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Claremont McKenna College

Viral Jihad: A Genealogy of al-Qaeda and ISIS' Propaganda

Submitted to:
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Abstract:

For the past twenty years, the United States has been at war. Yet, while invocations of war often evoke images of soldiers on the battlefield, the war the U.S. has been fighting looks far different. In the past two decades, the U.S. has attempted to curb the impact of terrorist organizations' media usage. This paper explores the genealogy of that media battle through a case study of al-Qaeda and ISIS' media apparatuses. It argues that, often overlooked, is the role that media plays as a foundational element in both groups' organizational structures. Moreover, this paper will demonstrate how ISIS has expounded on the success of al-Qaeda's media strategy, thereby creating an online caliphate. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that new strategies and ways of thinking about the war on terror will need to be developed in for the U.S. to effectively combat both al-Qaeda and ISIS' media.

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I would like to dedicate this Senior Thesis to the Middle East Studies Department at Claremont McKenna College, the Middle East Islamic Studies Department at Colgate University, and the Religious Studies Department at Colgate University. It is with my sincerest gratitude that I must thank all the incredible professors that I have had the pleasure of working with over my undergraduate experience. I have had quite an unconventional, yet fulfilling college experience, but what kept me going every day was my passion for Middle Eastern politics, religion, and history. Of course, this love could not have developed without my wonderful professors. So, thank you, *shukran*, *merci*, and *teşekkürler*.

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INTRODUCTION

“We do not understand the movement [ISIS], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. We have not defeated the idea. We do not understand the idea.”¹

-Major General Michal K. Nagata

“We are in a battle,” declared Ayman al-Zawahiri, deputy chief of al-Qaeda, in 2004. “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our *Umma*.”² Yet, just less than two decades after intercepting Zawahiri’s message, U.S. officials have failed to combat al-Qaeda’s media strategy. To continue Zawahiri’s battlefield metaphor, U.S. officials have barely even “deployed troops” to the media landscape. Al Qaeda has littered the internet with propaganda, but the U.S. has barely shot back.

In fact, it was not until after al-Qaeda's propaganda push during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 that counterterrorist experts began noting the potency of online terror. Al-Qaeda, and its Iraqi offshoot, now known as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), changed the game completely. Al-Qaeda is the first guerilla movement to transform the war from an era of physical battles to Cyberspace. From web platforms complete with instructions on how to commit suicide attacks to its English-language magazine (*Dabiq*), al-Qaeda changed the way that terrorism and counterterrorism would be studied for years to come.

To distribute their message, al-Qaeda Central Command (AQC) aptly used the Internet as a propaganda, recruitment, and training platform. AQC leadership quickly learned that it could reach a wider audience through a largely unregulated online domain. The sheer size of the AQC

¹ Cole Bunzel, “From Paper State of Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State,” *Center for Middle East Policy at BROOKINGS*, No. 19; (Mar 2014), 4.

² Daniel L. Byman, “Will ISIS and al-Qaida Always be Rivals,” *Brookings*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/05/27/will-isis-and-al-qaida-always-be-rivals/>.

media effort itself reflects a massive push on AQC's end to use this new platform, Cyberspace, to its benefit. Former CIA deputy director, John E. McLaughlin, went so far as to describe al-Qaeda as a movement fueled by “ideology and the Internet.”³ Certainly, it is impossible to understand Al-Qaeda in the early 2000s without centralizing the role of Internet propaganda.

Al-Qaeda’s command of the cyber-web domain set the stage for its Iraqi partner, ISIS, to master the next phase of the Internet revolution: social-media. Sheer numbers alone illuminate the proliferation of ISIS propaganda online. At the height of its Caliphate, ISIS boasted anywhere from 46,000 to 70,000 accounts on Twitter.⁴ Moreover, as this paper will further explore, ISIS created its own physical apparatuses for the distribution of propaganda. This includes control of all officially distributed propaganda through a Central Media Office (*Diwan al-’l’lam al-Markaz*), as well as through dozens of non-official and provincial-level offices.⁵ To date, the energy that ISIS has contributed to constructing a wide-spread apparatus across multiple social media platforms has proven difficult to combat.

Despite the high level of success of ISIS and al-Qaeda’s online propaganda, few studies dissect the groups’ social media strategy. Moreover, the existent studies tend to focus on ISIS’ interactions on Twitter and ISIS’ English-language content, leaving most of al-Qaeda and ISIS’ propaganda untouched. Perhaps even more concerning is the lack of research pertaining to how media fits into the organizational structures over the organization. This paper aims to fill these gaps in research by situating al-Qaeda and ISIS in context to their media empires.

³ Steve Coll and Susan B. Glasser, “Terrorist Turn to the Web as Base of Operations,” *The Washington Post*. Aug 7, 2005.

⁴ J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter,” *Brookings*, Mar 5, 2015; Yet, it is important to note that some of these accounts are run by the same users. [See Chapter 4 for a further discussion of ISIS accounts.]

⁵ Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War,” The Brookings Institution, 24 February 2015. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war>; Bacon, Tricia, and Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault. “Al Qaeda and the Islamic State's Break: Strategic Strife or Lackluster Leadership?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2019): 229–63.

This paper contains four main components. First, this paper will extensively detail the frameworks that traditional academia uses to understand al-Qaeda and ISIS. In other words, it will explore the groups' religious, geopolitical, and biographical underpinnings. Secondly, this paper will trace the origins of al-Qaeda, beginning with the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and ending with the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. Third, it will do a similar survey with ISIS, from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi first forming a jihadi organization in 1994 to the creation of an Islamic caliphate in 2014. In both its organizational purviews, this paper will make explicit note of the intersection of media with the formation of the two organizations. Finally, this paper will exhibit ISIS' ultimate media strategy both regarding how ISIS utilizes media and how ISIS' media usage impacts its success.

Through this analysis, an abundance of factors will become clear. Media will be demonstrated as fundamental to the operational functionality of both al-Qaeda and ISIS. Additionally, ISIS' media strategy will be revealed as not divorced from; but rather, a continuation of al-Qaeda's own media strategy. Ultimately, this paper will argue that ISIS' virtual operations are as fundamental to ISIS' definition of its caliphate as its physical operations. The significance of such an argument is clear: with a better understanding of how al-Qaeda and ISIS conceptualize and weaponize their media operations, U.S. officials can more effectively wage a media war against the organizations.

CHAPTER ONE: FRAMEWORKS OF REFERENCE

“This [Clash of Civilizations] is a very clear matter, proven in the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet, and any true believer who claims to be faithful shouldn’t doubt these truths, no matter what anybody says about them.”⁶

- Osama Bin Laden on Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*

In the Summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington famously published an article in *Foreign Affairs*. It was called “The Clash of Civilizations.” In the article, Huntington argued that in the next stage of history, conflicts would begin to emerge between civilizations such as “the West” and “Islam.”⁷ According to Huntington, there were an abundance of political, cultural, and religious distinctions endemic to each civilization.

Reading Huntington’s argument, one could easily explain the emergence of al-Qaeda and its protegee, the Islamic State; both are simply outcroppings of a natural Islamic rejection to “the West.” Yet, as many scholars have perceptively pointed out since the publishing of “The Clash of Civilizations,” there are three fundamental flaws with Huntington’s argument. First, Huntington ignores hundreds of years of transcontinental mixing of social movements, cultural trends, religious and spiritual groups, technological advancements, economic practices, and artistic traditions. Second, Huntington characterizes civilizations as stationary objects inside shut boxes; civilizations are not stagnant in time nor neat in their borders. Finally, by ignoring the diversity of definitions of a civilization, Huntington suppresses the true color of civilizations. In other words, Huntington focuses exclusively on the political histories of civilizations but fails to focus on the cultural or spiritual aspects.

These arguments, alongside many other valid concerns, suggest that understanding Islam is not as easy as painting Islam as the antithesis to the West. On the one hand, Islam is a complex,

⁶ Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, (London: Verso, 2005), 124.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.

world-wide tradition. Thus, understanding al-Qaeda and ISIS as merely rejections to the West is a reduction of Islam. On the other hand, al-Qaeda and ISIS are not simply incarnations of Islam; while they claim to have Islamic roots, Islam is not the only thing that defines them. As complex organizations, al-Qaeda and ISIS must be understood beyond their religious claims.

This chapter will only partially explain what Islam means, as religious traditions are only one small component of al-Qaeda and ISIS. In accordance with scholarship on the topic, there are three levels by which this chapter will analyze the emergence of al-Qaeda and ISIS. In addition to reviewing the organizations' religious roots, this chapter will explore the geopolitical contexts in which the groups were popularized. This chapter will then survey the key personalities that led the group. Through these different lenses, readers will gain a three-tiered understanding of why the al-Qaeda and ISIS developed, grew, and separated. As this chapter will make clear, none of the traditional frameworks that scholars utilize to understand ISIS and al-Qaeda are sufficient.

A Movement of Culture/Religious Fundamentalism

Contextualizing Jihad

In some ways, the religious roots of al-Qaeda and ISIS reflect a very specific, recent trend in Islam. In other ways, the traditions of al-Qaeda and ISIS harken back to early Islamic history. In any case, the Islam of al-Qaeda and ISIS is deeply rooted in a weaponization of Islam. Yet this weaponization only occurs in the context of "Islam under attack." In other words, al-Qaeda and ISIS derive their legitimacy from Islamic trends that attempt to push back on modern encroachments—political and theological.

To explore these trends, this section will explore the doctrinal roots of al-Qaeda and ISIS which are, admittedly diverse. As noted by terrorist scholar, Dr. Paul Kamolnick, al-Qaeda "is not

exclusively Salafist, though it includes a significant number. It is not exclusively Salafi-Wahhabi or Wahhabi, though it also includes their number; it is not exclusively inspired by Sayyid Qutb, though he is recognized and honored as a pioneering jihadi thinker. *Qa'idat al-Jihad* is rather a broad, transnational church-like conglomerate.”⁸ Dr. Kamolnick’s writing makes clear that al-Qaeda reflects a plethora of Islamic trends, thus requiring a nuanced analysis of each.

In order to comprehensively understand al-Qaeda and ISIS, this section will first note the formation of Salafism and Wahhabism as a rejection of liberal, secular statehood. This section will then demonstrate how the state responds to these more orthodox forms of Islam, ultimately producing political Islam, or Islamism. Finally, this section will explore how al-Qaeda and ISIS surpass their Wahhabi-Salafi Islamist roots and weaponize the conception of *jihad*.

Overall, this slow, yet complex progression towards al-Qaeda and ISIS theologies will illuminate two important trends. First, despite claims by both organizations that their theology represents “true Islam,” their doctrinal interpretations will simply represent one interpretative tradition among many. Secondly, this section will demonstrate how al-Qaeda and ISIS utilize their theology as a political strategy just as equally as a religious creed. This thereby suggests that al-Qaeda and ISIS are well-aware of the public perception of their organizations and are intentional in their creation of a public image. Importantly, while they will share many common religious roots, ISIS and al-Qaeda will differ on their theological interpretations, demonstrating their different political goals.

⁸ Paul Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization: History, Doctrine, Modus Operandi, and U.S. Policy to Degrade and Defeat Terrorism Conducted in the Name of Islam*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, June 5th, 2017).

The Rise of Secularism and State-Sponsored Violence

The development of a politicized Islam has existed since the “creation” of Islam because the emergence of a new system of faith inherently questioned traditional power structures. Yet, the modern iteration of Islam faced a major challenge after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. With the Ottoman Empire’s demise, a power vacuum emerged, and European countries raced to fill it.⁹ The arrival of European colonial powers brought many of their religious and philosophical traditions to the Middle East. Most notably, was a conception of secularism distinct to European nation-states. European nation-states conceived of secularism as the separation of church and state.¹⁰ Yet, when this conception of secularism intersected with Islam, conflict ensued. As religious scholar Hadi Enayat makes clear, “the ‘problem’ of religion, which had seemingly been resolved by the secular state, [was] posed anew.”¹¹ Secularism, as Enayat continues to argue, would struggle to be implemented in the new, Arab, and predominately Muslim states. 20th century Muslims were tasked with figuring out how Islam would be compatible with a new conception of statehood devoid of religion.

In addition to secularism, the politically “modern” state came complete with the notion that the state has hegemony over violence. Nineteenth and twentieth conceptions of statehood suggested that the state could decide what type of violence was legitimate and which was illegitimate. Such a model follows mainly from the theories of Max Weber who argued that “political modernity depended upon the centralized state monopolizing violence.”¹² This would have major implications for the Middle East. Basing much of their legal doctrine off their

⁹ Janin Hunt. *The Pursuit of Learning in the Islamic World, 610–2003*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005).

¹⁰ Need evidence here: Asad 2003, p.24 as quoted in Enayat: “Asad argues, it was this more anti-theistic conception of ‘secularism’ that was gradually co-opted by liberal elites and used to legitimize the project of political and cultural secularization.”

¹¹ Hadi Enayat. *Islamism and Secularism in Post-Colonial Thought*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), *Introduction*.

¹² Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2004), 5.

colonizers' political models, nascent Middle Eastern states began to severely repress their citizens. As will become clear with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islam provided the means for non-state groups to protest state-sponsored violence.

The Development of Salafi-Wahhabism

There was a diversity of ways in which Muslims responded to the rise of the modern nation state. One of these ways was Salafism. It was around the decline of the Ottoman Empire, in the mid to late-19th Century, that Salafism first began to develop. At the time, Salafism was an intellectual movement that took place at the spiritual center of the Sunni world, al-Azhar University.¹³ Yet, as debates over statehood began in the 20th century, Salafism moved beyond the academic realm. Salafis contended that that *as-salaf al-saliheen* (the pious forebearers), another term for the early *umma* (Muslim community), best understood and practiced Islam.¹⁴ While Salafism is now often conflated with anti-modernism, some early Salafis accepted modernism, such as the early Salafi Reformer, Muhammad 'Abduh, who considered himself both a Salafi and an Islamic modernist.¹⁵ Some of his followers even “developed his ideas in the direction of secular nationalism.”¹⁶ Others “admired the technical and social advancement of Europe’s Enlightenment, and tried to reconcile it with the belief that their own society was the heir to a divinely guided Golden Age of Islam.”¹⁷ Salafism would come to have a diverse meaning, but at least at its origins, it welcomed modernity.

¹³ Trevor Stanley, “Understanding the Origins of Wahhabism and Salafism, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol.3, 14: July 15, 2005, <https://jamestown.org/program/understanding-the-origins-of-wahhabism-and-salafism/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.; Roxanne L. Euben ed. And Muhammad Qasim Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), 18.

¹⁵ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹⁷ Stanley, “Understanding the Origins.”

Yet with the creation of Wahhabism, Salafism took a turn towards anti-imperialism. Wahabbism is the tradition derived from Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a Salafi who helped to found the modern Saudi Arabian state.¹⁸ Al-Wahhab claimed that “the decline of the Muslim world was caused by pernicious foreign innovations (*bida’*)—including European modernism, but also elements of traditional Islam.”¹⁹ Thus, al-Wahhab structured his movement not as solely anti-Western but also as anti-Shi’a and anti-Sufi. Despite its rejection of European ideological trends and interpretations of a modern, liberal state, Wahhabism should importantly still be considered Salafist given that both movements share a desire to reinterpret Islam through the original texts and actions of the Prophet. In fact, many scholars refer to the movements as one—Salafi-Wahhabism. Indeed, to al-Qaeda and ISIS, Salafism and Wahhabism are not distinguishable from one another. Nonetheless, in order to not replicate Huntington’s premise that Islamic traditions are inherently anti-Western or anti-modern, it is important to note that Salafism is not inherently incompatible with either the West nor with modernity. Falling into such reductionist conceptions of Islam simply plays into al-Qaeda and ISIS’ own rhetoric that the West is at war with Islam.

The Foundations of Islamism

In addition to often being described as Salafi-Wahhabist, al-Qaeda and ISIS are often described as Islamist. This poses the question of where Islamism fits in context to Salafism and Wahhabism. Indeed, all three movements are quite diverse in their interpretative iterations, making it difficult to distinguish between the three.

¹⁸ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 21.

¹⁹ Stanley, “Understanding the Origins.”

Most pertinently to how ISIS and al-Qaeda utilize Islamism, Islamism is what brings Salafi-Wahhab traditions into the political sphere. This paper uses the definition of Islamism proposed by Brookings' scholars Shadi Hamid and Rashid Dar who write, "Islamist groups believe Islamic law or Islamic values should play a central role in public life. They feel Islam has things to say about how politics should be conducted, how the law should be applied, and how other people—not just themselves—should conduct themselves morally."²⁰ Though, like Salafi-Wahhabists, Islamists often return to the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* (actions and words of the Prophet Muhammad), they do so with a specific political agenda.

Despite what al-Qaeda and ISIS leadership may want their followers to believe, Islamism is a product of modernity. Hamid and Dar continue to describe this very trend.

Islamism isn't just a reaction to modernity, but a product of it. In the pre-modern era, Islam imbued every aspect of public life, providing an overarching religious, legal, and moral culture. It went without saying, so it wasn't said. With the advent of modernity, Islam, for the first time, became a distinct political project.²¹

Hamid and Dar's argument reflects how, because of the introduction of secularism into the Muslim world, Muslims were forced to recreate a notion of statehood that included Islam. Islamism attempted to be this very politicization—a blend between the political and the religious. Moreover, Hamid and Dar rightly note that, while this blend was not novel to the Muslim world, it was modernity that begged for a rigidity that was formerly not required. In fact, there is no Arab word for the term Islamism, a reflection of the fact that Islamism is a conception for Western audiences to better understand the interaction between Islam and state. In any case, Islamism allows Islam—which, by Western eyes, could be seen merely as a religion—to transcend into the political realm.

²⁰ Shadi Hamid and Rashid Dar, "Islamism, Salafism, and jihadism: A Primer," *Brookings*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/07/15/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/>.

²¹ *Ibid*

One of the first political iterations of Islamism, Saudi Arabia aside, was the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The first records of the MB, also referred to by its Arabic name, *jama'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*, date back to the 1930s in both Egypt and Syria. Their respective founders, Hassan al-Banna and Mustafa al-Siba'i, were good friends who studied together at Al-Azhar in 1933. Both al-Banna and al-Siba'i were impacted by key ideological movements at the time: Islamic revitalization and anti-colonialism.²²

In fact, in both Syria and Egypt, the founding branches were created as a direct counter to French and British conceptions of modernity. For instance, both colonial powers created missionary schools that taught secular curriculum and Christian values. Hasan al-Banna was particularly worried that not only “the missionaries’ work would inevitably pierce the Islamic soul, but it was also part of a wider Western conspiracy against Islam.”²³ *Jamiya al-Gharra* was even established in Damascus in 1924 explicitly to “oppose French control of the Syrian education system.”²⁴ Accordingly, during the 1930s and through the 1940s, both Brotherhoods took on religious *and* educational roles. As described by Patrick Seale: “Paradoxically, it was the French, who in 1938 caused these isolated groups to merge by insisting on discussing the then contentious issue of Islamic teaching in schools with a single nation-wide organization.”²⁵ Seale’s argument thus suggests that missionary schools were not only the catalyst for the creation of the *jami'yyat*, but also unified the *shabab muhammad* against a common enemy. Among Muslims, education was an issue of moral values—if formal Arabic were replaced by English or French, their children

²² Noha Mellor. *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: Da'wa, Discourse and Political Communication*. Routledge, 2018.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dara Conduit. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2019).

²⁵ Díaz Naomí Ramírez. *The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria: the Democratic Option of Islamism*. Routledge, 2018.

would be unable to read the Qur'an and would be disconnected from their faith. By exploring both the Syrian and Egyptian contexts, it becomes clear that this Islamist trend to oppose the secularization of school curriculum was a transnational struggle.

Yet, in both Syrian and Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood slowly began to radicalize and incorporate more aggressive, Salafist rhetoric in response to state-sponsored violence. In Syria, this was catalyzed in the 1970s when a nascent Baath regime cracked down on any opposition.²⁶ This led to the creation of *al-Tali'a al-Muqatila lil-mujahidin* ("The Fighting Vanguard of Warriors"), whose founder, Marwan Hadid, rejected "Western ideas, any form of compromise with secular movements, and any mercy for Alawis."²⁷ In February 1982, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was massacred during the infamous Hama Massacre.²⁸ Yet, the presence of an Islamist group in Syria demonstrated to the entire Levant that there were those willing to stand up against 20th century notions of statehood and state repression.

