Al-Qaeda: A Future in Question

Kristin Sanfilippo, Xavier University '13

The complexity of the al-Qaeda organization and its capabilities makes it the most prominent non-state actor in the relationship of the West with the Middle East. Al-Queda's impact on world politics over the last decade demonstrates the potential for non-state actors to alter the behavior of nation states and change the course of history (for good or bad). Aside from taking precautions for potential terrorist attacks, al-Queda's actions have forced U.S. policymakers to reassess the role that the United States will play in the Middle East and compelled western nations to take proactive steps to limit the influence of al-Qaeda on Middle Eastern politics.

Although recent events, such as Osama bin Laden's death and the Arab Spring, suggest that al-Qaeda's political power in the region is diminishing, it is critically important that U.S. policymakers continue working to understand al-Qaeda's complex motivations and beliefs. Understanding al-Queda will help the defense systems of United States and other western nations prevent future attacks and, at the same time, give us a better understanding of the globalized world in which we live. This paper seeks to explain the history and priorities of al-Qaeda, in order to analyze their strength as an actor in Middle Eastern politics.

Historical Context

Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter define terrorism as the use of violence against civilians by non-state actors to attain political goals (Kydd 50). While hijacking plans and suicide bomber strategies of al-Qaeda might seem crazy to the observer, the technique has proven effective in the past. Between 1980 and 2003, half of all suicide terrorist campaigns were closely followed by substantial concessions by the target governments (Kydd 49). As a non-state actor, it can be difficult for terrorist groups to make credible threats. Therefore, they are often forced to display just how far they will go to achieve their outcomes on a public level.

For outside parties, al-Qaeda's public statements are the best way to understand their ideology and political demands (Blanchard 1). On a January 30, 2005 audiotape, Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian terrorist leader who joined forces with bin Laden to form al-Qaeda, identified the "three foundations" of al-Qaeda's political ideology. Translated to English, the first is the "Quran-Based Authority to Govern" which states that al-Qaeda supports the creation of an Islamic state governed by sharia law. Next was "Liberation of the Homelands" – a call for Muslim lands to be free from outside oppressors. Without this, Zawahiri argued that the Middle East would never know free elections or reforms. Lastly, he called for the "Liberation of the Human Being," which provides people with the ability to choose and criticize their leaders so long as the people use their liberty to uphold sharia law (10-11).

Bin Laden gained individual political attention in the Middle East after having been an active participant in the war against the Soviets, and then after victory was claimed in 1989, he moved to Sudan. The United States, who recognized him as a potential threat since the early nineties, pressured Omar Bashir, the leader of Sudan, to expel bin Laden from the country. In hindsight, this might have been a mistake. Soon after relocating to Afghanistan, Bin Laden teamed with Mullah Mohammed Omar, a Taliban leader who was spearheading the campaign

---

* *Kristin Sanfilippo (class of 2013) is a Political Science and International Studies major from Saint Louis, Missouri.*

for control of the war-torn country.   As stated by a U.S. senior officer, "'we should have left him in Sudan…Bashir you could work with. Mullah Omar you couldn't' (Newsweek 31)." The United States knew Bin Laden was a threat, and now they lost the contact they had in helping understand his motives and tracking his moves. Bin Laden on the other hand, developed his terrorist network even further in Afghanistan by joining forces with Zawahiri. From this, al-Qaeda was born.

In the mid-1990s, bin Laden made his first serious attempts to gain support of other Islamic militant groups in the Middle East. However, due to his lack of central ideology, his attempts to build an "Islamic Army" failed. Bin Laden needed to unify terrorist groups with varying agendas; he needed a way to show them the advantage of associating with al-Qaeda. At first, he would to try and achieve this by supporting militant groups financially, but in 1996, there were only thirty members in the organization (Farrall 132). From there, bin Laden sought to further establish an ideology that could encompass all the groups now under al-Qaeda's command. Bin Laden and his followers needed a foundation to bolster al-Qaeda's legitimacy as it continued to gain support and global attention. All groups associated with al-Qaeda could unite over their common enemy: the United States.

From his position in Afghanistan, bin Laden issued a "declaration of war" against the West, more specifically, the United States. The following decade included many small-scale attacks, including the suicide bombings on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 and the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen aboard the USS Cole in 2000. On September 11 of 2001, al-Queda finally gained the worldwide attention they desired with a large-scale attack on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. Bin Laden organized these attacks in hopes of prompting an armed retaliation from the U.S., and it worked. Leaders of many militant groups agreed to join al-Qaeda's ranks after the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in October of 2001. Now, bin Laden had the central ideology his Muslim supporters could unite over— defensive jihad (Farrall 132).

