, in their view, to reclaim the *umma* from the nation-state and dynastic regimes. Examples are obvious: Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Liberation Party), the Muhajirun (an offshoot of the Hizb al-Tahrir in Britain), Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri (leaders of al-Qa‘ida). In effect, pan-Islam went underground, re-emerged spectacularly, and, in one virulent form, attacks the status quo in the name of a ‘tradition’ that has only relatively recently appeared.^{xxxv}

Al-Qaeda and the global jihad might not have been exactly what Landau envisioned when he contemplated the determination of Pan-Islamists to fulfil their utopian dream. Yet the vision of resurrecting the caliphate, however vague it may be, that has manifested itself in a perpetual threat of terrorist violence seems to have become a permanent feature of life in the 21st century.

Towards Pan-Islamic unity or fragmentation and banality?

Despite bin Ladin’s grand global ambitions to unite the *umma*, the practical reality of al-Qaeda, as Lahoud aptly illustrated, is characterized by local agendas, internal rivalry and power-struggles, a trend that began to develop years before his death in May 2011.^{xxxvi} After 9/11 and the destruction of al-Qaeda’s headquarters in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda began to fracture into a global cadre of more-or-less independent groups which enabled it to continue to both elude and fight its enemies. This arguably unintended globalization of al-Qaeda brought with it also the fragmentation and indeed localization of bin Ladin’s mission. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), for example, despite having professed loyalty to Osama bin Ladin, seemed to be more concerned with the goal of overthrowing the Algerian government and the establishment of an Islamic state in its place than with the reestablishment of the caliphate and the unity of the global *umma*. A similar case is that of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Right from the start, AQI’s goals were

distinctly local in character: to force a withdrawal of US-led forces from Iraq; to topple the Iraqi interim government; to assassinate collaborators with the occupation; to marginalize the Shia population and defeat its militias, and subsequently to establish a pure Islamic state.^{xxxvii} What stands out is the confrontation with the Iraqi Shia, which quickly turned what started out as a campaign to liberate Iraq and establish an Islamic state within its borders into a bloody sectarian conflict massacring large numbers of Muslim civilians which, in spite of strong condemnation by bin Ladin and Zawahiri, significantly undermined bin Ladin's claim of a purely defensive jihad on behalf of *all* Muslims. This of course, as Anthony Celso's chapter develops in greater detail, is the origin of ISIS.

If al-Qaeda stood little chance of ever turning its global vision of the caliphate into reality, let alone maintaining a convincing commitment to the Pan-Islamic ideal of the *umma*, its prospects are even slimmer without the ideological inspiration and guidance of Osama bin Ladin. While the controversial killing of the sheikh temporarily re-energised the ranks of al-Qaeda, and through pledges of revenge ensured a heightened sense of alert amongst its Western audience, it was not enough to build up the sort of momentum and broad-based sympathy that they enjoyed, for example, at the height of the US-led occupation of Iraq. In terms of ideological continuity, Nasser al-Bahri, bin Ladin's former bodyguard, describes the new generation of al-Qaeda as the 'internet generation', 'young' and 'ill-educated', set on their very own missions of pursuing their individual agendas and oblivious to the guidance of the older generation. To the seasoned jihadi, 'One of the main problems the al-Qaeda movement has today is that young people join, for example, the Yemen branch but don't really follow the ideology of the central group ... In fact, they are totally ignorant about it.'^{xxxviii} 'This new generation, which claim to be members of al-Qaeda, have in fact absorbed nothing of his [bin Ladin's] deep thinking.'^{xxxix} The ongoing crisis of meaning of Islam in the modern world, characterised by both the fragmentation and pluralisation of religious knowledge and authority that made the development of al-Qaeda possible in the first place, is the same force that is now undermining it. In a twist on Hannah Arendt's words, the new generation of al-Qaeda might best be described as 'the evil of banality.'