In Egypt, a similar trend occurred. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Nasser regime committed many atrocities against the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (EMB), including mass incarceration and torture.²⁹ Nonetheless, this oppression simply led to the popularization of an EMB radical, Sayyid Qutb. Called by one journalist as "the Philosopher of Islamic Terror," Qutb was a zealous writer who helped to popularize conceptions that modernity was characterized by *jahiliyya* (pagan ignorance, a reference to the time before the Prophet Muhammad was born).³⁰ Qutb also

²⁶ Raphael Lefevre, "The Syrian Brotherhood's Armed Struggle," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*: December 14, 2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/14/syrian-brotherhood-s-armed-struggle-pub-50380>.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Robert M. Danin. "Remembering the Hama Massacre," *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*: February 2, 2012, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/remembering-hama-massacre>.

²⁹ Barbara Zollner, "Surviving Repression: How Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Has Carried On," *Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*: March 11, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/11/surviving-repression-how-egypt-s-muslim-brotherhood-has-carried-on-pub-78552>.

³⁰ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 129, 131.

conceptualized the creation of a vanguard to fight *jahiliyya*.³¹ Both ideas would later influence Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. When Qutb was assassinated in 1966, he became a martyr for the Islamist cause. Despite continued oppression by the Sadat administration, Qutb's legacy would continue to inspire the next generation of the Muslim Brotherhood to fight back against cultural and physical oppression by the modern state.

Global Jihad

What is perhaps most theologically interesting about al-Qaeda and ISIS is that they both share a mix of Salafism, Wahhabism, Islamism, and “*Ikhwanism*” (aka Qutbism). Together, these ideologies have come together to form global *jihadism*. Though both groups emerge from the same traditions, ISIS and al-Qaeda both have distinct interpretations of global *jihad*.

To unpack exactly what global *jihadism* means; however, it is important to first understand the root of the term *jihad*. In the interpretive history of Islam, it is commonly assumed that there are two forms of *jihad*. There is *al-jihad al-akbar* (the greater jihad) and *al-jihad al-asghar* (the lesser jihad).³² *Al-jihad al-akbar* refers to the struggle against one's own weaknesses or the struggle to attain piety. This is not what al-Qaeda or ISIS mean when they refer to *jihad*. What the two organizations do mean is, *al-jihad al-asghar*, which is “about self preservation and self-defense; directed outwardly, it is the source of Islamic notions of what Christians call ‘just war,’ rather than ‘holy war.’”³³

Traditionally, the lesser jihad was used sparingly; jihad as “just war” was only waged four times prior to the 20th century. However, as the secular conception of the modern nation-state encroached more and more on practicing Muslims, “just war” became ever-more relevant. In part,

³¹ Ibid, 139.

³² Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 50.

³³ Ibid, 50.

Wahhabism is at the roots of this theory—the third time *jihad al-asghar* was invoked was by Ibn Wahhab and the House of Saud against the Ottomans, Shi’a, and Great Britain. Almost a century and a half later Sayyid Qutb would invoke *jihad al-asghar* to call his fellow Muslims to arms against the Egyptian government. In their invocation of *jihad*, al-Qaeda and ISIS drew from both the *Ikhwan* and Wahhabi tradition.

However, al-Qaeda and ISIS both go beyond the *Ikhwan* and Wahhabis by failing to justify their offensive war. The Arabic word *harb* (offensive war) is notably distinct from *jihad* (defensive struggle); and thus, the latter can only be invoked when the *umma* is under attack.³⁴ Religious scholar, Bruce Lawrence, describes how “bin Laden points to passages in the Qur’an that he reads as authorizing a generalized *lex talionis* (law of retaliation)...Yet such a select reading of scriptural sources and extra scriptural authority sits ill with the conscience of the great majority of contemporary Muslims.”³⁵ As bin Laden’s biography will later make clear, bin Laden himself does not have the religious authority to make such claims. In his brash usage of *jihad*, he overstretches both the Wahhabi and *Ikhwan* tradition.

The other distinct component of global *jihad* from former traditions is, perhaps obviously, its global nature. In part, al-Qaeda and ISIS’ focus on global targets is not entirely new. Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood-affiliate, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salaam Faraj, wrote a fifty-four-page manifesto that suggested Egyptians should focus on the “near enemy,” the Egyptian regime, instead of on the “far enemy,” Israel.³⁶ By the 1980s, al-Qaeda twisted Faraj’s argument, and argued the inverse: Muslims should focus on the “far enemy,” the West. The reasons for this will be argued in the following section but, notably, al-Qaeda seems to have been prompted to adopt a

³⁴ Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, (London: Verso, 2005), xx.

³⁵ *Ibid*, xxi.

³⁶ Glenn E. Robinson, *Global Jihad: A Brief History*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 23.

“far enemy” strategy not because of the doctrinal roots, but rather, because it was politically expedient. Ironically, though ISIS emerged from al-Qaeda, ISIS would take on more of a “near enemy” strategy—a trend far more in line with Islamic discursive tradition.

In addition to its Muslim Brotherhood ties, both al-Qaeda and ISIS are distinctly *Salafi*. Both groups “emphasize the military exploits of the *Salaf* (early generations of Muslims) to give their violence an even more immediate divine imperative.”³⁷ Both groups try to emulate the violence of the early *umma* to connect to the time of the Prophet.

However, there is still a split between how ISIS and al-Qaeda promote their Salafism. ISIS is more Wahhabi than al-Qaeda because, unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS is prolific in its usage of *takfir* (Islamic excommunication). As will become clear, al-Qaeda tends to ignore the theological issue posed by the presence of different Islamic traditions, while ISIS fully believes that it is the duty of Muslims to slaughter the *murtad* (unbelievers). Such a debate over *takfirism* would come to dominate the two groups, and ultimately contribute to their split.

As earlier suggested, this section demonstrates the importance of understanding the doctrinal trends underlying al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, as was equally apparent from this section, political trends and significant figures partially shaped the religious practices that al-Qaeda and ISIS chose. The next two sections will survey such political trends and figures.

A Global Movement

While religion is one window into understanding the development of al-Qaeda-style jihadism, it is incomplete. Notably, there were key events that inspired this new wave of *jihad*. According to terrorism scholar Glenn E. Robinson, al-Qaeda-style *jihadism* refers to *jihad* on a

³⁷ Hamid and Dar, “Islamism, Salafism, and Jihadism.”

global scale. Robinson posits that there were three major catalysts that led to the rise of al-Qaeda. First, was the US' "twin pillars policy"—US policies that propped up both the military power of the Shah's Iran and Saudi Arabia.³⁸ When that strategy failed in 1979, it appeared that the conservative, religious right in Iran had beat out the United States, emboldening conservative revolutionaries around the Middle East.

Of particular humiliation to the United States was the takeover of the U.S. embassy in Iran. Sixty-six hostages were captured, blindfolded, and "paraded in front of the cameras."³⁹ The breaking news was broadcast throughout the world: the greatest military superpower in the world was embarrassed by students in a relatively weak country. Marines in charge of protecting the embassy had not even fired a single bullet.⁴⁰ The event signaled to nascent jihadists that America was not as strong as it appeared.

A second geopolitical catalyst to the rise of al-Qaeda was the seizure of the Kaaba by anti-Saudi jihadi militants. The two-week capture was hailed as a victory by Sunni jihadi circles. The Kaaba is the holiest site in Islam, believed to have been built by the Prophet Ibrahim.⁴¹ As a place of many Islamic legends, the site is the epicenter of Mecca and the direction to which Muslims pray five times a day. Thus, when a Saudi extremist by the name of Juhayman al-Uteybi, rallied followers to take the Kaaba, the events would have a major impact on the entire Muslim World.

On November 20, 1979 (the first day of the new Islamic year), Juhayman and his followers snuck into the Kaaba. At dawn, gunfire rang through the air.⁴² The assailants declared Juhayman's

³⁸ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 36.

³⁹ Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

⁴¹ Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 10. For an entire short history of the K

⁴² Notably, violence is not permitted at the Kaba. This made the events that would come to pass even more serious transgressions and demonstrated the severity of the impact. [Rund Abdelfatah interview with Ramtin Arablouei and Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, NPR, podcast audio, November 14, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/778888906>.]

brother-in-law, Mohammad Abdullah, to be the *Mahdi* (a prophetic figure in Islam who is foretold to reappear at the end of times).⁴³ The Saudi police, who were armed with no more than batons, ran for their lives, with two being shot dead.⁴⁴ 100,000 people were taken hostage.⁴⁵ Saudi troops refused to enter the Kaaba, given the Islamic ordinance forbidding violence in the Kaaba under any circumstances.⁴⁶ After three days, Saudi clerics issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) permitting the Saudi authorities to use violence to take back the grand mosque, though the Saudis first attempt to retake the mosque ended in bloodshed.⁴⁷ By December 4th, after fifteen days of control of the Mosque, the Saudi government regained control of the holy site. Casualties numbered in the hundreds.⁴⁸

The seizure of the Kaaba had major implications for Islamists throughout the Middle East. For one, the event is thought to have radicalized a young Osama bin Laden, the figure who would later become the face of al-Qaeda.⁴⁹ Often, the event is overlooked as a local incident in which orthodox extremists protested the Saudi regime. However, there are indications that the event had major implications even for those who were not Saudi nationals. The event, particularly in conjunction with the Islamic Revolution, marked the embarrassment of relatively secular governments by Islamists. This inspired many Islamists around the Arab World. “With the benefit of hindsight, it is painful clear: the countdown to September 11, to the terrorist bombings in London and Madrid, and to the grisly violence ravaging Afghanistan and Iraq all began on that

⁴³ Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, podcast audio, 69.

⁴⁴ Abdelfatah, *The Siege of Mecca*, 2019.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 130.

⁴⁸ “Mecca 1979: The Mosque Siege that Changed the Course of Saudi History,” *BBC*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-50852379>.

⁴⁹ Michelle Tang, “The Bloodbath at a Holy Shrine that Launched Global Jihad,” July 23, 2018, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/the-bloodbath-at-a-holy-shrine-that-launched-global-jihad/87862/>; Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 7. This is a bit in dispute, as bin Laden himself claims that he was radicalized by American intervention in the 1973 Yom Kippur War between an Arab state coalition and Israel. [Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xii.]

warm November morning, in the shade of the Kaaba,” as Yaroslav Trofimov describes in a book dedicated to the event.⁵⁰ Notably, the event was one of the first radical acts taken by Sunni Islamists, bringing what began with the Shi’a revival in Iran to Sunni-Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the third major catalyst for the rise of “global jihad” was the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979. The Soviet Invasion brought jihad into a global context; whereas the previous two events of 1979 were relatively grounded in Middle East-specific contexts, the Soviet Invasion opened criticism to a world order that seemed stacked against the average Middle Eastern citizen. As specialist on global jihad, Thomas Hegghammer, writes:

What happened in the 1980s is still relevant because the Soviet-Afghan war is the cradle of today’s jihadi movement. That was where al-Qaida was born, and that there was where famous leaders such as Usama Bin Ladin started their militant career. The networks forged in Afghanistan became the backbone of the jihadi movement in the 1990s and 2000s, with former Afghan Arabs filling key roles in most jihadi groups. Intellectually, too, the Afghan jihad played a vital role, both as an incubator for key ideas and as the source environment for the jihadi subculture we know today.⁵¹

Hegghammer suggests that without the Soviet-Afghan war, the modern jihadi movement today would look significantly different, let alone, may never have even taken shape. Hegghammer’s argument is compounded by a study by the *Los Angeles Times* which found that “the key leaders of every major terrorist attack, from New York to France to Saudi Arabia, inevitably turned out to have been veterans of the Afghan War.”⁵² In fact, as will be clear from the next chapters, all the men behind the major terrorist attacks in the 1990s were trained in Afghanistan camps that were remnants from the Afghan War.

These three foundations link the rise of al-Qaeda to specific historical events, suggesting that al-Qaeda was born out of a specific historical context. As we will come to see, this is far

⁵⁰ Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca*, 7.

⁵¹ Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad*, (Cambridge: University Printing House, 2020), 1.

⁵² Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 139.

different from the approaches of other authors, who consider al-Qaeda and its subsidiary, ISIS, as products of key personalities or religious fundamentalism.

A Personalistic Movement

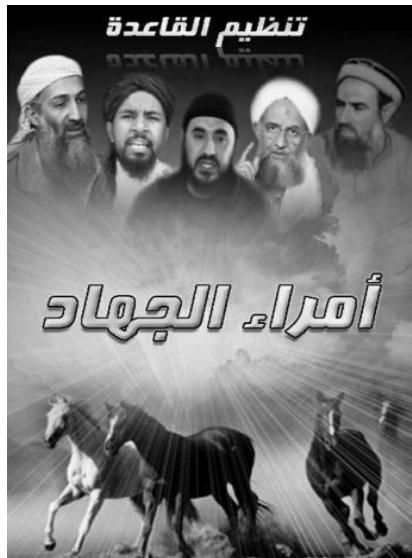
Other scholars are more interested in linking the rise of al-Qaeda, and the split of ISIS from al-Qaeda, as tied to key personalities within the movements. For instance, one scholar writes, “Since its creation in 1988 the Al-Qaeda organization has functioned according to a complex system of interpersonal relationships.”⁵³ According to this framework of analysis, these interpersonal relationships help to explain why terrorists are recruited and radicalized. As will come to be clear in this chapter, interpersonal relationships often define allegiance to a terrorist network. Thus, it is clear to see that when these allegiances break, it is often due to rifts in interpersonal relationships.

This chapter will operate off the framework suggested by terrorism researcher Dr. Paul Kamolnick. Dr. Kamolnick insinuates that the different movements are driven by particular figures: Dr. Abdallah Azzam, Osama Bin Laden, Abu Musa’b al-Zarqawi, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (to whom he prescribes the labels “Azzamism,” “Bin Ladenism,” “Zarqawism,” and “Baghdadism”).⁵⁴ To better understand these figures, we must understand their back stories.

⁵³ Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*, (New York: Other Press, 2005), 68.

⁵⁴ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*.

Figure 1⁵⁵: Al-Qaeda Poster



Left to Right: Osama bin Laden, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abdallah Azzam

Abdallah Azzam

Dr. Abdallah Azzam was born in the West Bank in 1941 to a relatively anonymous family. Azzam was partially radicalized by his Palestinian upbringing. However, Azzam was also radicalized by his Islamic studies at Damascus University where he joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1954. Notably, Azzam would later become one of the only al-Qaeda leaders with significant academic credentials in religious studies. In this sense, Azzam would become the spiritual father for the jihadist movement. His life story gives us a better insight into the religio-political debates that shaped the future of al-Qaeda for years to come.

After joining the Brotherhood, Azzam became quite remarkable in *da'wa* (an Islamic form of proselytizing). He also became well connected to key Islamist mentors including Shafiq Abd al-Hadi, Shaikh Fayiz Jarrar, and Muhammad abd al-Rahman Khalifa. Finally, as part of the

⁵⁵ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 285.

Brotherhood, Azzam became enthralled by the work of Sayyid Qutb, a prominent radical thinker of the Muslim Brotherhood. Azzam was particularly drawn to Qutb's writings that posited two key ideas: (1) that modern Muslim societies are in a state of *jahiliyya* (ungodly ignorance) and (2) that there is a divine right to establish an Islamic state (*hakimiyya*).

When Qutb was executed in 1966, Azzam was devastated, even writing a telegram of protest to Qutb's executioner, Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. A year later, in 1967, the Six-Day War began, even reaching Azzam's home village of al-Sila. The combination of his Palestinian roots with his Muslim Brotherhood teachings enraged Azzam, causing him to leave his home for the Jordanian-Israeli border. In 1969, Azzam began fighting with a little-known, Brotherhood-affiliated organization called Fedayin, marking the official beginning of Azzam's status as a *mujahid* (freedom fighter).

Azzam quickly rose in the ranks of Fedayin and was a part of the organization until its very end. After the 1970 Jordanian Black September, a period when Jordanian forces assaulted and killed thousands of opposition figures, Fedayin was defeated. The rupture of Azzam's organization left him ever more ready to confront the "corrupt" Arab regimes of Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.

However, Azzam did not continue with his combative streak for long; in 1971, Azzam began studying at al-Azhar University to receive his PHD in Islamic Law. In addition to producing a 600-page long dissertation, Azzam also became close with many members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. While never meeting Sayyid Qutb, Azzam is recorded to have been close to his family. At such a point in the Brotherhood's existence, there was significant debate between the more moderate "Bannanist" faction and the more extremist "Qutbist" faction, of which Azzam certainly supported the latter.⁵⁶ During this time, Azzam declared *takfir* (a formal Islamic

⁵⁶ The differences between Qutb and al-Banna are well described in the work of John A. Turner who writes: "[Qutb] transformed al-Banna's simplistic and methodologically weak concept of escaping the *jahili* society into a

disavowal of another's faith) on secular Arab leaders and leftists. Upon graduating in 1973, Azzam returned to Jordan where he became a lecturer at the University of Jordan. Many of his students, particularly those of Palestinian origins, went on to join Hamas.⁵⁷

Azzam's professorship opened many networking doors for him and significantly grew his prestige as a religious scholar. Azzam traveled extensively spreading *da'wa*. As described by Khaled al-Fawwaz, an associate of Azzam, "Azzam was a one-man 'wire service' for the jihad movement, traveling to Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to gather and spread news, recruit men, and raise millions of dollars for the cause."⁵⁸ It was through these efforts that Azzam met a young Usama bin Laden in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1978. By the end of 1970s, Azzam had made a name for himself as a prominent Jordanian Islamist.

This notoriety often got Azzam into trouble with Jordanian authorities, whom he critiqued extensively. Azzam claimed that Jordanian politics were un-Islamic and that the Jordanian regime directly supported Israel. Azzam was also frustrated by Jordan's support for the Iraqi government during the Iran-Iraq war. Due to his political activism, Azzam eventually got fired from the University of Jordan. Concurrently, it is widely believed that Azzam was simultaneously expelled from Jordan.

In 1980, Azzam and his family left Jordan for Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It was during this time that Azzam became formally acquainted with the young bin Laden, though they were not close friends.⁵⁹ At this point, though he had a stable teaching job in Mecca, Azzam was quite focused

revolutionary call to arms. [John A. Turner, *Religious Ideology and the Roots of Global Jihad*, (New York: Palgrave, 2014), 115-116.]

⁵⁷ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 85.

⁵⁸ Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 53.

⁵⁹ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 117.

on the foreign affairs of the *umma* (Islamic community). As Azzam's biographer, Thomas Hegghammer, writes:

[Azzam] himself later said he had wanted to get involved in a military struggle, but he was not sure which one. He eventually narrowed the choice down to two options: Yemen or Afghanistan: "I looked for a battlefield [*saha*], and there was a jihad in Yemen and a jihad in Afghanistan, and I said "let's go to one of the two battlefronts and start practicing our vocation, which is jihad."⁶⁰

Azzam was ready for a fight, growing anxious by his teaching career. Notably, however, it was not until a year later when his close friend and Egyptian Brotherhood member, Kamal al-Sananiri, encouraged him to join him in Afghanistan that Azzam truly chose Afghanistan over Yemen. In fact, it even took some persuasion.⁶¹ Such indecision reflects how the struggle in Afghanistan was not endemic to Azzam's conception of jihad; rather, Azzam chose to leave for Afghanistan somewhat on a whim. Of course, Azzam felt sympathy for the Afghani cause. But it was not as though his path to Afghanistan was linear in any means.

Once in Afghanistan—or, really, in Peshawar, Pakistan—Azzam began to serve as an Arab negotiator between Afghani mujahidin. Azzam made key allies of Abd Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf and Abdallah Anas, figureheads for the Afghan Mujahidin. Azzam also built strong relations with members of the Saudi and Pakistani government. Such relations allowed Azzam to organize his own movement, the Services Bureau (*Maktab al-Khidamat*), "an organization devoted to hosting Arab volunteers and putting them to good use in the Afghan jihad."⁶²

While, at first, Azzam struggled for funding, he found monetary support in the form of an old friend, Osama bin Laden. With Bin Laden's funding, Azzam was able to grow the Services Bureau into an extensive apparatus. The Bureau: extensively recruited foreign volunteers to the Afghan cause, handled the reception of new recruits, built an apparatus of on-the-ground

⁶⁰ Ibid, 119.