Bin Laden referred to jihad to as a communally binding Islamic principle that calls for the "necessity of armed resistance in the face of perceived aggression (Blanchard 2)." Jihad literally means, "struggle in the path of God (Malik)." For Muslims, this can mean an internal or external struggle. It can mean defense of Islam against attackers, or a Muslim's struggle against evil within oneself. However, there is no greater authority in Islam that is dictating interpretations of Islamic teaching for the individual. The *universal pontifex* means that the individual has to make his or her own interpretation of the doctrine, and recognize that he or she may be wrong. Therefore, al-Qaeda's interpretation of jihad can be justified, even if not all Muslims agree it's correct.

With a unifying and defined al-Qaeda mission, separate groups under al-Qaeda's command would not have to give up local agendas, only assume al-Qaeda's broader and more global agendas as well. "The hybrid ideology…that emerged make little distinction between targeting local enemies and targeting global ones and have a one-size-fits-all solution— jihad…this helped assuage other groups' fears that merging with al Qaeda would mean a loss of autonomy to pursue their own goals (Farrall 132)." Al-Qaeda now presented a united front that could intimidate competition and attract others to their cause.

After declaring jihad on the United States, bin Laden released a public statement that characterized as a "new crusade led by America against Islamic nations" (Blanchard 3) and argued that there is a growing conflict between Islam and the West. Bin Laden said this clash would come down to a fight "between the Islamic world and the Americans and their allies (3)." Here, bin Laden expressed a worldview that echoed Samuel Huntington's theory of the "Clash of

Civilizations." Huntington argued that in a post-Cold War world, civilizations would be the main source of conflict (Huntington 24).[1]

Bin Laden called for the Islamic civilization to unite. In his addresses to the world, bin Laden urges the Muslim world to join together as "one seamless community, or umma" (Blanchard 3), in which Muslims were obligated to defend themselves and their beliefs, seeking retribution against the United States. Furthermore, bin Laden argued that Muslims should unite under a *caliph*, or chief Muslim leader, who would help them govern under Islamic law and principles.

Bin Laden's call for a *caliph* supports Huntington's claim that in our post-Cold War world it is no longer our ideologies that will cause conflict but the cultural differences between our civilizations. In some ways, our ideologies are so rooted in our civilizations that we neglect to recognize them as collaborative. It is possible to see this as an explanation to the United States' invasion of the Middle East. It is now our way of thinking versus theirs—and not specifically in a governmental sense, but a cultural sense. Instead of attacking to implement democracy, the United States will justify a war as a salvation for the people against injustices. "In the political realm, of course, these differences [in values] are most manifest in the efforts of the United States and other Western powers to induce other peoples to adopt Western ideas concerning democracy and human rights (Huntington 41)." It is the idea that as the world becomes smaller and more connected, our understandings towards other cultures will have to increase. Otherwise, conflict is inevitable. And while we might not go to war under the terms of "fighting culture", we will reach a point where that seems like what we are doing anyways.

Al-Qaeda's Future as a Political Power

In his 2007 article in *Foreign Affairs,* Philip Gordan wrote of the diminishing strength of the al-Qaeda organization. Gordon emphasized the unrealistic aims of bin Laden specifically, saying that he was overly optimistic after his role in bringing down the Soviet Union (57). Furthermore, Bin Laden's original goals of establishing an Islamist state have lost practicality, and eventually his supporters will have to find another organization or outlet for their beliefs. Terror as we know it now -- in the form of large-scale attacks and complex organizational structures -- will cease to exist.

However, when Gordan wrote of bin Laden, he could not have known that al Queda's top leader would be killed in 2011. Gordon also could not have known of the Arab Spring revolutions across the Middle East. While many of his points remain valid today, recent developments are crucial to our ability to predict the future of terrorism and the role of al-Qaeda. With the Arab Spring and death of Osama bin Laden, leaders now have the potential to form the Islamic state they have been seeking, except their most outspoken leader and rallying point, bin Laden, is no longer alive.