-
- ⁱ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 14.
- ⁱⁱ Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam* (New York: Random House Inc, 2002), 1.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 1.
- ^{iv} Mona Azzam, “Al-Qaeda: the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of violence,” *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Briefing Article No. 1 (2003); Christina Hellmich, “Al-Qaeda—Terrorists, Hypocrites and Fundamentalists? The View from Within,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, no 1 (2005): 39–54; Roel Meijer, ed. *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2011).
- ^v The Pew Global Attitudes Survey 2005 revealed that a surprising number of Muslims had confidence in bin Ladin’s conduct in world affairs, regardless of the overall decline in support of the use of suicide bombing and other forms of terrorism and growing concern over the consequences of the war against terror. While in Morocco and Indonesia, public support for bin Ladin ranked at 26% and 37% respectively, marking an overall decline in support since 2003, this trend is not reflected in other countries. In Pakistan, for example, a narrow majority of 51% placed some measure of confidence in bin Ladin, a moderate increase from 45% in 2003. In Jordan, support for the al-Qaeda leader rose from 55% to 60% between 2003 - 2005, including 25% who say they have a lot of confidence in him.
- ^{vi} Jerome Gunning and Richard Jackson, “What's so ‘religious’ about ‘religious terrorism?’” *Critical Studies in Terrorism*, 4 no.3 (2011) 369–388.
- ^{vii} Bruce Lawrence, ed. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (Brooklyn/London: Verso, 2005) 46-47.
- ^{viii} Christina Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise* (London: Zed Books, 2011) 89.
- ^{ix} Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, 61.
- ^x Nelly Lahoud, *The Pitfalls of Jihad: Takfir and the Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2010).
- ^{xi} Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London: Routledge, 2003).
- ^{xii} Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003) 169.
- ^{xiii} Osama bin Ladin, Interview: Osama Bin Laden, May 1998, ABC (online). Available at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/interview.html#video>.
- ^{xiv} Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ^{xv} Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*.
- ^{xvi} James Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- ^{xvii} Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation States*, 4.
- ^{xviii} Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 37- 45.
- ^{xix} Wael Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- ^{xx} Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 37- 45.
- ^{xxi} Alan Kirby, “The death of Postmodernism and beyond”, *Philosophy Now*, no.58, November/December (2006).
- ^{xxii} Bernhard Lewis, “License to Kill,” *Foreign Affairs*, November – December (1998).
- ^{xxiii} Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation States*, 5.
- ^{xxiv} James Piscatori, “Imagining Pan-Islam” in *Islam and Political Violence*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh and Fethi Mansouri (London: Tauris 2007) 27-28.
- ^{xxv} Jakob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 217.
- ^{xxvi} Landau, *The Politics of Pan Islam*, 216.
- ^{xxvii} Piscatori, “Imagining Pan Islam,” in *Islam and Political Violence*, 29.
- ^{xxviii} Piscatori, “Imagining Pan Islam,” in *Islam and Political Violence*, 30.
- ^{xxix} Piscatori, “Imagining Pan Islam,” in *Islam and Political Violence*, 30.
- ^{xxx} Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad,” *International Security*, Winter 2010/11, 35, no. 3 (2006) 57.

^{xxxii} For an excellent exposition of the theory of jihad, see Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

^{xxxiii} Hellmich 2011.

^{xxxiv} Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, 61.

^{xxxv} Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam*, 311.

^{xxxvi} Piscatori “Imagining Pan Islam,” in *Islam and Political Violence*, 32-33.

^{xxxvii} Lahoud, *The Pitfalls of Jihad*.

^{xxxviii} Christina Hellmich, *Al-Qaeda*.

^{xxxix} Nasser al-Bahri, *Guarding Bin Laden* (London: Thin Man Press, 2013) 197.

^{xxxx} Al-Bahri, *Guarding Bin Laden*, 186.

Bibliography

Al-Bahri, Nasser. *Guarding Bin Laden*. London: Thin Man Press.

Azzam, Mona. “Al-Qaeda: the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of violence,” *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, Briefing Article No. 1, 2003.

Bonner, Michael. *Jihad in Islamic History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Eickelman, Dale and Piscatori, James. *Muslim politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1996.

Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside Al-Qaeda*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Gunning, Jerome and Jackson, Richard. “What's so ‘religious’ about ‘religious terrorism’?” *Critical Studies in Terrorism* 4 no.3 (2011): 369–388.

Hallaq, Wael. *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Heggammer, Thomas. “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad” *International Security*. Winter 2010/11, 35, no. 3, 2006: 53-94.

Hellmich, Christina. “Al-Qaeda—Terrorists, Hypocrites and Fundamentalists? The View from Within” *Third World Quarterly* 26 no.1, 2005: 39–54.

Hellmich, Christina. *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise*, London: Zed Books, 2011.

Kirby, Alan. “The death of Postmodernism and beyond”. *Philosophy Now*, no.58, November/December, 2006.

Landau, Jakob. *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Lahoud, Nelly. *The Pitfalls of Jihad: Takfir and the Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction*. London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2010.

-
- Lawrence, Bruce. ed. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden*. Brooklyn/London: Verso, 2005.
- Lewis, Bernhard. "License to Kill" *Foreign Affairs*, November – December, 1998.
- Mandaville, Peter. *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Mann, Michael. *Incoherent Empire*. London: Verso, 2003.
- Meijer, Roel. ed. *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*. London/New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press.
- Piscatori, James. *Islam in a World of Nation States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Piscatori, James. "Imagining Pan-Islam." In *Islam and Political Violence*, edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Fethi Mansouri, London: Tauris, 2007.
- Sageman, Marc. *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Schwartz, Stephen. *The Two Faces of Islam*. New York: Random House Inc, 2002.