⁶¹ Ibid, 121.

⁶² Ibid, 205.

intelligence, educated Afghani refugees on Islam, provided humanitarian aid to the Afghan Mujahidin and their dependents, assisted the Afghanistan mujahidin with military logistics, and published many materials including the popular, monthly Arabic language magazine, *al-Jihad*. In all of these simultaneous efforts, Azzam's Services Bureau extensively raised awareness about the plight of the Afghans to the rest of the Muslim *umma*.

By 1986, bin Laden set up a training camp for Afghan Arabs in southwest Peshawar, nominalizing it as *Sada* ("Echo").⁶³ The *Sada* camp became a part of the Services Bureau and ultimately, its main training facility.⁶⁴ However, the *Sada* camp was also a point of contention between Azzam and bin Laden—bin Laden saw the training at the camp as insufficient and "basic."⁶⁵

Bin Laden ultimately launched his own project in al-Ma'sada. Azzam reportedly knew of the project's existence, even visiting the site in 1987. Though Azzam did not fully approve of al-Ma'sada, there was not much that he could do, and he resigned to let al-Ma'sada be incorporated into the Services Bureau. Al-Ma'sada is the force that would later become incorporated into al-Qaeda. However, importantly, Azzam was a periphery figure in al-Ma'sada's formation. Some scholars attribute Azzam as the "co-founder of al-Qaeda," but this is clearly untrue; Azzam's organization was an affiliate of al-Ma'sada but Azzam himself did not explicitly condone the group's formation.⁶⁶

On November 24, 1989, just two years after the formation of al-Ma'sada, Azzam was assassinated. The event was described by Hegghammer as "the biggest murder mystery in the

⁶³ Notably, this was done behind Azzam's back because Azzam was less concerned with the more violent sides of the Afghani conflict as he was focused on the other forms of non-violent support that could benefit the cause. [Ibid, 334]

⁶⁴ Ibid, 336.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 337.

⁶⁶ Such is claimed on Azzam's wikipedia.com page:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_Yusuf_Azzam#cite_note-uoozvz-4.

history of jihadism.”⁶⁷ There are competing claims for who ordered the assassination, with potential suspects being Saudi, Jordanian, Israeli, Afghan, Pakistani, or U.S. intelligence forces. Others claim individuals such as Osama bin Laden, leader of the Afghan Mujahidin party Hezb-e Islami, or Ayman al-Zawahiri, were to blame for Azzam’s death.

Despite who may have assassinated him, Azzam will be remembered as one of the fathers of modern jihad. Scholar of global jihad, Dr. Paul Kamolnick, attributes four essential components of al-Qaeda to Azzam. First, he writes that Azzam was influential in characterizing Muslim opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as defensive jihad (*jihad al-daf*) via a highly revered legal opinion (*fatwa*).⁶⁸ This was a *fatwa* Azzam declared in 1985, which centralized the role of *jihad al-daf* in the Afghani struggle.⁶⁹ In Azzam’s 1984 book *Defense of Muslim Lands*, Azzam described *jihad al-daf* as a “compulsory duty” that arises “if the Kuffar [unbelievers] enter a land of the Muslims.”⁷⁰ In fact, “Azzam was probably the first trained ‘*alim* to articulate an elaborate legal argument for [defensive] jihad as an individual obligation for all in the modern era.”^{71,72}

Secondly, Azzam was influential in using *jihad al-daf* to justify military struggles against non-Muslim governments. Azzam centralized territorial conquest as the means to Muslim reassertion of control over the Middle East. However, Azzam does crucially differ from his successors, bin Laden and Zawahiri in particular, as Azzam does not call for an Islamic state.

Thirdly, Azzam was passionate about the armies that would re-conquer former Muslim lands to be Muslim armies; thus, he was a staunch advocate of supporting the Afghan *mujahidin*.

⁶⁷ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 437.

⁶⁸ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 16.

⁶⁹ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 302.

⁷⁰ Peter L. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda’s Leader*, (New York: Free Press, 2006), 26.

⁷¹ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 16.

⁷² Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 305.

Azzam's organization, the Services Bureau, solely focused on enticing Arab and foreign recruits to the cause of the Afghani jihad. Yet, Azzam hoped that these recruits, today called Arab-Afghans, would serve as a support to the *mujahidin* cause.⁷³ As described by John A. Turner, "Azzam transformed a mixed group of jihadists, working with national movements into a unified international force during the Soviet Afghan War."⁷⁴

Although bin Laden and Azzam were friends and agreed on most issues, the status of Afghan Arabs in the *mujahidin* was one they would disagree on.

[Azzam] thought that Arabs, like all foreign fighters, were there to assist the Afghans and should be integrated into their structures and under the control of the Afghan commanders. Bin Laden, by contrast, wanted some or all Arabs kept apart, thus creating his own apparatus.⁷⁵

Finally, Azzam was committed to martyrdom, the conception that dying while killing was a noble Islamic cause.⁷⁶

Azzam's conceptions were not novel; many of his ideas, particularly about *jihad al-daf*, are rooted in ideas popularized by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism. In fact, Azzam represents a significant link between Salafism and *Ikhwanism* (the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood), even though both ideologies have a history of competition.⁷⁷ As described by Hegghammer:

On the one hand, he self-described as a Muslim Brother, venerated Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, and used Qutbist terminology such as *hakimiyya* (sovereignty) and *jahiliyya* (age of ignorance). On the other, he also self-described as a Salafi, quoted Ibn Taymiyya, and expanded on terms associated with Salafism such as *tawhid* (oneness of God) and *al-wala' a'l-bara* (loyalty and disavowal).⁷⁸

⁷³ Unfortunately for Azzam, the Arab-Afghan forces never numbered at more than a few thousand, making their military contributions insignificant. Partially due to this reason, the nubile al-Qaeda was ignored by many U.S. intelligence serves. [Euben ed. And Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*], 429.]

⁷⁴ Turner, *Religious Ideology*, 118.

⁷⁵ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 41.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 51.

⁷⁷ Mohammad Affan, *Competing Models of the Modern Islamic State: Wahhabi vs Muslim Brotherhood Ideologies*, December, 2014,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297731277_Competing_Models_of_the_Modern_Islamic_State_Wahhabi_vs_Muslim_Brotherhood_Ideologies.

⁷⁸ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 290.

In joining Salafi and Brotherhood ideologies, Azzam, either consciously or unknowingly, averted factionalism within the *umma*. Azzam is regarded by many jihadists today as one of the most significant martyrs and ideologues of the twentieth century. Certainly, while not the founder of al-Qaeda, Azzam was crucial in ideological support for the organization.

Osama Bin Laden

Perhaps the most well-known figure of modern *jihadism* is Osama bin Laden, the chief financier and founder of al-Qaeda. Born in 1957 into a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia, bin Laden was surrounded by conservative Islam in the form of Wahhabism. Wahhabism is named after the prominent thinker, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, who believed in a “moral renewal of Islam by cleansing the umma of unbelief (*kufur*), any perceived violations of *tawhid* (belief in the unity of God, monotheism, and all practices thought to corrupt the principles of the pure faith as adumbrated in the scriptures and the example of the *salaf*, the first generations of Muslims.”⁷⁹

Though Wahhabi doctrine was key in bin Laden’s theological upbringing, it is also notable that *Ikhwanism* was not absent from bin Laden’s life. Bin Laden encountered many former Brotherhood members fleeing Syria, Jordan, and Egypt during his childhood, including Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb.⁸⁰ As earlier noted, bin Laden also became well acquainted with Abdallah Azzam who was a professor at King Abdul Aziz University when bin Laden was a student there. Thus, like Azzam, bin Laden straddled the line between Wahhabism and *Ikhwanism*.

⁷⁹ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 426.

⁸⁰ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 85.

When bin Laden was twenty-three, he was recruited by the then head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal “to help organize the flow of Saudi funds and equipment to the *mujahidin* who had taken up arms against the Russian-backed regime in Afghanistan.”⁸¹ Bin Laden first traveled to Peshawar in 1980 and moved there permanently in 1982.⁸² It was in Peshawar that bin Laden reconnected with Azzam. With Azzam, bin Laden helped to recruit Arabs to the Afghan cause and also funded the Services Bureau. Bin Laden offered to pay the expenses (roughly \$300 per month) of any Arab who would fight in Afghanistan.⁸³ Bin Laden also set up a guest house, *Beit al-Ansar*, in Peshawar (House of the Supporters) to help house these new recruits.⁸⁴ Finally, bin Laden directed funding at his own organization *Sijill al-Qaeda* (Register of the Base), which would later become the foundation of al-Qaeda.⁸⁵ Bin Laden and Azzam’s efforts paid off; by 1989, it was estimated that there were around four thousand Arab volunteers in Afghanistan.⁸⁶

Bin Laden and Azzam were such great recruiters of Afghan Arabs that it caught the CIA’s attention. However, contrary to popular belief, for the time being, attention from the CIA is all bin Laden caught; bin Laden was nothing more than a small file among many other intelligence reports. Proposals to expand funding for bin Laden and Azzam’s organizations “never moved beyond the talking stage.”⁸⁷ Despite the speculation that bin Laden and the CIA collaborated, there

⁸¹ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 132; Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xii.

⁸² Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 132; Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xii; Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 429.

⁸³ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 155. “According to Essam Deraz, a filmmaker who covered bin Laden in the late 1980s, the Saudi was subsidizing the Afghan Arabs at a rate of \$25,000 a month during this period.” [Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 56]

⁸⁴ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 51.

⁸⁵ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xii.

⁸⁶ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 201. According to Khaled al-Fawwaz, bin Laden’s friend, and Milt Birden, the chief operator of the CIA’s Afghan operations, the number could have been as many as 25,000. Of course, there is no formal way to verify this number and it is likely that a percentage of those men were not explicitly associated with bin Laden’s organizations. [Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 55]

⁸⁷ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 155.

is no proof that there have ever been any monetary contributions from the CIA to the Afghan Arab cause.⁸⁸

In 1986, bin Laden began collaborating with the Pakistani secret service (ISI) and the CIA to build a tunnel complex on the border close to the Pakistani Border, the Khost tunnel complex, and a mountain base, Tora Bora.⁸⁹ Notably, though the projects were funded by the CIA, the projects were focused on construction; not on the creation of a robust Afghan Arab fighting brigade. According to some reports, the construction projects were a source of tension between Azzam and Bin Laden.⁹⁰ Azzam considered the projects to be a waste of money and that the projects diverted from the Afghan Arab's main purpose in Afghanistan; however, bin Laden had his sights set on having his own training camp.

Later in 1986, bin Laden opened his first training facility in Jaji. It was called by some as *al- Masada* (the Lion's Den) and by others as *al Ansar* (the Partisans).⁹¹ In 1987, the site was bombed by Soviets, killing dozens of bin Laden's men.⁹² The battle ended with bin Laden and his men retreating. Nonetheless, the battle at Jaji "marked the birth of Osama bin Laden's public reputation as a warrior among Arab jihadists."⁹³ Bin Laden was able to use the battle as proof of his fighting prowess.⁹⁴ The Service Bureau's magazine, *Jihad*, printed many stories of bin Laden's battle, popularizing his name as a fighting hero and helping spread recruitment efforts to Muslims globally.

The media campaign that bin Laden waged after the 1987 battle of Jaji led bin Laden to become close with Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor who would become bin Laden's closest

⁸⁸ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 60.

⁸⁹ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, 132; Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xiii.

⁹⁰ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 157.; Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 49.

⁹¹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p. 157.

⁹² Ibid, 162.

⁹³ Ibid, 163.

⁹⁴ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 50.

advisor.⁹⁵ Zawahiri was radicalized in Egyptian prison after being imprisoned and extensively tortured by Sadat's orders.⁹⁶ The experience shaped Zawahiri's religio-political views, making him extremely keen on bringing the *mujahidin*'s fight to the rest of the Arab world. In fact, though Zawahiri was in Peshawar with the other Afghan Arab fighters, Zawahiri was uninterested in the Afghani struggle against the Soviets. According to a confidant of Azzam, "In Peshawar, we didn't count Zawahiri as a *mujahid*. He was just sitting in Peshawar trying to recruit people to fight against Egypt. Osama became a part of this Egyptian group..."⁹⁷ Thus, by 1988, al-Zawahiri had already become such an intimate confidant of bin Laden that he was defining both the social circles of bin Laden and bin Laden's ideological agenda.

Even before Azzam's death in 1989, the split between bin Laden and Azzam's goals manifested itself. On one hand, this was due to a strategic divergence between the two men; as earlier suggested, bin Laden was beginning to focus more on developing a Islamist fighting apparatus than on supporting the Afghani cause. According to the Palestinian journalist, Jamal Ismail, this manifested by 1988, Osama bin Laden no longer financially contributed to the Services Bureau.⁹⁸

However, there was another reason for Azzam and bin Laden's split. The novel relationship between bin Laden and al-Zawahiri threatened bin Laden's relationship with Azzam. Zawahiri was an intriguing, politically seasoned figure who "turned bin Laden against Abdullah Azzam" and introduced bin Laden to more hardline Islamist leadership.⁹⁹ Zawahiri even allegedly instructed

⁹⁵ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 429. According to another source, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri met in 1986. Whether 1986 or 1987, Zawahiri and bin Laden's friendship would become quite profound. [Ibid, 50]

⁹⁶ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 64.

⁹⁷ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 69.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 62.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 63.

his followers not to pray with Azzam, a serious repudiation in Islam.¹⁰⁰ To any degree, the tension between Azzam and bin Laden never manifested itself further, because Azzam was assassinated in 1989.

There is some disagreement between scholars about the formal beginning of al-Qaeda. Some scholars go as far to argue that al-Qaeda never existed until the 1998 trial of four men charged with the 1998 U.S. embassy bombing in East Africa.¹⁰¹ Such claims stem from a conception of al-Qaeda solely as an ideology and claim that bin Laden was nearly an insignificant member of the group.¹⁰² However, these arguments have since been dismissed as “utter nonsense” given that there is significant evidence that al-Qaeda had a formal funding apparatus and leadership structure that traces back to at least 1988.¹⁰³

On the other end of the spectrum, some scholars confuse an article written by Azzam, *al-Qaeda al-sulbah* (The Solid Base), as the founding document for al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁴ However, as pointed out by Thomas Hegghammer, “The article merely says Afghanistan is the territorial base on which the Islamist movement must establish itself before it can make further conquests.”¹⁰⁵ The article does not indicate that a formal group had formed. Moreover, given Azzam’s reluctance to bring the fight of Afghanistan to the entire Arab world, it is extremely unlikely that Azzam would be the founding member of al-Qaeda, an organization whose modus operandi was the targeting of corrupt Arab governments.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 68.

¹⁰¹ Adam Curtis’ “The Power of Nightmares” (documentary), quoted in Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, p.75.

¹⁰² Ibid, 75.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 76.

¹⁰⁴ Philippe Migaux. Chaliand Gérard ed. and Blin Arnaud ed. *AL QAEDA*. In *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to ISIS*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 314-348.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxrp4.17>.; John A. Turner. *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. 103.

¹⁰⁵ Hegghammer, *The Caravan*, 354.

There are two likely theories for the formal creation of al-Qaeda. The first was proposed by historian Mahmood Mamdani. He writes that, following the death of Azzam in 1979, an infamous meeting was held in Khost that determined the path of al-Qaeda. During that meeting, the ten men in the room, including bin Laden, decided “to wage jihad beyond the borders of Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁶ In order to do so, the organizers created a new organization, al-Qaeda, and decided that bin Laden would be the leader.

However, another likely theory is proposed by terrorism journalist Peter L. Bergen, suggesting that al-Qaeda may have even existed prior to the death of Azzam. Bergen cites handwritten correspondences between bin Laden and his associates directing them to pay Islamist salaries on a monthly basis. Some documents uncovered by Bergen even give the minutes of meetings in which new recruits are to be inducted into a “new military group” which would include “al Qaeda.”¹⁰⁷ The meeting is thought to have started on August 18, 1988, and included Abu Ubaidah, al-Qaeda’s military commander and Abu Hajir, al-Qaeda’s religious advisor.¹⁰⁸ Bergen uses the date September 10, 1988, the date of the first letter, as the official starting date for al-Qaeda.

In any regard, al-Qaeda was likely formed through a series of meetings between the end of 1988 and 1989. At the time, intelligence forces were unaware of the implications of this new Jihadi group.

Nonetheless, bin Laden’s relationship with intelligence forces grew strained. During the First Gulf War of 1990, bin Laden offered the Afghan Arab’s services in support of Kuwait to the Saudi royal family. According to a study by Euben and Zamman:

The royal family rejected the offer, opting instead to permit thousands of U.S. troops into the Kingdom to launch Operation Desert Storm and pressured several Saudi ‘ulama to endorse the

¹⁰⁶ Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*.

¹⁰⁷ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 79.

decision. Bin Laden, in turn, accused the Saudi regime of relinquishing to infidels the duty of defending the land of Muhammad and of violating Islamic law by entering in a pact with non-Muslims to fight other Muslims (i.e. Iraqis).¹⁰⁹

Of course, such threats were not taken lightly by the repressive Saudi regime which derived its authority from religious legitimacy. When bin Laden began speaking out in Jedda about his desires to fight the Hussein regime, the Saudis grew angry. Bin Laden even published a letter to King Fahd, “The Letter of Demands,” calling for reforms within the Kingdom.¹¹⁰ After this letter, the Saudi Royal family restricted bin Laden’s travel within the Kingdom. Bin Laden, in turn, sought refuge in Sudan. In 1994, the Saudi royal family revoked bin Laden’s citizenship permanently and, in 1996, bin Laden was expelled from Sudan.

Part of the reason for bin Laden’s expulsion from Sudan was his anti-American activities. Oddly, although it is thought that bin Laden had businesses during his time in Sudan, he was still trying to build his fighting brigade.¹¹¹ During his early years in Sudan, bin Laden facilitated the travel of Arab Afghan veterans to Somalia to assist in anti-US demonstrations. In 1993, it was these Somalis with the assistance of the Afghan Arabs that caused the events of Black Hawk Down, the death of seventeen Americans. And, according to scholar Bruce Lawrence, “It is virtually certain that bin Laden was also attempting to organize underground opposition to the regime in Riyadh.”¹¹² Certainly, al-Qaeda was still active in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bin Laden’s group operated several training camps: Khalid ibn Walid, al-Farough, Sadeek, Khaldan, Jihad Wal, and Darunta.¹¹³ The noise created from the continuation of al-Qaeda caused Egypt, the United States, and Saudi Arabia to put increasing pressure on Sudan to expel bin Laden. The U.S. even imposed economic

¹⁰⁹ Euben and Zamman ed., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 429.

¹¹⁰ Ghost Wars, p. 222.

¹¹¹ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 126.

¹¹² Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xiii; He was certainly on the radar of the Saudi intelligence. Prince al-Faisal is recorded to have stated, “We monitored bin Laden recruiting persons from different parts of the Islamic world, from Algeria to Egypt, from East Asia to Somalia, to get them trained at these [Sudanese] camps.” Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 155.

¹¹³ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 89.

sanctions, which Sudanese government felt could strongly curtail future investment.¹¹⁴ Thus, after only five years, bin Laden was expelled from Sudan.

After being kicked out of Sudan, bin Laden sought refuge in a familiar location, Tora Bora, Afghanistan, where he was warmly welcomed by the Taliban.¹¹⁵ As will be further discussed in the next chapter, bin Laden now used al-Qaeda as a base for a series of attacks against the US. Some of these were rhetorical, such as his infamous 1996 speech in which bin Laden declared war on the United States or bin Laden's "the Crusaders and the Jews" 1998 speech.¹¹⁶ Bin Laden also increased his rhetoric against the U.S. in many interviews on CNN, ABC News, and al Jazeera.¹¹⁷ Most significantly, though, during this time, bin Laden was also responsible for directing the U.S. embassy attacks in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.¹¹⁸ Then, in 2000, al-Qaeda suicide attackers nearly sank a U.S. destroyer, the U.S.S. Cole attack in Yemen. These attacks significantly raised the profile of al-Qaeda and, subsequently, the profile of bin Laden.