The various revolutions across the Middle East led to an overthrow of secular rulers that many worried would allow for Islamic extremists to step in and create a system of Islamic states, for which groups such as al-Qaeda have long sought for. However, the impact of the death of Osama bin Laden seems to be more powerful than some may have predicted. The jihadist movement no longer has a charismatic leader to organize around, and there is evidence to suggest that Muslims in the Middle East may not completely agree with al-Qaeda's ideas. Overthrown governments and lack of organized control could be the perfect avenue for al-Qaeda to start to establish the Islamic state across the Middle East that they are seeking, but this may not be the plan for protestors in the various countries. Specifically concerning the

---

[1] Civilizations are defined as the "highest cultural grouping of people and broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species." Civilization identity has and will become increasingly important, and the Western world will have to deal with this concept now, and certainly in the future.

conflict in Syria, Zawahiri released messages of support for the Syrian people against their corrupt leader Bassar al-Assad. Zawahiri then called the protestors, "the front for jihad and martyrdom" and claimed they were coinciding with some of al-Qaeda's aims. Yet, as quoted from the Syrian Foreign Office, "We have seen al-Qaeda struggle to show that its message of violent jihad is relevant to the Arab spring where people have found a different voice and a different way to bring about change they desire" (Ali). This suggests the Syrian people are not fighting for the type of regime al-Qaeda seeks, but instead seek to establish their own way of governing. While the people might not support the United States' involvement in the Middle East, it seems they will fight for what American citizens have. Aligning closely with the modernity vs. tradition perspective, the people of the Middle East will continue to face the challenges that comes with choosing traditional Islamic rule or fighting for greater freedoms, and in many cases, democracy. As al-Qaeda continues to push for a united Islamic state, Muslims at the forefront of the revolts do not seem to have the same intentions.

Furthermore, in wake of the Arab Spring, some would argue that al-Qaeda has lost credibility. For over a decade, al-Qaeda has promoted the use of violence and terrorism against the United States, using the U.S.' pro-Israel stance as a point for unification between Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians. However, some of recent uprisings in Arabs states show success in operations opposite of how al-Qaeda works:

> The recent narrative that the Arab people have been writing for themselves…that peaceful, non-violent demonstrations are the way to topple unpopular leaders and redeem the dignity of the Arab people. It is very much about dignity… al-Qaeda is now faced not only with a leadership crisis but a credibility crisis and a narrative crisis (Indyk).

Al-Qaeda is in a position of conflict in a region where they primarily gain their power. Though the problems that led to revolution were also many of the problems that led to al-Qaeda originally (lack of jobs, lack of education, etc), it seems that many in the Middle East seek an alternative to violence for the future. "Rather than advocating violence and pledging allegiance to a medieval code of sharia, leaders of the Arab Spring have called for democracy based on greater freedom, pluralism and opportunity (Coleman)." Most notably, young people are at the forefront of the revolution, and historically, bin Laden has drawn young men into his ideology and made them his main recruiting target. Perhaps Middle Eastern youth see a different future than the one bin Laden was attempting to design for them. Also, the involvement of women in the protest (particularly in Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia), and the cooperation of Christians and Muslims to reach a greater goal are two practices that bin Laden would have never encouraged only further suggesting that people are choosing alternatives to al-Qaeda's demands.

Speaking to the interactions of Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, arguably the most important goal of al-Qaeda would be their push for a fundamentalist Islamic state. As opposed to a secular state, a separation of religion and politics, fundamentalist Islam would seek for their political laws and religion to intertwine. This is why al-Qaeda promotes to the establishment of sharia law, or Islamic law. It begs the question of how many Middle Easterners would be supportive of the more conservative switch to sharia law. While it could be argued that the Middle East was at the peak of civilization when they were governed by sharia law, a survey by Shibley Telhami suggests the modern population do not feel that is the root cause. When asked what parts of the bin Laden's fundamentalist Islam they support, "33 percent of Muslim respondents said none, 33 percent said its confronting with the United States, 14 percent said its support for Muslim causes such as the Palestinian movement, 11 percent said its methods of operation, and just 7 percent said its efforts to create an Islamic state (Gordan 63)." Bin

Laden's goal of an Islamic state is optimistic at best; fundamentalist Islam is unlikely to gain an entire region of supporters. Additionally, a study of jihadist literature conducted by the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 2006 suggests that al-Qaeda leaders' ideas did not leave a profound impact. "Both men have had an enormous impact on the wider Jihadi Movement, but our data shows that they have had little to no impact on Jihadi thinkers (Blanchard 1)." The question stands then: how long will al-Qaeda's influence last if they are not affecting a substantial change in thinking?