In 1998, bin Laden was able to create a new organization, the World Islamic Front, with the help of al-Zawahiri and other Pakistani Islamists.¹¹⁹ Bin Laden also created one of the most prominent paramilitary Islamist organizations, Harkat ul-Ansar, which was once funded by the United States. In creating such organizations, bin Laden represented the new phase he had entered in the late 1990s: all-out holy war against the United States.

All of bin Laden's increased activity was not without serious push-back from the United States and its allies. In August 1998, the U.S. Navy sent cruise missiles to al-Qaeda's training camps

¹¹⁴ Ghost Wars, p.266.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 430. However, it is important to point out that bin Laden did not immediately fly into Taliban-controlled territory. It was not until the Taliban controlled Kabul and Jalalabad that Osama bin Laden was in the protection of the Taliban. [Ghost Wars, p.332] Yet, the Taliban via Mullah Muhammad Omar sent a delegation to greet bin Laden on his arrival [Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 93].

¹¹⁶ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 166.

¹¹⁷ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 161.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 218.

¹¹⁹ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, xiv.

in Khost, Afghanistan.¹²⁰ The attacks nearly killed bin Laden.¹²¹ Yet, instead of decimating bin Laden's camp and killing bin Laden himself, the attacks only raised the profile of al-Qaeda's mission. The U.S. also attempted to pressure the Taliban to expel bin Laden, though they were met with refusal by bin Laden's main ally, Taliban leader Mullah Omar.¹²² Saudi intelligence officers also sent assassins to Afghanistan to kill bin Laden.¹²³ Such attacks were, obviously, unsuccessful.

Also unsuccessful was the U.S. intelligence community's ability to predict the events that would eventually unfold on September 11, 2001. Despite their increased focus on bin Laden, the intelligence community clearly missed what bin Laden had been planning all along—a massive attack on U.S. soil. Notably, “While bin Laden did not involve himself in the details of the 9/11 operation, he was its ultimate commander,” as journalist Peter Bergen described.¹²⁴ Bin Laden was not only the founder of the al-Qaeda apparatus, but also an overseer to its key operations.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States began a massive air campaign against al-Qaeda's central forces in Afghanistan. Apparently, this was a surprise to bin Laden. As described by Bergen:

Bin Laden disastrously misjudged the American response to the 9/11 attacks, which he believed would be one of two strategies: an eventual retreat from the Middle East along the lines of the U.S. pullout from Somalia in 1993, or a full-scale American ground invasion of Afghanistan similar to the Soviet invasion of 1979, which would then allow the Taliban and al Qaeda to fight a classic guerrilla war. Neither of these two scenarios happened. The U.S. campaign against the Taliban was conducted with massive U.S. airpower, tens of thousands of Northern Alliance forces, and no more than three hundred U.S. Special Forces soldiers on the ground. And al Qaeda, which means “the base” in Arabic, subsequently lost the best base it ever had. 9/11 may have been a tactical victory for al Qaeda, but it was a strategic disaster for the organization.¹²⁵

Bergen makes clear that bin Laden misjudged the response of the Americans, expecting the U.S. military to wage a ground war in which al-Qaeda would be able to extract casualties from the U.S.

¹²⁰ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 224.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 223.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

ground troops. On the contrary, al-Qaeda was forced to retreat to the mountains of Tora Bora, Afghanistan, where it was more difficult for the Americans to attack.¹²⁶

Moreover, al-Qaeda's Tora Bora site allowed a way for the Taliban and al-Qaeda to escape into Pakistan, which both groups took advantage of that December.¹²⁷ From that point on, bin Laden flew entirely under the radar of U.S. intelligence. For many years, it was thought that bin Laden was on the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan—a 1,500-mile-long terrain.¹²⁸ Eventually, bin Laden was found in the town of Abbottabad, Pakistan. Bin Laden was killed through a SEAL team raid on May 2nd, 2011.¹²⁹

Despite his death, bin Laden's legacy looms larger than the man himself. In terms of his ideological legacy, bin Laden largely impacted al-Qaeda in three key ways. First, as earlier recorded in arguments between bin Laden and Azzam, bin Laden was keen to target Western governments. Unlike the jihadists before him, bin Laden described targeting Arab regimes as “cutting a tentacle of the octopus” and “as long as the number of [*mujahid*] youth is few and our capabilities are limited, we should condense the matters by striking the head.”¹³⁰ The struggle against corruption in the Arab world would have to wait; bin Laden was focused on the “far enemy.” Although such a perspective was “never embraced by the vast majority of existing Sunni Islamist insurgents,¹³¹ bin Laden forged a legacy of attacking the enemy on its own soil that lasts until today.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 328.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 330.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 380.

¹²⁹ For a complete description of bin Laden's assassination, see: Nicholas Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden,” (The New Yorker: August 8, 2011), https://www.thomasweibel.ch/artikel/110808_new_yorker_getting_bin_laden.pdf.

¹³⁰ Bin Laden's *Bushriyaat* (Glad Tidings) speech quoted in Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 48.

¹³¹ Ibid, xvii.

Secondly, as will be further discussed in the next chapter, bin Laden was brilliant in creating a robust media strategy for his new organization. Unlike Azzam, whose *da'wa* (proselytizing) only made it as far as cassette tapes, bin Laden's *da'wa* reached NBC, al-Jazeera, and BBC. Bin Laden had even begun to post content to the web, as bin Laden's biographer put it, after bin Laden's created *jihadi* internet culture, "Signing up for the jihad [was] a mouse click away."¹³²

Finally, bin Laden was an ardent supporter of *tawhid* (the Islamic conception of unity). While *al-Qaeda* views Shi'a Muslims as a devious sect, bin Laden himself refused to explicitly denounce Shi'a as *kufir* (infidels). The *kufar* (multiple *kufir*) bin Laden focused on were agents of the Western world.¹³³ Indeed, some reports suggest that when bin Laden was in Sudan, he met with Hezbollah leader, Imad Mugniyeh, and that Hezbollah even provided explosives training and weaponry for al-Qaeda.¹³⁴ Moreover, since 9/11, many al-Qaeda leaders have been found hiding in Iran, suggesting a pseudo-alliance between al-Qaeda and the Shia, Iranian leadership.¹³⁵ This is not to suggest that bin Laden approved of Shiism; but rather, that bin Laden outweighed unity over confrontation with the Shi'a. As will come to be seen when discussing al-Qaeda's successor, ISIS, a tolerance towards Shi'i will certainly not be the case.

¹³² Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 390.

¹³³ There is significant speculation as to why bin Laden would not explicitly denounce Shiism. For one, Kamolnick describes how bin Laden's own mother was Syrian with an *Alawite* (a Shia sect) background, suggesting that his "filial tenderness" accounts for his lack of condemnation. [Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 22].

¹³⁴ Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, 143.

¹³⁵ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 22; For more on the topic, see: Cole Bunzel, "Why are al Qaeda Leaders in Iran? What a Prisoner Exchange Reveals About an Unlikely Relationship," *Foreign Affairs*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-02-11/why-are-al-qaeda-leaders-iran>.

Before discussing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, it is important for readers to differentiate al-Zarqawi from his predecessors. While Abdallah Azzam and Osama bin Laden were close friends, the interpersonal relationship between Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi looked quite different. For one, Osama bin Laden was a university-educated Saudi from a well-respected family. Al-Zawahiri was even better educated, with a PHD from al-Azhar. Compared to the two men, al-Zarqawi was relatively unknown—al-Zarqawi (who was then known by the name of Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al-Khalaylah) was from an anonymous family and was a high school dropout.¹³⁶ He was a man who “was fired from a job as a video-store clerk and whose background included street gangs and, according to Jordanian intelligence officials, prison for sexual assault.”¹³⁷ While al-Zarqawi would become a prominent figure in the jihadi movement, he was certainly on the periphery of the bin Laden’s inner circle. This lack of strong relationship would shape al-Zarqawi’s lack of robust connection to al-Qaeda; and, ultimately, partially explain why ISIS and al-Qaeda diverged.

Al-Zarqawi’s roots somewhat explain his divergence from bin Laden. However, al-Zarqawi’s upbringing does not explain why al-Zarqawi was radicalized; unlike bin Laden and Azzam, al-Zarqawi did not show up to Afghanistan ready to wage jihad. In fact, in sharp contrast to bin Laden and Azzam, al-Zarqawi had little religious background. He was a heavy drinker with many tattoos.¹³⁸ It was not until al-Zarqawi’s mother enrolled him in religious instruction at the al-Husayn Ben Ali Mosque, a mosque inspired by Salafist traditions, that al-Zarqawi began to straighten out. Nonetheless, “al-Zarqawi was not yet a convert to extremism,” as al-Zarqawi’s

¹³⁶ Mary Anne Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2006. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/>.

¹³⁷ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 11.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

biographer, Jean-Charles Brisard argues; al-Zarqawi was simply going through the motions¹³⁹ According to an imam at the mosque, it was the adventure of Afghanistan that seemed to enthrall a young al-Zarqawi, rather than the Islamist underpinnings of the conflict.¹⁴⁰

Unfortunately for al-Zarqawi, he arrived in Khost, Afghanistan, by the time the Soviets were already withdrawing. Nonetheless, al-Zarqawi decided to stay in Afghanistan. It was there he met Mohammed Taher al-Barqawi, alias: Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, an influential spiritual leader with ties to the World Islamic League, a prominent jihadist organization in Afghanistan. Given his many ties to the jihadist movement, al-Maqdisi was “at the heart of al-Qaeda,” and was thought to be a significant part of its foundation. Al-Maqdisi’s hardlined Salafist thinking would leave a substantial spiritual impression on the young al-Zarqawi, and their relationship likely accounts for a turn of al-Zarqawi to a more conservative, Islamist ideology.¹⁴¹

Professionally speaking, al-Zarqawi was shaped by another key jihadi figure, Saleh al-Hami. Al-Hami was a Jordanian-Palestinian who worked for Azzam’s magazine, *al-Jihad*.¹⁴² According to al-Hami, al-Hami supported al-Zarqawi when he wanted to begin a career in journalism.¹⁴³ Al-Zarqawi, at least for a short while, worked for a small jihadist magazine, *al-Bonian al-Marsous* (The Impenetrable Edifice).¹⁴⁴ *Al-Bonian al-Marsous* would later become “the ideological spearhead of al-Qaeda.”¹⁴⁵ Al-Zarqawi’s career in journalism would not last long, but

¹³⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴¹ As earlier suggested, many scholars take a biographical approach to understand terrorism. Nowhere is this more evident than in studies on the early years of al-Zarqawi. For instance, Jarret Brachman, the research director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point stated, “It’s not surprising that Zarqawi embraced Salafism. Jihadi Salafism is black and white—and so is everything that Zarqawi’s ever done. When he met al-Maqdisi, he was drifting, trying to find an outlet, and very impressionable. His religious grounding, until then, was largely dependent on whose influence he was under at the time. And since his father had died when he was young, he’d been seeking a father figure. Al-Maqdisi served both needs.” [Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life.”]

¹⁴² Ibid, 21; Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life.”

¹⁴³ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Weaver, “The Short Violent Life.”

¹⁴⁵ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 22.

these early years clearly shaped al-Zarqawi's perspective on jihad; to al-Zarqawi, media was always central to the jihadist struggle.

In 1993, al-Zarqawi returned to Jordan. Even though al-Zarqawi had only been gone for four years, Jordan looked far different than it had when he, and his fellow Afghan Arabs, had left.¹⁴⁶ The same year al-Zarqawi returned, Iraq had lost the Gulf War to secular, American forces, the Palestinians had signed the Oslo Accords, and the Jordanians and the Israelis were working towards a peace deal.¹⁴⁷ For the Afghan Arabs, these political events were enraging.

The police were increasingly alarmed by the rise of religious extremism and were constantly cracking down on terrorist gangs. The *jihadists* returned as hardened men who were struggling to give up their fighting spirit.¹⁴⁸ Zarqawi quickly found al-Maqqdisi and their *jihad* ensued.

With an influx of Jordanian Afghan War veterans, al-Zarqawi and al-Maqqdisi had many recruits to their cause. They named their new organization *Bayit al-Imam* (Allegiance to the Imams). Its key aim was to overthrow corrupt Arab governments, particularly the Jordanian regime.¹⁴⁹ Apparently, *Bayit al-Imam* became so popular that it received funding from Osama bin Laden, though the record is convoluted.¹⁵⁰ In any case, the group only lasted formally for a single year. Zarqawi and Maqqdisi would both be arrested in March, 1994.¹⁵¹ The formation of the group

¹⁴⁶ It is estimated that around three hundred other Jordanians became veterans in Afghanistan. [Ibid, 34.]

¹⁴⁷ Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life."

¹⁴⁸ According to al-Hami, "Waging jihad has become like oxygen for these men, and it was difficult to forgo it." [Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 32].

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 35.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 35. The notation that there was funding from bin Laden is made only by Jordanian authority claims of an interview with Osama Yassin Abu Shamah (financier of the organization). However, there is no way of verifying this claim or knowing if the confession was made under duress. Moreover, because bin Laden was focused on a "far enemy" strategy, it seems unlikely that he would fund a group so dedicated to taking down the Jordanian government.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 43; In a rare, humorous moment in terrorism studies, it appears al-Zarqawi was not a "natural revolutionar[y]." In his first operation, "al-Zarqawi dispatched one of their men to a local cinema with orders to blow it up because it was showing pornographic films. But the hapless would-be bomber apparently got so distracted by what was happening on the screen that he forgot about his bomb. It exploded and blew off his legs." [Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life"]

would come to represent the growing frustration of *jihadis* from Afghanistan with their own governments. Unlike bin Laden's movement that stayed in Afghanistan, many of those who soon returned home now had grievances directed at their relatively secular governments.

Zarqawi did not waste time in prison. The time "made him more focused, brutal, and decisive."¹⁵² In 1998, after the embassy bombings, Zarqawi reportedly told his cellmates that he intended to "join the attack on American targets."¹⁵³ Yet, that was not all that Zarqawi intended. During prison, Zarqawi began to espouse targets at any "unbeliever." As described by his biographer:

For Zarqawi, the term "unbeliever" covers a rather heterogeneous set of people, including not only Christians and Jews but also Shiites, Hindus, and more generally, all those who do not strictly adhere to the tenets of Salafism. By the end of his incarceration in Jordanian prisons he had been won over by the Manichean idea that there are two worlds: the world of Sunni Muslim believers of the Salafist persuasion and the world of the others, the *kafirs* or unbelievers, among whom he counts Muslims themselves when they collaborate with the "implacable" enemies: Israel and the United States. No individual belonging to the second category deserves to live.¹⁵⁴

Clearly, al-Zarqawi's time in prison was hardening him. He was becoming both a leader and an ideological zealot, all in one.

In 1999, al-Zarqawi got a rare break. In an effort to appease the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, a new Jordanian administration released about 3,000 prisoners.¹⁵⁵ Al-Zarqawi was among them. Maqdisi was also released, though three years later, he would be sent back.¹⁵⁶

About a month after his release, al-Zarqawi, acknowledging that it was too dangerous for him to stay in Jordan, moved to Hayatabad, Pakistan. As his biographer writes, "It was not by chance that Zarqawi had come there. He knew that if he wanted to plan large-scale operations, he had to get closer to Al-Qaeda's decision center and especially Osama bin Laden himself."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² ISIS, 10.

¹⁵³ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 50.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 51.

¹⁵⁵ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 57.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 58.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 63.

By the Summer of 1999, al-Zarqawi had nearly succeeded in his goals. By leveraging his relationships with key Jordanians such as Abu Zubaydah, al-Qaeda’s head of operations, al-Zarqawi became one of bin Laden’s lieutenants.¹⁵⁸ Al-Zarqawi also received a letter of endorsement from Abu Kutaiba al-Urdani, a Jordanian who worked in Azzam’s Service’s Bureau.¹⁵⁹ The letter helped al-Zarqawi to curry favor with bin Laden, at least initially.

However, things went awry for Zarqawi when, in December 1999, he finally got the chance to meet bin Laden. As a former Israeli intelligence official reported, “it was loathing at first site.”¹⁶⁰ As earlier suggested, the class differences between bin Laden and al-Zarqawi would become visceral. There were also other sources of tension. Bin Laden was suspicious of the Jordanian, believing that he may have been infiltrated by Jordanian intelligence.¹⁶¹ He also felt that al-Zarqawi’s hatred towards the Shi’a was divisive. By all accounts, bin Laden was a unifier, concerned with *tawhid* (unity) of the *umma* (Muslim community). Al-Zarqawi and bin Laden’s conceptions of *takfir* and the most pressing goals of *jihad* were simply incompatible.

Figure 2: ¹⁶² Map of Afghanistan



¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 69.

¹⁵⁹ Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.; ISIS: Inside the Army, 13

¹⁶² Rachel Martin, “Even in a Calm Corner of Afghanistan, Future is Murky, NPR, podcast audio, November 19, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/2010/11/18/131421485/even-in-calm-corner-of-afghanistan-future-is-murky>.

In 2000, al-Zarqawi moved from Kandahar to Herat, an Afghan city on the Iranian border.¹⁶³ Although bin Laden gave al-Zarqawi seed money to set up a training camp, the geographic distance between the two men made bin Laden suspicious.¹⁶⁴ Already concerned that al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian intelligence services' "plant," bin Laden's suspicions only grew further.¹⁶⁵ Not to mention, in a 2000 meeting between bin Laden and Zarqawi, bin Laden asked Zarqawi to pledge *baya* (a religious oath of allegiance) to him.¹⁶⁶ Zarqawi refused.

During the following year, despite bin Laden's suspicions, the Herat training camp would multiply from dozens to hundreds.¹⁶⁷ Zarqawi would eventually call his camp *Jamaat Tawhid wal Jihad* (JTWJ, School of Unity and Jihad).¹⁶⁸ While based in Herat, JTWJ began to extend its operations to Jordan, Iraq and Israel.¹⁶⁹ Al-Zarqawi's associates, Abu Abdel Rahman al-Shami (Ra'id Khuraysat), Mahmoud Muhammad al-Nusur, and Mutasim Musa Abdallah Muhammad al-Darikah, were sent to "reorganize the Islamist resistance" in Iraqi Kurdistan. The mission would later become the foundation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Al-Zarqawi "set up an immigration pipeline to bring in Jordanian recruits [via] a channel passing through Iraq and Iran."¹⁷⁰ As will be discussed in more depth in two chapters, al-Zarqawi utilized both his Herat and Kurdistan bases to launch, or at least attempt to launch, several attacks against the "near enemy."

After 9/11, everything changed for al-Qaeda. For one, al-Zarqawi's Herat camp was bombed by the US. Al-Zarqawi and his associates then fled back to Kandahar where al-Qaeda

¹⁶³ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 72.

¹⁶⁴ Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life."

¹⁶⁵ Nonetheless, there is also some evidence that al-Zarqawi traveled frequently between Kabul and Herat. [Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 73]. These trips likely helped to smooth tensions between bin Laden and al-Zarqawi.

¹⁶⁶ ISIS, 16.

¹⁶⁷ Brisard, *Zarqawi*.

¹⁶⁸ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 72.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 76-77.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 107.

leadership was coalescing.¹⁷¹ In December 2001, al-Zarqawi reportedly even participated in the Battle of Tora Bora, the battle in which the U.S. first launched post-9/11 attacks aimed at capturing or killing Osama bin Laden.

Then, Zarqawi fled to Iran. Admittedly, not much is known about Zarqawi's time in Iran, though some records suggest he was reportedly arrested in Tehran in March 2002 alongside 150 other members of al-Qaeda.¹⁷² Yet only a few weeks after his arrest, al-Zarqawi was released from prison and left Iran for a Baghdad hospital where he received medical treatment.¹⁷³ Why he was released so quickly by Iranian authorities is unclear. Though the Iranians made a show of arrests to prove compliance with American directives, they seem to not have sentenced al-Zarqawi and his fellow al-Qaeda members to any meaningful sentences. It is also equally possible that al-Zarqawi was never arrested. According to another biographer of al-Zarqawi, Fu'ad Hussein, al-Zarqawi only spent a week in Iran.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, both biographical accounts suggest that many al-Qaeda operatives were, indeed, arrested by Iranian authorities. The arrests likely had a significant impact in decreasing the size of al-Zarqawi's group.

At this point, al-Zarqawi had become a legend within the *jihad* movement. He had even attracted the attention of the Americans. He was even mentioned twenty-one times in a 2002 U.N. speech by Colin Powell.¹⁷⁵ Powell claimed, incorrectly, that because al-Zarqawi spent time in a Baghdad hospital, this proved al-Zarqawi was a link between al-Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime. In fact, al-Zarqawi was not just unconnected to Hussein—al-Zarqawi was not even in Iraq

¹⁷¹ Fawaz A. Gerges. *ISIS: A History*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 80.

¹⁷² Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 95.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁷⁴ Gerges. *ISIS: A History*, 83.

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/colin-powell-u-n-speech-was-a-great-intelligence-failure/>

at the time. He was in Syria. While Powell's claims were incorrect, they further helped to elevate the status of al-Zarqawi.¹⁷⁶

Zarqawi's status helped him to unify the increasing number of jihadist groups that were operating in Iraq. By the end of 2001, Mullah Krekar, the leader of a group called *Ansar al-Islam*, began working with al-Zarqawi. Though, in 2002, Mullah Krekar declared that allegations of his links with al-Qaeda were "totally unfounded," records indicate that al-Zarqawi had defacto control of the group since December 2001.¹⁷⁷ This added six hundred Arab Afghans to al-Zarqawi's movement, *Tawhid wal Jihad*. In June 2003, a new group formed that opposed *Ansar al-Islam*, *Ansar al-Sunna*.¹⁷⁸ Yet, by November, the group "carried out several joint operations with Zarqawi's group."¹⁷⁹ Other groups that folded into *Tawhid wal Jihad* include *Jaysh Mohammed*, *al-Jamaa Salafiya*, *Takfir wal Hijra*, and *Jund al-Sham*. By 2004, *Tawhid wal Jihad* is estimated to have between 1,000 and 1,500 fighters, between 8,000 and 12,000 Islamist "resisters," and around 20,000 sympathizers.¹⁸⁰ Al-Zarqawi was creating an army.

Not all of the new men recruited were Iraqi. In fact, many were from Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and North Africa.¹⁸¹ Al-Zarqawi apparently began to focus more extensively on recruiting from *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) and "as the recruitment process veered in the direction of Syria, so did Zarqawi's reliance on Syrian jihadists."¹⁸² One of Zarqawi's Syrian financiers, Sulayman Khalid Darwish (aka Abu al-Ghadiya), specifically helped shuttle

¹⁷⁶ Brisard, *Zarqawi*, 95.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 120.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 127.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 132.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 134.

¹⁸¹ Gerges. *ISIS: A History*, 66.

¹⁸² Ibid, 66.

fighters from Syria to Iraq.¹⁸³ In short, al-Zarqawi significantly increased the infrastructure of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

However, al-Zarqawi had a specific strategy that importantly differed from bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's in two different ways. First, al-Zarqawi knew how to utilize *takfirism* as a weapon. To recruit more fighters to his cause, al-Zarqawi took advantage of the heightening tensions between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis.¹⁸⁴ Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, in sharp contrast, were extremely cautious to upset the Shi'a. For one reason, al-Qaeda leaders were still in hiding, protected in Iran. Labeling the Shi'a as *murtad* (infidels), could lead to the imprisonment and/or deaths of al-Qaeda leaders. Moreover, both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri were worried about alienating Sunnis sympathetic to the Shi'a. Al-Zarqawi was ruining al-Qaeda Central (AQC's) reputation.

There is one important caveat in the development of this *takfiri* strategy. It is likely that, while al-Zarqawi was a figurehead for AQI's growing divisiveness, the ideological roots for al-Zarqawi's *takfirism* lead back to Zarqawi's deputy, Abu Ali al-Anbari (aka Abdulrahman al-Qaduli). In a 2018 Atlantic piece, journalist Hassan Hassan describes how "it was Anbari, Zarqawi's No.2 in his al-Qaeda years, who defined the Islamic State's radical approach more than any other person; his influence was more systematic, longer lasting, and deeper than that of Zarqawi."¹⁸⁵ Hassan continues to argue that, in 2003, Anbari's *jihadi* group, *Tal Afar*, was known to target anyone it considered heretical, including Shiites, members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and local informants.¹⁸⁶ Yet, prior to 2004, Zarqawi was largely fixated on secular Arab regimes, such as his home country of Jordan. In 2006, Anbari would ultimately be arrested by U.S. troops

¹⁸³ Ibid, 66.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid 86-87.

¹⁸⁵ Hassan Hassan. "The True Origins of ISIS," *The Atlantic*, November 30, 2018.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/isis-origins-anbari-zarqawi/577030/>.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

in Baghdad. Nonetheless, Hassan's case that Anbari significantly influenced Zarqawi, and, ultimately, the trajectory of al-Qaeda in Iraq, appears solid.

Yet, in addition to infamy for the weaponization of *takfirism*, al-Zarqawi was becoming well known for his tactic of beheadings. Al-Zarqawi was even anointed as "the sheikh of the slaughterers," given his reputation for brutal tactics. The imagery of slaughtering was perceived by many as simply grotesque, and certainly un-Islamic.¹⁸⁷ Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri became concerned, yet again, about the future of al-Qaeda's brand.

Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri's predictions came true by 2005. Al-Zarqawi's gruesome beheadings and intense, divisive rhetoric turned "the silent majority" of Sunni's away from al-Zarqawi. He was soon seen as a "terrorist" throughout the Middle East, by Sunnis and Shi'a alike. Even al-Zarqawi's former mentor, Maqdisi, reprimanded al-Zarqawi on a highly watched al Jazeera program. On the program:

Maqdisi said that violence against civilians is wrong because it harms the interests of the umma and tarnishes the image of Islam. He reminded Zarqawi that so-called martyrdom operations should be carried out only under specific and exceptional conditions. He warned against alienating Iraqis by losing sight of the nature of the struggle in Iraq and forgetting that Iraqis knew what was best for their country.¹⁸⁸

The critique was reportedly not received well by al-Zarqawi. Yet, despite al-Zarqawi's frustration, bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and Maqdisi did have a point—al-Zarqawi was losing the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people.

On June 7, 2006, Jordanian authorities gave a tip to United States intelligence that al-Zarqawi was hiding near Baquba. Soon after, al-Zarqawi was killed by targeted U.S. drone strikes. Unfortunately for the U.S., al-Zarqawi's legacy would live on past his death. Al-Qaeda in Iraq had

¹⁸⁷ As an ICRC report details, "After a military engagement, if an adverse party does not collect and bury its own dead, it becomes the Muslims' obligation to do so, to protect the dignity of the dead and show respect for their families. Failure to do so would be tantamount to mutilation, which is prohibited under Islamic law." ["Management of the Dead Under Islamic Law," *International Committee of the Red Cross*, April 2020.]

¹⁸⁸ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 91.

found its strategic basis: extreme violence against any who dared to disagree with its strict, doctrinal practices. This included the Americans and Israel, just like AQC was concerned, but AQI's list of enemies also included the Shi'a, Christians, liberal Sunnis, and any government with ties to the United States or Israel. As stated by researcher Dr. Paul Kamolnick, Zaraqawi's legacy is "characterized by "ultra-sectarianism...[and]an unprecedented conduct of ultraviolence as a media-based spectacle."¹⁸⁹ Zaraqawi believed in sectarian violence, not only to terrorize his victims, but as a tool to recruit new members. While, at the time of Zaraqawi's death, his strategy was not that popular, a rise of sectarian tension in 2006 would renew his vision.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi

When Zaraqawi was killed in 2006, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi would expand on Zaraqawi's sectarian legacy. Baghdadi is most well-known for transforming al-Qaeda in Iraq into the Islamic State. Certainly, Baghdadi's vision to create a caliphate was iconic, and differentiated Baghdadi even further from al-Qaeda leadership.

Yet, as will become clear in this chapter, Baghdadi transformed al-Qaeda in Iraq in many other ways. While, like Zaraqawi, Baghdadi prioritized the "near enemy," Baghdadi targeted the "nearest" of the "near enemy": *kafir* (infidel) citizens within Iraq and Syria.¹⁹⁰ In this sense, Baghdadi went even further than Zaraqawi; Baghdadi was planning to systematically exterminate all Shia Muslims. Baghdadi also had a doctrinal impact on his organization—he informed the apocalyptic and eschatological beliefs of AQI.¹⁹¹ These beliefs were denounced as heresy by al-Qaeda and would be an additional factor that led to AQI and AQC's split.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, xix.

¹⁹⁰ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, xix.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁹² Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was born by the name Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al Badri on July 28, 1971.¹⁹³ He was born into a lower-Middle class family, that is said to have descended from the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹⁴ During his youth, Baghdadi gained the name of “The Believer” given that when he was not in school, he tended to be found at his local mosque.¹⁹⁵ Baghdadi graduated from the University of Baghdad in 1996 and, shortly after, enrolled in the Saddam University for Islamic Studies in order to study Quranic recitation.¹⁹⁶

During his time in graduate school, Baghdadi was persuaded by an uncle to join the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹⁷ It was there that he became exposed to Salafist thinking and he quickly “gravitated toward those few Salafis whose strict creed led them to call for the overthrow of rulers they considered betrayers of the faith.”¹⁹⁸ One of these Salafists included Muhammad Hardan, who quickly became a mentor to Baghdadi. In fact, Hardan helped to inspire Baghdadi away from the Brotherhood and more towards *jihadism*. Baghdadi would soon report he felt the Brotherhood mainstream was composed of “people of words, not action.”¹⁹⁹ In 1999, Baghdadi graduated from Saddam University with a master’s degree and a hardened outlook on the role of Islam in public life.²⁰⁰

In 1999, Baghdadi enrolled in a doctoral program in Quranic sciences, though left the program four years later to fight with the resistance against the U.S. invasion of Iraq.²⁰¹ He helped

¹⁹³ “Timeline: The Life and Death of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi,” *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-life-and-death-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi>.

¹⁹⁴ William McCants, “The Believer: How an Introvert with a Passion for Religion and Soccer became Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Leader of the Islamic State,” *Brookings*, September 1, 2015. <http://csweb.brookings.edu/content/research/essays/2015/thebeliever.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid; “Who Was Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,” *BBC*, October 28, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50200392>.

¹⁹⁶ McCants, “The Believer.”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid

²⁰⁰ “Timeline: The Life and Death.”

²⁰¹ Ibid.

to found *Jaysh ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jamaah* (Army of the People of the Sunna and Communal Solidarity) which fought against the U.S. coalition in Northern and Central Iraq.²⁰² Yet, in January, 2004, al-Baghdadi was captured by U.S. forces and detained in a prison called Camp Bucca.²⁰³

Camp Bucca was a transformative experience for the 33-year-old Iraqi. During his time, Baghdadi reportedly “led prayers, delivered sermons, and taught religious classes” to fellow inmates.²⁰⁴ Often, he would even mediate conflicts between rival groups of prisoners and negotiate with Camp Bucca authorities.²⁰⁵ These actions made Baghdadi stand out as a natural leader. To the 24,000 inmates at Camp Bucca, most of them Sunni, Baghdadi was a galvanizing force.²⁰⁶ Because of the impact of figures like Baghdadi, one BBC journalist described the camp as a “university” for jihadists.²⁰⁷ Another Brookings journalist details that “if they weren’t jihadists when they arrived, many of them were by the time they left.”²⁰⁸ It was in Camp Bucca that Baghdadi created many future members of the Islamic State. After 10 months in prison, Baghdadi was released, though the jihadi networks would remain long after his release.²⁰⁹

Upon leaving prison, Baghdadi called a relative in al-Qaeda. With the help of an al-Qaeda spokesman, Baghdadi was convinced to go to Damascus, Syria, in order to help in al-Qaeda’s cause. Baghdadi was tasked with “ensuring that AQI’s online propaganda was in line with its brand of ultraconservative Islam.”²¹⁰ His role as a media strategist would leave a big impact on Baghdadi’s conception of the *jihad* struggle. Like his predecessor, Baghdadi understood the

²⁰² McCants, “The Believer.”

²⁰³ “Timeline: The Life and Death.”

²⁰⁴ “Who Was Abu Bakr.”

²⁰⁵ McCants, “The Believer.”

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Jim Muir, “‘Islamic State’: Raqqa’s Loss Seals Rapid Rise and Fall,” *BBC News*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648>.

²⁰⁸ McCants, “The Believer.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid. Reportedly, the inmates wrote each other's phone numbers on the elastic of the underwear in order to stay in contact.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

importance of waging *jihad* both physically and ideologically. By seeing AQI's social media apparatus up close and personal, Baghdadi would continue on to establish a robust media strategy for his future organization, ISIS.

Baghdadi slowly crept his way up the AQI hierarchy, a process that was accelerated after he received a PHD in Quranic Sciences.²¹¹ At the same time, al-Qaeda in Iraq was reorganizing itself after the death of Zarqawi. The group was rebranded as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).²¹² With renewed spiritual credentials and ISI in need of leadership, Baghdadi was appointed to the Islamic State's Sharia Committee in 2007.²¹³ He also caught the attention of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, ISI's Minister of War, who appointed Baghdadi to the eleven-man Consultative Committee.²¹⁴ Baghdadi's leadership roles did not end there—Baghdadi soon became a member of an even more powerful group, a panel of three men called the Coordination Committee.²¹⁵ All three positions were prestigious honors, allowing Baghdadi to control much of the ISI network. He could now “select, supervise and fire the Islamic State's commanders in the group's Iraqi provinces” and was in charge of “coordinating[ing] communication between the Islamic State's top leaders and their provincial representatives.”²¹⁶ Al-Baghdadi, in only a few years, had amassed a significant amount of power.

On April 18, 2010, Baghdadi would have another stroke of luck. ISI's leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and his deputy, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, were killed in a U.S. raid.²¹⁷ This meant that

²¹¹ “Timeline: The Life and Death.”

²¹² “Who Was Abu Bakr.”

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ McCants, “The Believer.”

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ “Who Was Abu Bakr.”

Baghdadi, formerly ISI's number three commander, inherited the Islamic State in Iraq and all that came with it.²¹⁸ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, now just thirty-nine years old, was in control.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership would come to represent a meaningful change in the organization. For one, ISI was now being run by Iraqi members of the Islamic State, rather than foreign fighters who had been trained in Afghanistan.²¹⁹ Al-Baghdadi welcomed in former prisoners from Camp Bucca and many former military or intelligence officers of Saddam Hussein's regime.²²⁰ These men were highly skilled fighters, thereby increasing the fighting capabilities. Moreover, their Iraqi pedigrees meant that ISI could attract greater community support which it had lost towards the end of 2006.

Yet, al-Baghdadi's leadership also represented another major change within Islamic State leadership. Hajj Bakr, the head of ISI's military council, purged anyone who challenged Baghdadi's authority.²²¹ Bakr's legacy for eliminating al-Baghdadi's rivals even awarded Bakr the nickname, the "prince of shadows."²²² Al-Baghdadi was ensuring that all of the Islamic State operatives shared his hardline, Salafist world view.

As would come to pass, however, al-Baghdadi had trouble incorporating the Syrian offshoot of ISI, *Jubhat al-Nusra*. In 2011, al-Baghdadi deployed Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a Syrian jihadist who had traveled to Iraq to resist the U.S. occupation, to create *Jabhat al-Nusra*

²¹⁸ "Timeline: The Life and Death."; Importantly, the rise to power of al-Baghdadi was not immediate. After the death of Abu Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Ayyab al-Masri, bin Laden instructed the Consultative Council to, "appoint an interim leader and to send him a list of candidates for *emir* [prince] and their qualifications." Yet, this obviously never happened. The head of ISI's military council, Hajji Bakr, let the Consultative Council go to a vote. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was approved 9-2. [McCants, "The Believer."]

²¹⁹ McCants, "The Believer."

²²⁰ Ibid.; "Who Was Abu Bakr."

²²¹ McCants, "The Believer."

²²² Ibid.

(JN) and “wage jihad against the Alawite government.”²²³ While initially, JN followed al-Baghdadi’s playbook, it soon became clear that, like AQI, JN was developing a rebellious streak.

From the outset, al-Jolani and al-Baghdadi quarreled over leadership. Al-Baghdadi was desperate to announce ISI’s presence in Syria, but al-Jolani, claiming that JN’s mandate was provided by al-Zawahiri, cited al-Zawahiri’s ban on officially announcing that al-Qaeda was interfering with Syria.²²⁴ Al-Jolani began to officially defy al-Baghdadi’s repeated orders to announce al-Nusra as part of ISI and al-Baghdadi began to search for a way to undermine al-Jolani.²²⁵ Al-Baghdadi was particularly bothered by the fact that al-Jolani pledged *baya* to al-Qaeda’s new leader, al-Zawahiri.²²⁶ Al-Baghdadi and al-Jolani’s personal rifts would continue for two years, however, before the men would reach their breaking point.

In 2013, tensions boiled over. In April, without consulting al-Jolani, al-Baghdadi declared that ISI was expanding its operations into Syria and absorbing al-Nusra—which, he claimed, had always been a part of ISI.²²⁷ Al-Baghdadi also rebranded his new organization the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). To gain leverage against al-Baghdadi, al-Jolani pledged his formal support to AQC.

Al-Jolani’s strategy was marginally successful; while al-Zawahiri maintained that ISIS would remain al-Qaeda’s representative in Iraq, he ruled that JN was separate from ISIS and was al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria.²²⁸ Al-Zawahiri also declared that ISIS should return to the Iraq front

²²³ “The Jihadist Factor in Syria’s Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani,” International Crisis Group, February 20, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/jihadist-factor-syrias-idlib-conversation-abu-muhammad-al-jolani>.

²²⁴ Tricia Bacon and Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault, “Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2019): 236.

²²⁵ Ibid; Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism’s Global Civil War,” *Brookings* (Brookings, July 28, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/>.

²²⁶ McCants, “The Believer.”

²²⁷ Byman and Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda,” *Brookings* (Brookings, July 28, 2016); Turner, “Strategic Difference,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): pp. 208-225; Zelin, “The War between ISIS” (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014), 5.

²²⁸ Ibid, p. 237.

so that JN could maintain hegemony over Iraqi operations.²²⁹ Predictably, al-Zawahiri's decree was poorly received by al-Baghdadi, who rejected the ruling on political and religious grounds.

As will come to be clear in the next chapter, this argument over leadership ultimately led to the official break between ISIS and al-Qaeda. In February of 2014, the rift between ISIS and al-Qaeda became official when al-Zawahiri officially announced that al-Qaeda was no longer linked to ISIS.²³⁰ The announcement led to significant infighting, not only between ISIS and AQC members, but also, predictably, between ISIS and JN members.

Al-Baghdadi's group ultimately won the struggle and consolidated much of Eastern Syria. As al-Baghdadi expanded his territory, so too did he expand his brutal treatment of Shi'a and Sunni dissenters. As terrorism specialist William McCants describes, "Baghdadi viewed imposing the harsh religious laws as a way of legitimizing his new state as 'Islamic,' and terrifying the local population into submission. Like Saddam, he understood the political utility of brutality in the name of religion."²³¹ Baghdadi soon captured western Iraq, and, by June 2014, he was able to even take over Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city.²³² By the end of June, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria officially declared itself a caliphate and Baghdadi its caliph.

Throughout 2014 and 2015, many reports emerged that claimed Baghdadi had been killed in U.S. airstrikes.²³³ Nonetheless, Baghdadi would re-emerge after each report, frustrating his American opponents. Over the course of the next few years, the U.S. coalition would be successful in slowly re-taking ISIS controlled territory. It was not until October 26, 2019 that Baghdadi was killed during a U.S. Special Operations raid.²³⁴

²²⁹ Zelin, "The War between ISIS" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014), p. 4.

²³⁰ Bacon and Arsenault, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2019): p. 237; Turner, "Strategic Difference," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): pp. 208-225.

²³¹ McCants, "The Believer."