Regardless of the impact of al-Qaeda's influence, when Osama bin Laden was killed, Americans rejoiced. For some, the war on terror was over. For others, justice had been served for the many victims of al-Qaeda attacks over the last two decades. However, to neglect the long struggle against finding bin Laden would be ignorant. According to Christopher Dickey in the article, "A Decade on the Lam", "Few fights have ever been more complex and frustrating than the global campaign to eradicate Al Qaeda" (Dickey 30). There was nothing easy or simple about finding bin Laden, and it took the nation with the world's greatest military capabilities ten years to locate one man. Just the amount of time that it took to find bin Laden speaks to the loyalty of his followers. Though there were few close to him near the end, he was still able to run an expansive and complex terrorist organization, without any Internet or phone connection, for years without leaving his home. It was the dedication of his followers and supporters that kept the U.S. on the hunt for a decade.

From an American standpoint, killing the top leader seemed like the best way to have destroyed al-Qaeda altogether. However, when considering the structure of al-Qaeda's core, branch, and franchises, it could suggest that the loss of bin Laden does not affect the unity among the rest of the organization, nor impede its communication. As long as the subsidiaries continue to maintain the actions of the central leaders in the organization, "al-Qaeda will have alternative means to project power and maintain influence (Farrell 136)." And because of the continual growth of followers since 2001, al-Qaeda may be stronger than before. They have established a regional branch in the Arabian Peninsula, expanded franchises in Iraq and the Maghreb, along with developing their "ideological sophistication and influence [they] lacked ten years ago" (128). Al-Qaeda has lost strength, but the organization is not weak. While regime changes in the Middle East may not accept al-Qaeda's aims, it is important to note their supporters all over the world. These populations may be significantly smaller, but their potential for negative impact is strong. Furthermore, it can be argued that the decentralized nature of al-Qaeda allows it to more easily organize and implement attacks despite the death of bin Laden. While a large-scale attack may no longer be practical, al-Qaeda has enough power to carry out smaller attacks and still be influential. One man can place one bomb fairly simply—therefore their goal of being a constant threat can continue (Rashid).

Conclusion

Al-Qaeda will continue to be viewed as a global threat, but for their organization to have a political influence in the Middle East seems improbable. Al-Qaeda has not been able to take full advantage of the Arab revolutions due to the timing of bin Laden's death and the transition in leadership, and they may have missed a golden opportunity in their pursuit to establish an Islamic state. Terrorism, as a political strategy, is not something that people of the Middle East will always want to be associated with, and eventually the influence of al-Qaeda will have dwindled. "Al-Qaeda can continue to pose a security threat, but it was never an alternative. Far from leading the Arab and Muslim worlds toward a clash of civilizations, bin Laden will become a footnote to the broader story of regional transformation (Coleman)." Al-Qaeda was never the ideal option, and then is it more likely that the future will know a Middle East without

al-Qaeda than with it. However, as we continue into the future of international relations we must continue to mediate between conflicting groups such as al-Qaeda and the United States, but also seek to understand what values and motivations led to such a conflict in the first place. Until we do, groups with conflicting ideological agendas will never have a reason to cooperate in our world.

Works Cited

Ali, Nour. "Syrian activists reject al-Qaida leader's support for uprising." *The Guardian.* N.p., 28 Jul 2011. Web. 12 Nov 2011. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/28/syria-rejects-al-qaida-support/print>.

Blanchard, Christopher M. United States. *CRS Report for Congress: al-Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology.* 2007. Web. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf>.

Coleman, Isobel. "Death of Bin Laden Doesn't Move Middle East." *Council on Foreign Relations.* 05 May 2011. Web. 20 Nov 2011. <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east/death-bin-laden-doesn't-move-middle-east/p24917>.

Dickey, Christopher. "A Decade on the Lam." *Newsweek.* 25-30, 05 May 2011. Print.

Gordan, Philip H. "How to Fight the Right War." *Foreign Affairs.* 86.6 (2007): 53-66. Print.

Hasan, Syed Shoaib. "Pakistanis left numb by Bin Laden killing." *BBC News* 04 May 2011: Web. 31 Aug 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13280814>.

Huntington, Samuel. "The Clash of Civilizations." *Foreign Affairs.* Summer 1993: 22-49. Print.

Indyk, Martin. "Bin Laden Peace Dividend for Middle East?" *Council on Foreign Relations.* Interview by Bernard Gwertzman. 03 May 2011. Web. <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east/bin-laden-peace-dividend-middle-east/p24880>.

Kydd, Andrew H. and Barbara F. Walter. "The Strategies of Terrorism." *International Security.* 31.1 (2006): 49-79. Print.

McCants, William. "Al Qaeda's Challenge." *Foreign Affairs.* 90.5 (2011): 20-32. Print.

Rashid, Ahmed. "Osama's death: What next for al-Qaeda?." *BBC News.* 02 May 2011. Web. 05 Nov 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13257441>.