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/27/world/middleeast/al-baghdadi-dead.html>

It is difficult to interpret Baghdadi's legacy because he embodies a host of contradictions. Baghdadi will forever be remembered as one of *jihadism's* most famous violent sectarians. Nonetheless, by successfully creating a caliphate, Baghdadi helped to unify Sunni Iraqis against a perceived external threat. Yet, what is most important about Baghdadi and that which is often missing from efforts to analyze Baghdadi's impact, was his role in fostering the media structures of ISIS. Like his predecessors, Baghdadi was conscious of and deliberate in creating a media apparatus that would help to advance his political goals. The following chapters will explore just this—from al-Qaeda's creation of a media apparatus to ISIS' media empire.

CHAPTER TWO: ORIGIN of al-QAEDA

“People are supposed to be innocent until proven guilty. Well not the Afghan fighters. They are the ‘terrorists of the world.’ But pushing them against the wall will do nothing except increase the terrorism.”

- Osama Bin Laden

Al-Qaeda’s Early History

As the last chapter made clear, a host of historical factors led to the rise of al-Qaeda. Between the failure of the US’ “twin pillars” policies, the seizure of the Kaaba by jihadists, and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, jihadists in the Middle East were now emboldened to a new form of global jihad. In combining historical precedent with the rise of al-Qaeda a key, often overlooked feature of al-Qaeda becomes clear—al-Qaeda emerged as an idea rather than a formal organization. Such a concept is furthered by specialist Dr. Paul Kamolnick who refers to al-Qaeda as the al-Qaeda Organization (AQO). Dr. Kamolnick derives his classification of “organization” from bin Laden’s own description of the group as the “Base of the Jihad Organization” (*Tanzim Qa’idat al-Jihad*). In his assessment, Dr. Kamolnick is likely drawing from other scholars as well. For example, Olivier Roy describes al-Qaeda as a “brand name” and John A. Turner describes al-Qaeda as an “ideology.”²³⁵ In essence, al-Qaeda is not the highly coherent group that its colloquial image entails; al-Qaeda is a collection of diversely oriented organizations.

Despite the group’s significant affiliation with bin Laden, al-Qaeda is incorrectly thought to have been named by Abdallah Azzam. After realizing that the Soviets were planning to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1988, Azzam did not want to disband the organization he had created. Azzam was killed in the car bombing a year later, bringing bin Laden into power.

²³⁵ John A. Turner, *The Rise of Salafi Jihadism and the Al-Qaeda Ideology*. In: *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), https://doi-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/10.1057/9781137409577_8.

At the time, Azzam's death represented a major shift in the al-Qaeda movement for two reasons. First, Bin Laden, having been eclipsed by Azzam, now was able to prioritize his own world view.²³⁶ Chiefly, bin Laden did not want to focus his fight against corrupt Muslim leadership, instead focused on reconquering former Islamic territory and the new ultimate target, the Western occupiers. Bin Laden's conception of jihad had been shaped from the Afghanistan struggle. Unlike Azzam, bin Laden looked beyond Afghanistan, attempting to diagnose a larger problem within the Middle East. As is evident from bin Laden's attacks, bin Laden was focused on "the head of the [infidel] snake," or the United States.²³⁷ Bin Laden believed that, because the *mujahideen* successfully beat back the Soviet Invasion in 1979, a similar defeat could occur through terrorist attacks against the United States. Only after the U.S. had been defeated could al-Qaeda reposition its attacks against despotic Arab regimes.

The second major change of Azzam's death was a reorientation of funding. Prior to the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, Azzam's own organization, the Services Bureau, was funded by the Saudis and Americans.²³⁸ During the final months prior to Azzam's death, bin Laden had transferred significant funding from the Services Bureau to *al-Qaeda*.²³⁹ Now, with the funding drying up and the former link to substantial funds deceased, bin Laden had to look elsewhere.

²³⁶ However, the true shift in al-Qaeda's ideology to the "far enemy" strategy did not actualize itself until 1993, with the attempted bombing of the World Trade Center.

²³⁷ Kamolnick, *The Al-Qaeda Organization and the Islamic State Organization*, 32.

²³⁸ Migaux. Chaliand Gérard ed. and Blin Arnaud ed. *AL QAEDA*, 316. There are two main theories for what would come of the Services Bureau or, MUKUB. According to Migaux, the organization continued to have some prominence for at least a few years. The World Islamic Relief Fund and *Mufawaq* Foundation, two Saudi based foundations, helped to prop up MUKUB for a few years [Migaux. Chaliand Gérard ed. and Blin Arnaud ed. *AL QAEDA*, 316]. However, an alternate theory is proposed by Steve Coll, who describes how the Services Bureau was folded into a nascent al Qaeda. [Coll, *Ghost Wars*]

²³⁹ *Ibid*, 316

According to some sources, al-Qaeda was able to live on due to funding from their operations in Sudan. Apparently, the Sudanese government looked the other way when bin Laden was undertaking construction projects, as the construction projects provided a much-needed investment into a depleted Sudanese economy.²⁴⁰ Such a point has been highly contested. As written in Greg Bruno's CFR Report, "Al Qaeda's Financial Pressures," "by the time bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, he had been squeezed of his potential inheritance in Saudi Arabia and stripped of personal assets from Sudan."²⁴¹ Moreover, a Staff Report to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States found that "contrary to common belief, Bin Ladin did not have access to any significant amounts of personal wealth (particularly after his move from Sudan to Afghanistan) and did not personally fund al Qaeda, either through an inheritance or businesses he was said to have owned in Sudan."²⁴² According to these sources, the question of how al-Qaeda was able to live on past the death of Azzam and the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Afghanistan remains.

However, these sources do not paint the whole picture. It is important to delineate the wealth that bin Laden amassed prior to his Saudi citizen being revoked in 1994 and after 1994. Before 1994, it was not as though bin Laden was "strapped for cash." According to American investigators, bin Laden received a \$1 million annual allowance from his family from between 1970 to 1994.²⁴³ Not to mention, salaries for al-Qaeda members during bin Laden's time in Sudan were quite high; salaries for al-Qaeda members ranged from \$500 to \$1,200 per month.²⁴⁴ For

²⁴⁰ Migaux. Chaliand Gérard ed. and Blin Arnaud ed. *AL QAEDA*, 318. Victor Comras, "Al Qaeda Finances and funding to affiliated groups" *Strategic Insights* Volume IV Issue 1 (January 2005), Center for Contemporary Conflict, p. 5.; Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 79.

²⁴¹ Greg Bruno, "Al-Qaeda's Financial Pressures"

²⁴² John Roth, Douglas Greenburg, and Serena Wille. *National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States: Monograph on Terrorist Financing*, https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/staff_statements/911_TerrFin_Monograph.pdf.

²⁴³ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 240.

²⁴⁴ Holy Wars Inc, p.80.

somewhere between a thousand to two thousand al-Qaeda members in Sudan, let alone al-Qaeda members still operating in Afghanistan, the salaries certainly added up.²⁴⁵

After 1994, Greg Bruno's CFR report and the Staff Report to the National Commission certainly hold more credence. According to a former al-Qaeda member, by the end of the 1994 salaries for group members were cut and "bin Laden [said] there [was] no money and he lost all the money."²⁴⁶ Moreover, when Saudi Arabia revoked bin Laden's citizenship in 1994, they subsequently froze his assets in the Kingdom, meaning that bin Laden could only rely on his present business dealings.²⁴⁷ Two years later, when bin Laden was expelled from Sudan, he was again forced to leave behind investments. According to a source interviewed by journalist Peter L. Bergen, bin Laden lost as much as \$150 million between his expulsion from Saudi Arabia and Sudan.²⁴⁸

There are two primary methods that such officials used to raise money for a nubile al-Qaeda that was now struggling for funding. First, al-Qaeda operatives utilized charitable organizations as covers for funding. *Zakat*, a compulsory Islamic tax on income, and *sadaqah*, a voluntary contribution, are often made to charities anonymously, meaning that these monetary contributions often have little oversight.²⁴⁹ Notably, many of the organizations thought to have ties to al-Qaeda funding are headquartered in Saudi Arabia. These include: the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), the Benevolence International Foundation, the *al Haramian* Islamic Foundation, Blessed Relief (*Muwafaq*) Foundation, and the Rabita Trust.²⁵⁰ From this list, four of the names particularly stand out—the *Muwafaq* Foundation, the IIRO, Benevolence International,

²⁴⁵ Holy Wars Inc, p.83.

²⁴⁶ Holy War Inc, p. 102.

²⁴⁷ Holy War Inc, p.102

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p.102.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p.3.

²⁵⁰ Comras, p.5. [?]

and the Rabita Trust—given that all were thought to be sources of funding for the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan.²⁵¹ According to a CIA report “funds raised through the International Islamic Relief Organization were used to support at least six Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan prior to 9/11.” FBI records also support CIA findings that the IIRO and Muslim World League worked in tandem with bin Laden to fund his activities in Afghanistan.²⁵² These contributions were by no means insignificant; a Saudi government audit on its largest bank, the National Commercial Bank, demonstrated that \$3 million flowed from Saudi accounts to bin Laden.²⁵³

Outside of charitable contributions, bin Laden and his contemporaries were able to keep al-Qaeda financially alive through another source: businesses. As earlier suggested, the links between Sudanese business dealings and al-Qaeda funding are ambiguous; it is currently unclear as to whether bin Laden’s business dealings during his refuge in Sudan were profitable or that bin Laden was able to use this money for the financing of al-Qaeda operations. However, there still is some evidence that bin Laden and his contemporaries were able to run businesses that funneled money and arms to al-Qaeda.²⁵⁴ For instance, in 1993, the CIA received an intelligence report that “bin Laden’s businesses had begun to ship cash to Egyptian Islamists for printing presses and weapons.”²⁵⁵ Bin Laden was also recorded to wire \$210,00 to contacts in Texas for a private jet that would smuggle weapons between Pakistan and Sudan.²⁵⁶ And, much to the chagrin of Egyptian authorities, bin Laden bought camels “to smuggle guns through the desert to Egypt.”²⁵⁷ While these intelligence reports are limited in their understanding of bin Laden’s activities, they suggest that, in part, the money bin Laden made during his time in Sudan helped to fund al-Qaeda

²⁵¹ Ibid, p.4.

²⁵² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 278-279.

²⁵³ Ibid, 517.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 5.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 268

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 269.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 269.

activities. By 1996, a rare public statement by the CIA declared bin Laden as “one of the most significant financial sponsors of Islamic extremist activities in the world.”²⁵⁸

Building a Global Reputation

While al-Qaeda was flying under the radar of international intelligence services in the 1980s and early 1990s, bin Laden was keen in building a global reputation. In addition to physical recruitment efforts, bin Laden was fundamentally interested in building up the al-Qaeda “brand.” In the beginning, however, many of these efforts were looked upon with disdain by Azzam.

The media campaign began after the Battle of Jaji, the battle in which Osama bin Laden’s compound was attacked by a Soviet air campaign. As earlier suggested, this battle was fundamental in building up bin Laden’s own warrior reputation among Arab jihadists. After the fighting subsided, bin Laden created a fifty-minute video that “showed him riding horses, talking to Arab volunteers, broadcasting on the radio, firing weapons.”²⁵⁹ Videos were even taken during the raid itself, and included shots of executions of Russians.²⁶⁰ Bin Laden also began to seek out Arab journalists to spread word to other Arab recruits.²⁶¹ Stories began to percolate throughout the Arab World of bin Laden’s battlefield exploits.

While bin Laden was extraordinary in spreading his messages to the Arab world, Azzam grew frustrated. In fact, this media strategy was the first sign of trouble between the two men; Azzam felt that bin Laden was no longer as focused on supporting the mujahideen as bin Laden was focused on building up an Arab fighting coalition.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 320

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 163.

²⁶⁰ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 54

²⁶¹ Ibid., 54 & 57; Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 69.

Yet, after Azzam's death in 1989, bin Laden continued to pontificate to the Arab World without reservations. When the Saudi family angered bin Laden by allowing U.S. troops onto Saudi soil during the First Gulf War, bin Laden responded with a major media campaign against the Kingdom. Bin Laden worked with two young Islamist preachers known as the "Awakening Sheikhs" who "recorded anti-American sermons on cassette tapes and circulated millions of copies around the kingdom in late 1990 and early 1991."²⁶² Bin Laden also began delivering lectures around Jeddah mosques and circulating the anti-American cassette tapes. Bin Laden's efforts culminated in the "Letter of Demands," a letter addressed to King Fahd, which included dozens of signatures of other Islamists. According to researcher Steve Coll, "For the first time the CIA began to see evidence that Arab jihadists trained in Afghanistan posed a threat in Saudi Arabia itself."²⁶³ Bin Laden was beginning to make a name for himself as a key jihadist and Islamist.

Ironically, even though Azzam did not intend to recruit Arabs to the anti-US campaign that bin Laden was keen on expanding, Azzam's speeches had an impact for years to come. The most prominent example of the radicalizing impact of Azzam's speeches is demonstrated by a Kuwaiti man named Ramzi Yousef. As a teenager, Yousef was exposed to the "fiery sermons about the Afghan jihad" of Abdullah Azzam.²⁶⁴ Yousef also often listened to underground cassette tapes, read of Azzam in newspapers, and read pamphlets on the Afghani jihad.²⁶⁵ In 1990, Yousef entered a Arab camp in Afghanistan, Khalden, where he trained for about six months.²⁶⁶ Two years later, in 1992, Yousef moved to New York where he connected with Islamists that had trained in Peshawar with Azzam. On February 26, 1993, Yousef attempted to blow up the World Trade Center.

²⁶² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 229.

²⁶³ *Ibid*, 230.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 248.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 248.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 249.

By Yousef’s standards, the attack was unsuccessful. He had hoped to cause about 250,000 deaths, whilst only ended up killing six and wounding one thousand.²⁶⁷ The attack also caused over \$500 million in damage.²⁶⁸ After the attack, Yousef disappeared to Pakistan, where, after many months later, it was uncovered he was hiding in *al-Beit al-Shuhadaa* (“House of the Martyrs”), a Pakistani guest house funded by bin Laden.

Yousef’s attack signaled to the world that the United States was not invulnerable from jihadi terror attacks. Moreover, it serves as a potent reminder to readers just how impactful Azzam and bin Laden’s message could be. Even though Azzam did not intend to recruit jihadis to bin Laden’s Arab-centered cause, Azzam’s work inspired the first major terror attack by this new wave of jihadis on Western soil.

1993 was a big year for al-Qaeda’s morale. Just eight months after the World Trade incident, al-Qaeda-trained Somalis helped to down a U.S. Black Hawk helicopter. The event would infamously become known as the Battle of Mogadishu, or the Black Hawk Down incident. In a 1996 interview with Peter L. Bergen, bin Laden officially claimed that his group was affiliated with the attack stating, “With Allah’s grace, Muslims in Somalia cooperated with some Arab holy warriors who were in Afghanistan.”²⁶⁹ Bergen continues to describe, “For bin Laden, Somalia was clearly an intoxicating victory. He exulted in the fact that the United States withdrew its troops from the country, pointing to the withdrawal as an example of the ‘weakness, frailty and cowardice of the U.S. troops.’”²⁷⁰ Clearly, Somalia was a major tactical win for al-Qaeda, demonstrating their potential to strike the U.S. via regional proxies. Even former Senator Bob Kerrey, who served on the 9/11 commission, admitted, “It is true that al Qaeda was emboldened by 1993—it was their

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 250.

²⁶⁸ Ibid, 250

²⁶⁹ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 22.

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

first successful attack on us.”²⁷¹ While the links to al-Qaeda were not publicized until three years after the attack, the Black Hawk Down incident certainly inflated al-Qaeda’s confidence.

There is also some evidence that, during the early 1990s when bin Laden was in exile in Sudan, bin Laden was still working on recruiting Arabs to his nascent al-Qaeda organization. For one count, bin Laden “fashioned himself as a lecturer-businessman,” often preaching at mosques in Khartoum.²⁷² During the early 1990s, bin Laden helped to form the Committee for Advice and Reform (ARC, or *Hayat al-Nasiha w’al-Islah*) and the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR, or *Lajnat al-Difa’ ‘an al-Huquq al-Shar’iyya*)²⁷³. These groups “were active in faxing letters of opposition to Saudi Arabia and popularizing Islamist dissent in Saudi Arabia to the English-speaking world.”²⁷⁴ Moreover, as earlier recorded, bin Laden was buying weapons and printing presses from Islamists in Egypt. The detail of the printing presses is notable, as it indicates that bin Laden placed equal importance on the acquisition of physical weaponry as he did on the tools for the dissemination of the jihadist ideology. In other words, while he was in Sudan, bin Laden was just as concerned with spreading jihad through propaganda as he was on training new recruits.

On August 23, 1996, bin Laden infamously declared war on the West. This “Declaration of *Jihad* against the Americans occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries” or “Ladenese Epistle” was issued after bin Laden’s expulsion from Sudan.²⁷⁵ The speech was translated into various languages and distributed on audio cassettes. Of notable help in carrying the message was

²⁷¹ James Gordon Meek, “*Black Hawk Down*” Anniversary: *al Qaeda’s Hidden Hand*, (ABC News, October 4, 2013), <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/black-hawk-anniversary-al-qaedas-hidden-hand/story?id=20462820>.

²⁷² Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 269.

²⁷³ For more on the ARC, see Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 88.

²⁷⁴ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 70.

²⁷⁵ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 23. As noted by Glenn E. Robinson in *Global Jihad*, “It is often said, incorrectly, that Bin Laden’s 1996 document was a *fatwa* (religious opinion). It was not.” [Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 74].

the CDLR London branch, which disseminated bin Laden's message to British newspapers.²⁷⁶ Bin Laden's 1996 speech was of particular importance, as it is one of the first documents in which he labels the United Nations and United States as potential targets.

Later in 1996, in November, Osama bin Laden was interviewed by *Nida'ul Islam*, an Australian journal edited by Muslim Activists. This interview is often overlooked as a key doctrinal text; however, for the purposes of al-Qaeda's popularization, this interview is crucial. As described by scholar Bruce Lawrence, this interview "can be regarded as an indication of bin Laden's efforts to expand media coverage of his appeal for a global jihad."²⁷⁷ This is due to two key features: (1) the interview's publication in Australia represents the global reach bin Laden strove to gain; and (2) bin Laden specifically notes transgressions of the global community against Muslims in Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, demonstrating how bin Laden sees his reach as not isolated to a singular Muslim struggle. This is important in further delineating bin Laden's ideology from his predecessor, Abdallah Azzam. Again, we notice that bin Laden is less focused on Afghanistan than he is on a pan-Islamic struggle against Western forces and "despotic" Muslim governments.

Bin Laden's efforts to reach global news did not stop with his 1996 speeches; in March 1997 Bin Laden met with CNN reporter Peter Arnett. The visit was arranged by ARC and Arnett's colleague Peter Bergen.²⁷⁸ According to Bergen, when speaking with the ARC representative, Khaled al-Fawwaz, Khaled was initially interested in broadcasting the interview on CBS. However, once Khaled learned that CNN broadcasted to hundreds of countries and CBS was only

²⁷⁶ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 23; Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 74.

²⁷⁷ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 31.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 44. For a full account of the interview, see: Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 1-23.

shown in the US, Khaled decided to choose CNN.²⁷⁹ This decision, yet again, demonstrates al-Qaeda's desire to reach the widest audience possible.

When Arnett inquired about bin Laden's future plans, bin Laden responded with a chilling statement: "You'll see them and hear about them in the media, God willing (*inshallah*)."²⁸⁰ As would come to pass, the media did indeed pick up on al-Qaeda activities just under one year later.

"The Second Wave of Global Jihad"²⁸¹

While, throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, bin Laden was incomparable in spreading the word of *jihad* throughout the world, his rhetoric notably shifted in 1998. Even when bin Laden criticized the United States in his 1996 "Declaration of *Jihad*," he equally criticized the Saudi government for its actions in Kuwait and Yemen. Such a point is illuminated by scholar Glenn E. Robinson who writes, "this was not, strictly speaking, a 'far enemy' document. Bin Laden reserved equal disdain for the Saudi monarchy and the quisling Muslim clerics who allowed the monarchy to run roughshod over Islam."²⁸² Robinson's note reminds us that even in 1996, bin Laden was primarily operating under a "near enemy" doctrine.

This all changed on February 23, 1998 with bin Laden's first and only *fatwa*, "The World Islamic Front." Remarkably, bin Laden never had the religious credentials to issue a *fatwa*, nor to refer to himself as a *sheikh*, which he does in the *fatwa*'s signatory. Additionally, bin Laden does not gain religious credentials simply by citing *fatawa* (multiple *fatwa*) of other scholars in his own speech. Yet this *fatwa* is more significant for reasons other than it being an utter embarrassment to bin Laden's credibility as a religious leader. Most notably, the *fatwa* focuses on the U.S.

²⁷⁹ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 6.

²⁸⁰ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 56 [transliteration my own].

²⁸¹ This title is borrowed from Glenn E. Robinson's *Global Jihad*, 78.

²⁸² Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 76.

“occupation” of Saudi Arabia, the U.S. sanctions on Iraq, and Israel’s occupation of Islam’s third holiest mosque.²⁸³ As again described by Robinson, “No longer is the Saudi regime or any other apostate near-enemy regime equally responsible for these travails. Rather, they are now powerless to stop the American occupation and aggression.”²⁸⁴ The 1998 *fatwa* is, thus, a clear example of the “far enemy” doctrine.

It is also important to note that bin Laden’s 1998 *fatwa* had major political implications. As Zawahiri co-signed the *fatwa*, this effectively declared that Zawahiri’s *al-Jihad al-Islami* organization was now linked with al-Qaeda.²⁸⁵ Other co-signers of the document included Abu Yasir Rif’ai Ahmad Taha of the Egyptian Islamic Group (*al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya*), Sheikh Mir Hamzah secretary of *Jamiat e Ulema of Pakistan*, and Fazlur Rahman, *amir* (prince) of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh.²⁸⁶ Thus, al-Qaeda formalized its ties to global jihadi parties, representing its new global strategy.

Finally, bin Laden’s *fatwa* had deep religious implications by not delineating between American civilians and the U.S. military. The *fatwa* states:

With God’s permission we call on everyone who believes in God and wants reward to comply with His will to kill the Americans and seize their money wherever and whenever they find them. We also call on religious scholars, their leaders, their youth, and their soldiers, to launch the raid on the soldiers of Satan, the Americans, and whichever devil’s supporters are allied with them, to rout those behind them so they will not forget them.²⁸⁷

In bin Laden’s provocative language, he suggests that all Americans, civilian or military, are at fault for America’s sins. As earlier indicated, this represents a major delineation from the thousand

²⁸³ For the full *fatwa*, see *Messages to the World*, 58.

²⁸⁴ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 79.

²⁸⁵ Notably, linking the two groups was not the best strategy for al-Zawahiri, as many of the *al-Jihad al-Islami* members did not want to be a part of al-Qaeda. As Robinson reports: “most Egyptian al-Jihad members thought this new mission was a mistake and wanted to remain focused on Egypt’s situation. Only a position of al-Jihad followed Zawahiri on the jihad and those cadres, combined with bin Laden’s recruits to al-Qa’ida, hardly made for much of a fighting force.” [Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 81]

²⁸⁶ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 58-59.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

years of Muslim history, which clearly makes it *haram* (forbidden) to target women and children.²⁸⁸

Bin Laden and his growing al-Qaeda organization got a major publicity bump in 1998 not just from his *fatwa*. On August 7th, two truck bombs were set off at U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya.²⁸⁹ During the bombings, twelve Americans and 212 Africans were killed.²⁹⁰ Four thousand more were injured.²⁹¹ The scenes were horrific. According to Kenyan diplomat, Prudence Bushnell, “This huge procession of people who were bleeding all over one another. There was blood everywhere on the bannister. I could feel someone bleeding on my hair and back.”²⁹² As put by the U.S. lawyer prosecuting the embassy bombers, Patrick Fitzgerald, “The lucky are blinded and the unlucky are dead.”²⁹³

The attacks were a major success for al-Qaeda, not only because the assailants succeeded in massacring affiliates of U.S. foreign policy, but also because of the way that the attacks could be used to bolster al-Qaeda’s reputation. For one count, the attacks solidified al-Qaeda’s reputation as religiously legitimate. Al-Qaeda named the Tanzania attack Operation al-Aqsa—a reference to a Jerusalem mosque controlled by Israel, the third holiest site in Islam.²⁹⁴ Al-Qaeda called the Kenya attack the Holy Kaaba operation—a reference to the holiest site in Islam.²⁹⁵ The attacks were also set between 10:30 and 11 AM on a Friday (*juma’a*), the most observant day of the week for practicing Muslims.²⁹⁶ It is during this time on Fridays that observant Muslims would be

²⁸⁸ Even earlier in his life, before his 1996 declaration, bin Laden had distinguished between civilian and military targets. From 1966 on, bin Laden would deny that he ever made the distinction, yet the record proves otherwise. [Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 20.]

²⁸⁹ For detailed accounts of the bombing, see Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 403-404.

²⁹⁰ Robinson, *Global Jihad*, 81.

²⁹¹ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 110.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.105.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.105.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

worshipping at their mosques, which means that al-Qaeda was purposely trying to minimize the casualties of “innocent” Muslims. Al-Qaeda proved itself shrewd in its calculations; by not avoiding Muslim casualties, al-Qaeda could reinforce its Islamic credentials, albeit a twisted sense of Islam.

In addition to reinforcing al-Qaeda’s righteous reputation, the embassy bombings contributed to bin Laden’s growing media strategy. In fact, three months before the mission, Muhammad Rashed al-’Owhali, a conspirator in the Kenya bombings, was not simply briefed on his mission. Al-’Owhali was also the main subject of a video “in which he declared himself a martyr on behalf of the ‘Army of Liberation of the Islamic Holy Lands.’”²⁹⁷ This video, in addition to Bin Laden’s May *fatwa*, began to circulate extensively after the bombings, leading to the popularization of al-Qaeda’s message.

When the video of al-’Owhali surfaced soon after the embassy attacks, it quickly became clear that bin Laden was behind the embassy bombings. The life stories of the attackers were also a clear hint. Al-’Owhali was known to devour magazines and books about jihad, including the *Jihad* magazine published by the Services Office. He was trained at al-Qaeda’s *Khaldan* camp in Afghanistan, where he learned how to conduct attacks on American military bases and embassies. Tanzania’s bombing conspirator, Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, also trained in Afghanistan. While he never met bin Laden, he learned about bin Laden’s calls for attacks against the U.S. from CNN and BBC. Combined, the Afghani al-Qaeda camps and media coverage of bin Laden helped to radicalize these two men. Both men admitted that senior al-Qaeda operatives were the directors of their attacks.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, p.107

With bin Laden's fingerprints all over the lives of the Tanzanian and Kenyan bombers, it was clear that bin Laden was behind the attacks. As noted by scholar Bruce Lawrence, "These were the first terrorist actions that could unequivocally be connected to bin Laden."²⁹⁸ Bin Laden may have never explicitly given instructions to the Kenya embassy bombers, but there was no doubt that al-Qaeda trained and inspired these embassy bombers.²⁹⁹ At this moment, it became clear that bin Laden was not only a financier of terrorism directed towards the United States, but bin Laden was also a strategist of this new wave jihadi terrorism.

The question for the US, at this point, was no longer who planned the bombings but how to react. On August 8th, a day after the bombing, intelligence officers received reports that there was to be a meeting of senior members of terrorist groups on August 20th.³⁰⁰ Bin Laden was thought to be among the potential attendees. So, on August 20th, Clinton launched seventy-five Tomahawk cruise missiles at Zawahar, Pakistan, the site of the terrorists' meeting.³⁰¹ The mission was known as Operation Infinite Reach.³⁰² While twenty-one Pakistani jihadists died and dozens were wounded, bin Laden was not among the casualties. The mission was a resounding embarrassment to the Clinton presidency.³⁰³

Together, the embassy bombings and the American's failure to assassinate bin Laden served as a massive publicity stunt for al-Qaeda. While Clinton faced criticism back home, bin Laden was celebrated amongst jihadists in the Arab world. As stated by expert Steve Coll, "Bin Laden's reputation in the Islamic world had been enhanced...The missile strikes were his biggest

²⁹⁸ Lawrence ed., *Messages to the World*, 65.

²⁹⁹ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 30.

³⁰⁰ *Ghost Wars*, p.409.

³⁰¹ *Ibid*, 411.

³⁰² Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 118.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, 412. The timing of the embassy bombings and subsequent action by the Clinton administration, as Clinton was facing significant public criticism at the time. The criticism was primarily due to the Monica Lewinsky scandal, which had become public news in 1998. For more on the scandal, see: <https://www.history.com/topics/1990s/monica-lewinsk/>

publicity payoff to date.”³⁰⁴ After the unsuccessful U.S. strikes, bin Laden gave his first interview to the Qatari Arab news outlet, al Jazeera, which lasted a full ninety minutes.³⁰⁵ By late 1999, the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center calculated that al-Qaeda operated in more than sixty countries.³⁰⁶ Al-Qaeda had become a brand name that spoke to Muslims in nearly every language throughout the entire globe.

In addition to al-Qaeda’s own propaganda of the event, Western media played a significant role in amplifying al-Qaeda’s voice. A study on this very topic found that, “In 2000, for example, CBS News and NBC News broadcast significantly more stories mentioning bin Laden than segments referring to Great Britain’s prime minister, Tony Blair and Germany’s chancellor, Gerhard Schroder. ABC News presented the same number of stories mentioning bin Laden and Blair, far fewer to Schroder”³⁰⁷ Importantly, this played right into bin Laden’s hands; by emphasizing an “us vs. them” narrative, Western media re-emphasized bin Laden’s own message.

Bin Laden, both through his own efforts and through his portrayal on media, had become larger than life. A Pakistani cleric described at the time that bin Laden had become “a symbol for the whole Islamic world against all those outside powers who were trying to crush Muslims. He is the courageous one who raised his voice against them. He’s a hero to us, but it is America that first made him a hero.”³⁰⁸ Bin Laden’s dream of creating a Muslim coalition to fight the far enemy had been realized. He had inspired a small minority of the Muslim world that would soon join his fighting force.

³⁰⁴ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 412.

³⁰⁵ Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World*, 65.

³⁰⁶ Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 124; By this point, al-Qaeda training camps had “attracted a rainbow coalition of Jordanians, Turks, Palestinians, Iraqis, Saudis, Sudanese, Moroccans, Omanis, Tunisians, Tanzanians, Malaysians, Bangladeshis, Indians, Filipinos, Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chinese Uighurs, Burmese, Germans, Swedes, French, Arab-Americans, and African Americans. [Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 30-31.]

³⁰⁷ Brigitte L Nacos, *Mass Mediated Terrorism*, 100 in Douglas Kellner, *The Media In and After 9/11*, (Los Angeles: International Journal of Communication, vol. 1, 2007), 138.

³⁰⁸ Bergen, *Holy War Inc.*, 126.

#NeverForget

Even two decades after the 9/11 attacks, it remains difficult to analyze the antecedents and consequences of 9/11 given the immense ongoing trauma as a result of the day. Yet, it is important to unpack how part of that trauma has roots both in the context which inspired the 9/11 attacks and in the media spectacle that 9/11 became. This is not to overlook the real trauma experienced from 9/11; but rather, to pay homage to it by better understanding how collective trauma was an intentional strategy on the part of bin Laden.

First, it is important to not forget the context in which these growing attacks were situated against American forces. While al-Qaeda grew its connections throughout the world, it was in Afghanistan where new recruits were turned into soldiers. Al-Qaeda capitalized on anti-American aggression that stemmed from perceptions of the U.S. as an occupying force in the Middle East. The growing number of attacks that were linked to the United States' military actions were a blind spot for American intelligence officials. "Clinton and his Small Group gave relatively little attention to the Afghanistan context from which the embassy bombings arose," argued Steve Coll in his analysis of U.S. missteps following the bombings.³⁰⁹ Rather than trying to understand the connection between the historical context from which al-Qaeda came into being and the present-day actions of the Pentagon, Clinton and his advisors were far more concerned with the immediate issues: finding bin Laden and punishing him for his actions. Clinton's administration was not worried about creating more terrorists in the process; in Clinton's mind, al-Qaeda had hit the U.S., so the U.S. had to hit back harder.

Not to mention, al-Qaeda continued to use the media to contextualize and popularize the 9/11 attack. The Summer prior to 9/11, a one-hundred-minute recruitment tape emerged in which

³⁰⁹ Coll, *Ghost Wars*.

bin Laden crowed, “Blood, blood, and destruction, destruction...We give you the good news that the forces of Islam are coming.”³¹⁰ In early June, bin Laden set up an interview in which he claimed “there would be attacks against American and Israeli facilities within the next several weeks.”³¹¹ It was clear that a plan was in motion, but to intelligence analysts who were only beginning to grasp the depths of al-Qaeda’s prolific media strategy, that plan was far from being recognized.

By mid-July, all nineteen of the attackers were in the United States. Nearly all of them visited Afghanistan for the first time in 1999 or 2000, again reflecting the significance of Afghanistan as a central point for weaponization of jihadis.³¹² Moreover, while fifteen of the attackers were Saudi, two were from the U.A.E., one was from Egypt, and another was from Lebanon.³¹³ The nineteen men from different nationalities had come together for a multinational cause, or perhaps, what could be described as a supranational cause. Like bin Laden, the men all shared a belief that they should target the head of the snake. In fact, early September was chosen after the attackers realized that Congress would be in session.³¹⁴ Their key targets would be sitting ducks, or so bin Laden’s men thought.

At 8:45 AM on September 11th, an American Airlines Boeing 767 crashed into the 80th floor of the World Trade Center’s north tower.³¹⁵ 18 minutes later, another Boeing 767 hit the 60th floor of the south tower. Both planes had roughly 20,000 gallons of jet fuel, making them highly explosive.³¹⁶ Hundreds were killed due to the impact of the planes, but many more were killed by inferno caused by the massive amount of jet fuel in the planes. Then, at 10 AM, the South Tower

³¹⁰ Bin Laden as quoted in Coll, *Ghost Wars*, 567.

³¹¹ *Ibid*, 566.

³¹² *Ibid*, 570.

³¹³ *Ibid*, 570.

³¹⁴ *Ibid*, 571.

³¹⁵ “September 11 Attacks.” *History.com*, September 11, 2020.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*.

began to collapse. Half an hour later, the North Tower collapsed. In total, the Twin Tower attacks left 2,763 dead³¹⁷

The Twin Towers, though most remembered, were not the only targets of the 9/11 attacks. At 9:45 AM, American Airlines Flight 77 struck the Pentagon, the U.S. military headquarters, killing 189 military personnel and civilians. Yet another flight, United Flight 93, was likely headed to Congress, based on the auspicious timing of events. This flight departed late, giving those on the plane time to get news of the first plane crashing into the Twin Towers. Thus, when the plane was taken over, the passengers fought back. Although all forty-four people aboard were killed, their actions prevented al-Qaeda from celebrating a total victory. Unfortunately for the U.S., Osama bin Laden had taken the lives of 2,977 people and injured 6,000 more.³¹⁸

Yet, to bin Laden, it was not just the death toll that was significant; rather, it was the symbolism of the attacks. As argued by researcher Lisa Finnegan in *No Questions Asked: News Coverage Since 9/11*, “the press promoted fear after 9/11, bought into the assumptions of the Bush Administration’s war, and then largely reproduced the Administration’s lies and propaganda.”³¹⁹ It was exactly the same “us and them” message that Osama bin Laden had wanted to create. In fact, in the book *Reflections in a Longshot Eye* by journalist Lawrence Pintak, Pintak argues that Bush and Osama bin Laden’s rhetoric and worldview discursively mirror each other.³²⁰ Bin Laden effectively heightened the polarization, reinforcing his own perspective that the U.S. and Muslims

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ “September 11 Terror Attacks Fast Facts,” *CNN*, September 18, 2020.

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/>; Despite the conventional, patriotic narrative, it is important to note that citizens from 78 countries died as a result of the attacks. This belies the notion that the attack was solely on American citizens. From bin Laden’s perspective, those 78 other countries were culpable for working with the U.S., but it would certainly be difficult to make the individual argument for each country. 9/11 was certainly a global event.

³¹⁹ Lisa Finnegan, *No Questions Asked: News Coverage Since 9/11* as quoted in Douglas Kellner, *The Media In and After 9/11*, (Los Angeles: International Journal of Communication, vol. 1, 2007), 136.

³²⁰ Lawrence Pintak *Reflections in a Longshot Eye*, in *ibid*, 137.

were at war. The Western media's repeated coverage of the towers falling in the days following the attacks did little to better educate the Western viewers. Instead, Western media coverage simply played into bin Laden's own hands.

In pitting Islam and the West against one another, bin Laden helped to recruit to his own cause, leading to an upsurge in recruitment after 9/11. As President Bush infamously said on September 21st, "You are Either With Us, or with the Terrorists."³²¹ On October 7th, bin Laden indirectly replied, "I tell you that these events have split the entire world into two camps: one of faith, with no hypocrites, and one of unbelief—may God protect us from it."³²² What were bin Laden and President Bush trying to do but convince the world to join their side? Their strategies were the same; denounce their opponent to attract the attention of their intended proponents. Bin Laden was speaking to Muslims and President Bush was trying to speak to other powerful nations, but each man was advertising.

As readers will understand in the next chapter, the torch of *takfirism* would become emblematic of al-Qaeda in Iraq, better known today as ISIS. The work to galvanize Arabs in Afghanistan would be brought to Iraq and, with it, would go al-Qaeda's divisive propaganda machine. Importantly, the impact of *takfirism* was not limited to the Western target; Bin Laden utilized *takfirism* to target Shi'a, liberal Sunnis, Christians, and Jews. Bin Laden's decades-long fight was only beginning to take shape.

³²¹ "Bush: 'You are Either with Us, or With the Terrorists,'" VOA, September 21, 2001. <https://www.voanews.com/archive/bush-you-are-either-us-or-terrorists-2001-09-21>.

³²² Lawrence, *Messages to the World*, 105.

CHAPTER THREE: THE RISE AND FALL OF al- QAEDA in IRAQ (AQI)

“Al-Zarqawi was not buying into their version of *jihad*, and they didn’t really give a shit about him. So it was more like: ‘Here, go make your jihad in Jordan. That sounds great.’”
- Nada Bakos, former analyst for the CIA

Early Iterations of al-Qaeda in Iraq

It was in late 1993 that the first iteration of al-Qaeda in Iraq formed. As earlier recorded, this organization was called *Bayit al-Imam* (Allegiance to the Imam). It was, in fact, created by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s mentor, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Maqdisi and Zarqawi formed *Bayit al-Imam* due to a variety of causes. First, both men had just returned from Hayatabad, Pakistan, where they had been waging *jihad* against the Soviets. The men did not want to give up their cause.³²³ By this point, Zarqawi had already had an epiphany, a dream in which “a sword had fallen from the sky and upon which the word ‘jihad’ was prescribed.”³²⁴ According to Zarqawi, his fate was set; his new lifelong mission was to wage *jihad*.

Secondly, the men had major religious and political concerns. Western culture saturated within the Jordanian borders; “alcohol, pornography, and sex could be had relatively easily.”³²⁵ Coupled with major geopolitical events—the Palestinians signing the Oslo Accords in 1993, the Iraqis losing the Gulf War to the Americans, and peace talks beginning between the Jordanians and Israelis—Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi were enraged. With some seed money from bin Laden to help get the jihadist organization running, Zarqawi and Maqdisi were able to begin stockpiling weaponry.³²⁶

³²³ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 32.

³²⁴ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), 7.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 8.

³²⁶ Daniel L. Byman and Jennifer R. Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda: Jihadism's Global Civil War,” Brookings (Brookings, July 28, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/isis-vs-al-qaeda-jihadisms-global-civil-war/>; Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 9.

Despite their passion for operating against the Jordanian government, Zarqawi and Maqdisi were being tracked by the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate (*mukhabarat*). When the two men tried to flee the *mukhabarat* in March 1994, they were arrested, charged, and convicted with possessing illegal weapons and belonging to a terrorist operation. Apparently, both men tried to turn their trial into propaganda. They decried everybody in the courtroom for their *haram* (religiously forbidden) behavior and even submitted a letter to the judge “in which they claimed that [the courtroom] was acting against the teachings of the Holy Quran.”³²⁷ While at the time, the co-conspirators’ actions seemed insignificant, they would catch the attention of bin Laden.³²⁸

As earlier recorded, Zarqawi’s time in prison was extremely transformative. Zarqawi used the time to study the Qur’an and became hardened in his faith. Yet Zarqawi’s prison sentence did not only impact Zarqawi, but also, *Bayit al-Imam* itself. Zarqawi spent the time converting many to his cause. From petty criminals to Afghan Arabs like himself, Zarqawi gained many new followers in prison.

Zarqawi even was able to use the time in prison to recruit outside of the prison walls. He had quite an operation going. Zarqawi was the recruiter who controlled the entire apparatus. Maqdisi was the preacher, whose Islamist sermons would reverberate throughout the prison walls. And, with the help of Maqdisi’s closest friend, Sheikh Abu Qatada, Maqdisi’s speeches went beyond the prison. The operation is well described by journalist Mary Anne Weaver, who writes: “Now al-Maqdisi’s religious tracts were smuggled out of Sawaqa by prisoners’ wives and mothers, with help from sympathetic prison guards, and they were sent on to Abu Qatada, who posted them on the Web sites of Salafists and jihadists throughout Europe, the Middle East, and the Persian

³²⁷ Ibid, 10.

³²⁸ Ibid, 11.

Gulf.”³²⁹ Clearly, Zarqawi’s media efforts had not ended, despite his incarceration. By the time of Zarqawi’s release in 1999, he had become the *amir* (prince) of *Bayit al-Imam*.

After being released from prison, it is possible that Zarqawi may have even planned a major terrorist attack. Nicknamed the “Millennium Plot,” the attack was planned to bomb Christian tourist sites in Jordan during the 2000 millennium celebrations.³³⁰ Yet, the plot was foiled by Jordanian authorities, and Zarqawi escaped to Pakistan.

In 2000, Zarqawi began working on a new project—the creation of the group, *Jamaat al-Taawhid wa-l-lihad* (JTWJ, School of Unity and Jihad), in the Afghanistan city of Herat.³³¹ Bin Laden gave JTWJ somewhere between \$5,000 to \$200,000 in seed money.³³² According to terrorism specialists Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, “This may have been a test to see how well al-Zarqawi could get on with so little.”³³³ The camp was scarce, just a small patch of land with a banner reading *Tawhid wal-Jihad*, “a couple of chin-up bars, and guys running around with AK-47s,” as reported by an ex-Pentagon official.³³⁴ Though located in Afghanistan, the camp fielded many recruits from Jordan and Palestine. To the chagrin of bin Laden, Zarqawi intended his camp to train recruits in *jihad* against Middle Eastern apostate regime, not against the “far enemy.”³³⁵

³²⁹Mary Anne Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, *The Atlantic*, July/August, 2006. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983>

³³⁰Rabasa, Angel, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O’Brien, and William Rosenau. “The Al-Zarqawi Network: Jordanian and Iraqi Jihadis.” In *Beyond Al-Qaeda: Part 1, The Global Jihadist Movement*, 135-46. RAND Corporation, 2006. Accessed April 29, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg429af.18>; Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life.”

³³¹Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 14; Aaron Y Zelin, “The War between ISIS and Al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement” (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014), https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_20_Zelin.pdf, 2; Such letters that were faxed to the Saudi government included “The Betrayal of Palestine” (Dec 29, 1994) and “The Invasion of Arabia (1995/1996).

³³²Weaver, “The Short, Violent Life.”; Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 14.

³³³Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 14-15.

³³⁴*Ibid*, 15.

³³⁵At the time, bin Laden had more important things to pay attention to than Zarqawi’s insolence. As stated by Nada Bakos, a former analyst for the CIA, “Al-Zarqawi was not buying into their version of *jihad*, and they didn’t really give a shit about him. So it was more like: ‘Here, go make your jihad in Jordan. That sounds great.’” [*Ibid*, 15]

With the “near enemy” strategy in mind, in 2002, Zarqawi went about planning another attack. JTWJ received \$35,000 from al-Qaeda to conduct a suicide operation on Israel.³³⁶ Yet the two Jordanians Zarqawi sent to fulfill the mission—two men Zarqawi had met in prison—were arrested in Turkey.³³⁷ Once again, Zarqawi’s attempt at a terrorist attack had failed.

Zarqawi quickly had to flee his Herat base, and with him, he brought the JTWJ to Iraq. Once in Iraq, Zarqawi set about recreating his network. As earlier suggested, Zarqawi used the notoriety from Powell’s infamous 2002 U.N. speech to help unify the diverse *jihadi* groups in Iraq. These groups included *Ansar al-Islam*, *Jaysh Mohammed*, *al-Jamaa Salafiya*, *Takfir wal Hijra*, and *Jund al-Sham*. The names of the groups give a window into their ideological basis. For instance, *takfir wal hijra* clearly takes pride in a *takfiri*, anti-Shia mindset.

The reason for the diversity of *jihadist* groups in Iraq partially reverts to the First Gulf War. Saddam Hussein “sought to fortify his regime against fundamentalist opponents, foreign and domestic, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus he Islamized his regime.”³³⁸ In other words, Hussein was attempting to shore up concerns of internal opposition by fortifying his own religious credentials. Hussein’s Islamization of Iraqi politics would come to be known as the Faith Campaign and would have major implications for the next two decades.

One of the most notable trends emerging from the Faith Campaign was the rise in militarized Islam. Hussein sent many of his top military officers to Salafist Islamic Schools, thinking that they could infiltrate the movements while remaining loyal to the Baathist regime.³³⁹ The opposite occurred: many officers emerged more loyal to Salafism than Saddam’s Baathist regime. Thus, Hussein had created many Salafists that would go on to attack his relatively

³³⁶ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 47.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 25.

³³⁹ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 25.

“secular” regime. Intelligence officials now had a keen appreciation for the depths of Sunni religiosity in Iraq and learned how to exploit it.³⁴⁰ When the Americans would later invade, many of these intelligence officers would utilize such knowledge to the benefit of AQI. For the time being, however, the Faith Campaign would simply lead to an overall amplification of conservative Salafism through the Iraqi Sunni community.

Thus, even before the U.S. forces invaded Iraq, there were many Iraqi, Syrian, and Jordanian Sunnis who could be convinced to join Zarqawi. In Iraq, recruitment was partially driven by the amount of animosity against the international community. Since the First Gulf War in 1991, U.S. support for the Iraqi people against the brutal regime of Saddam Hussein had not materialized. International relations scholar, Fawaz Gerges, describes the brutal conditions that emerged in Iraq by 2003:

...the UN sanctions regime, led by the United States and seconded by Great Britain, also further contributed to the collapse of the country’s water, electricity, health care, and agriculture systems and hyperinflation set in. As the country’s economy continued its downward spiral, two-thirds of the Iraqi army were demobilized, with many facing unemployment upon their return home. Government salaries were heavily cut if even paid. With teachers leaving their jobs and chronic shortages in school supplies, the education system was also heavily affected, leading to a sharp fall in the country’s literacy rates. Between Hussein’s catastrophic wars and policies, the bombing campaign, and the UN embargo, Iraq’s socioeconomic fabric had been torn by the time of the 2003 invasion...³⁴¹

Understandably, the U.S.-led sanctions caused many Iraqis to blame the U.S. for their country’s decline. Coupled with the rise of Salafism, a Wahhabi, anti-Western doctrine began to arise within Iraq’s Sunni community.

To add fuel to the fire, in the months leading up to the U.S. occupation, Osama bin Laden began a massive media campaign against Western forces. Bin Laden advocated for “martyrdom occupations,” or

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 26.; In fact, as recorded by Gerges, Hussein “instrumentalized religiosity for political gains, and continued to support the Palestinian cause by engineering a rapprochement with Hamas, an Islamist resistance movement. Between 2000 and 2003, the Iraqi government provided financial support for the families of Palestinian suicide bombers, including those of Hamas members” (Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 62.

³⁴¹ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 99-100.

suicide bombings, in order to fight the coming American forces.³⁴² Osama bin Laden would soon get his call answered.

On October 28, 2002, Zarqawi got a chance to test his new Sunni coalition. Zarqawi's associates Salem Saad Salem Ben Suweid (aka Abu Abdallah) and Mohammed Issa Mohammed Daamas (aka Abu Oman), successfully snuck into Jordan. The two men then assassinated Laurence Foley, an American USAID worker, in Foley's own garage.³⁴³ The attack was the first of many successful attacks planned by Zarqawi and represented a turning point in his career.

In March 2003, the U.S. occupation of Iraq dramatically shifted the relationship between JTWJ and AQC. The invasion gave al-Qaeda an opportune chance to strike U.S. forces, though AQC still needed regional support.³⁴⁴ At the time, al-Zarqawi wanted JTWJ to remain independent, but his organization was still struggling to make a significant impact in Iraq. Ansar al-Islam, one of JTWJ's affiliates, issued a press release that June calling for recruits to fight against the Americans. In order to recuperate from the bombings that the group was facing, Ansar al-Islam leadership also appealed for donations.³⁴⁵ It appeared Zarqawi's organization was under some financial stress.

To combat the challenges the JTWJ was facing, Zarqawi employed a double strategy of ultra-violence and media propaganda of such violence. In August, Zarqawi made his Iraqi debut through a string of attacks. The first attack occurred on August 7th when Zarqawi's men exploded a van against a wall outside the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad.³⁴⁶ The blast killed seventeen people. Twelve days later, another JTWJ member exploded a bomb-laden truck outside Baghdad's Canal Hotel, the headquarters of the UN in Baghdad.³⁴⁷ Twenty-two humanitarian aid workers were killed, including Special Representative of the

³⁴² Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 22.

³⁴³ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 86.

³⁴⁴ Zelin, "The War between ISIS," 12.

³⁴⁵ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 126.

³⁴⁶ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 28.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 28.

Secretary-General, Sergio Vieira de Mello.³⁴⁸ 200 others were injured. Then, on August 29th, Zarqawi's forces attacked the Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib Mosque in Najaf.³⁴⁹ The attacks killed ninety-five Shia, including the founder of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).

Notably, the embassy attack was on a "far enemy" target, perhaps to appease bin Laden while he and Zarqawi negotiated the status of JTWJ. However, it is equally possible that the attack was to generate greater media exposure, particularly to Western audiences, as the next chapter will argue. With Zarqawi's attempt to grow the reputation of his own organization, notoriety was certainly necessary.

Remarkably, these attacks were coordinated with significant help from former Baathists. Retired U.S. Army Colonel, Derek Harvey, explains: "Originally, the Baathists cooperated in the bombing of the U.N. and in other suicide bombings in 2003. The safe houses of the suicide bombers were adjacent to compounds and residences of the Special Security Organization [SSO] officers."³⁵⁰ Harvey further details that the SSO, a security apparatus in charge of the Special Republican Guard and Special Forces, gave JTWJ the trucks to complete their operations.³⁵¹ Finally, Harvey reports that that same Summer, SSO forces were even facilitating corridors for foreign fighters to enter Iraq. The Faith Campaign, yet again, was propelling Iraqi forces against the Americans.

Anti-American sentiment was also bolstered by Zarqawi's robust media strategy which prominently displayed dead U.S. soldiers. Even as early as March 2003, Ansar al-Islam posted images and videos on its website of mutilated bodies of American soldiers.³⁵² Yet, the most famous video Zarqawi helped to create was the execution of a twenty-six-year-old American contractor, Nicholas Berg, who was beheaded on April 9, 2004.³⁵³ Rather than staying quiet about the grotesque execution, Zarqawi seemed to revel in

³⁴⁸ "What is World Humanitarian Day?" *UNOCHA*, March 2012, https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/120223_OOM-worldhumanitarianday_eng.pdf.

³⁴⁹ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 71

³⁵⁰ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 28

³⁵¹ *Ibid*, 28.

³⁵² Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 129.

³⁵³ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 68.

the gruesome content. *Muntada al-Ansar*, a JTWJ affiliate, posted a video of the execution on its website.³⁵⁴ Al-Zarqawi, the thought-to-be executioner in the video, was quite intentional with his staging. He fully demonstrated the beheading and gore of the video on-screen.³⁵⁵ From this detail, it becomes clear that the video was made as propaganda intended to terrify JTWJ's targets and expand the notoriety of the JTWJ.

Indeed, the strategy of brutal beheadings would later become ISIS' de-facto propaganda tool. "Within a half year after the invasion of Iraq... Zarqawi became a household name for his brutal personal beheadings and fast-paced suicide bombing campaign against Shiite religious targets and Sunni civilians, among others," writes terrorism scholar Aaron Zelin.³⁵⁶ It was through these beheadings and suicide bombings that Zarqawi received the nickname: Sheikh of the Slaughterers.

The video of Berg's beheading quickly made international news. With it, Zarqawi's name was elevated, and he became a "pioneer" of combining horrific ultra-violence with mass media.³⁵⁷ Not to mention, "the media coverage only made him more popular among militant Islamist circles in both the Arab world in the West, and, in turn, it facilitated the recruitment of jihadists abroad."³⁵⁸ Between committing discriminate violence and distributing propaganda of such discriminate violence, Zarqawi had finally created a lasting media strategy.

Zarqawi Pledges *Baya*...Finally

After years of negotiations, Zarqawi eventually pledged *baya* to bin Laden in 2004, an act that officially linked JTWJ to al-Qaeda.³⁵⁹ With al-Zarqawi's pledge, he now gained access to the donors, logistics, and recruitment facilitation networks of AQC.³⁶⁰ Al-Zarqawi also renamed the group *Tanzim*

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 68.

³⁵⁵ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 32.

³⁵⁶ Zelin, "The War between ISIS."

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 32.

³⁵⁸ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 68.

³⁵⁹ Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."

³⁶⁰ Ibid; Zelin, "The War between ISIS," 2.

Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn (al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers), though it was known more commonly as AQI.³⁶¹

The timing of Zarqawi's *baya* may seem odd, given that, at this point, Zarqawi and bin Laden had extremely divergent views on the direction they wanted to take al-Qaeda. Bin Laden's focus was still concentrated on targeting the "far enemy." Al-Zarqawi was much more interested in fighting "near enemies."³⁶² Even more concerning to bin Laden, was al-Zarqawi's substantial violence against local Muslims: Though AQC by no means advocated a peaceful strategy, bin Laden was very concerned with growing the support of local partners. If locals saw AQI blowing up Shia mosques or, even worse, liberal, Sunni mosques, bin Laden was worried the Iraqis would see it as "Muslims killing other Muslims."³⁶³ Finally, Zarqawi's desperation to grow the power of AQI was quite potent. From its outset, al-Zawahiri hoped AQI would provide the means to build and declare an Islamic State.³⁶⁴ Though this was one of AQC's long-term goals, bin Laden was adamant that it was not yet the time to declare a caliphate.

Despite bin Laden and Zarqawi's divergent positions, Zarqawi was forced to pledge *baya* when the Americans launched an offensive in Fallujah that October. Zarqawi published the *baya* on JTJWJ's Website in order to reinforce support from his parent organization.³⁶⁵

³⁶¹ Ibid; Shapiro, "The Insider's View," *The Terrorist's Dilemma*, 2013, Chapter Four;

³⁶² Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."

³⁶³ Byman and Williams, "ISIS vs. Al Qaeda."; Bacon and Arsenault, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2019): 242; AQC was so concerned with public opinion that Turner records, "when fighting in the Islamic world and expressed the need to apologize and take responsibility when operations fail to meet with expectations. Later in the same year, two al Qaeda leaders – Abu al-Libi and Attiya – chastised the Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan on similar grounds, which they refer to as 'religious mistakes which might result in a negative deviation from the set path of the jihadist movement in Pakistan, which also are contrary to the objectives of jihad and to the efforts exerted by us' They cite the killing of 'normal' Muslims and attacks in crowded public places among their chief grievances." [John Turner, "Strategic Difference," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): 208-225].

³⁶⁴ Bacon and Arsenault, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break," 242.

³⁶⁵ Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 151. However, Zarqawi could not help but insert a slight to bin Laden in his letter, writing "our brothers from Al-Qaeda have understood the strategy of the group Tawhid wal Jihad and are satisfied with the methods we have employed." Obviously, bin Laden and Zawahiri were *not* satisfied with Zarqawi's conduct.

The U.S. success in Fallujah would cause Zarqawi to flee, but at Fallujah, Zarqawi had won another media battle. For one, seventy marines were killed and 651 more were wounded in the battle.³⁶⁶ Compared to 2,175 insurgents who died, these numbers may seem low. However, Zarqawi was able to portray the dead insurgents as martyrs and the Americans as aggressors.³⁶⁷ In the media battlefield, that went a long way. In addition to the many casualties, the Battle of Fallujah resulted in significant destruction of the city. “The aftermath was a pocked moonscape, uninhabitable for many—not that many were left,” wrote Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. The massive destruction proved that America was waging “a total war against Islam,” in the words bin Laden himself.³⁶⁸ At this point, AQI was winning the media battle against the Americans.

In December 2004, bin Laden publicly responded to Zarqawi’s *baya*, solidifying the already extensive relationship between al-Qaeda Central and JTJW. The audiotape was broadcast on al Jazeera, further popularizing the message.³⁶⁹ Nonetheless, in private, bin Laden reprimanded the new organization. In an intercepted letter from Zawahiri (then, the deputy head of al-Qaeda) to Zarqawi, Zawahiri and bin Laden’s frustration with Zarqawi becomes quite clear.³⁷⁰ Zawahiri’s message “urged Zarqawi to remember “that we are in a battle” and that “more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media.”³⁷¹ Zawahiri even “warns Zarqawi that his beheading and slaughtering of hostages is bad propaganda.”³⁷² Al-Qaeda was growing quite concerned over Zarqawi’s impact on the al-Qaeda media strategy.

³⁶⁶ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 38.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 38. Zarqawi publicly called the martyrs “courageous resisters of Fallouja.” [Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face*, 151].

³⁶⁸ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 38.

³⁶⁹ Gerjes, *ISIS: A History*, 74.

³⁷⁰ Lee Hudson Teslik, “Profile: Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi,” Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, June 8, 2006), <https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/profile-abu-musab-al-zarqawi>.

³⁷¹ Zelin, “The War between ISIS” (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014), 3.

³⁷² Gerjes, *ISIS: A History*, 80.

Yet, Zarqawi, seemingly immune to criticism from his parent organization, continued his sectarian campaign. For instance, on November 5, 2005, AQI suicide bombers attacked three US-owned hotels in Amman, Jordan.³⁷³ The attack would be the worst terror attack in Jordanian history, killing sixty people.³⁷⁴ Then, on February 22, 2006, four AQI terrorists detonated explosives inside the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, Iraq.³⁷⁵ The mosque is one of the holiest shrines in Shia Islam.

As the former chapter suggested, the attacks had mixed effects. On one hand, the sectarian violence heightened tensions between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. On the other hand, many Sunni Muslims rejected the violence committed by Zarqawi. Zarqawi's bombings in Jordan would cause most Jordanians to consider AQI a terrorist organization.³⁷⁶ In Iraq, an organization even began called the *Majlis al-Sahwa* (Awakening Councils) which demonstrated a public desire to expel AQI from the Sunni triangle. Zarqawi's death in 2006 would ultimately be a sigh of relief for much of the Muslim world. However, what would come to follow would be even worse.

The Rise of ISI

After Zarqawi was killed, an umbrella Islamist organization, *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin* (the Mujahideen Shura Council) met to decide the fate of *jihad* in Iraq. They made two major decisions. First, the group decided to merge all their groups into AQI and to rebrand the organization the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).³⁷⁷ Secondly, they chose Abu Omar al-Baghdadi as Zarqawi's replacement. Zarqawi's deputy, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (aka Abu Ayyub al-Masri), pledged *baya* to al-Baghdadi. Al--Muhajir's *baya* effectively transferred the extensive resources of MSM to al-Baghdadi. While al-Baghdadi's state, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), was still an AQI affiliate, none of these changes in leadership or a declaration

³⁷³ Ibid, 88.

³⁷⁴ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 62.

³⁷⁵ Ibid, 63.

³⁷⁶ Gerjes, *ISIS: A History*, 88; Zelin, "The War between ISIS," 3.

³⁷⁷ Gerjes, *ISIS: A History*, 93.

of an Islamic State were approved by AQC.³⁷⁸ Neither Zawahiri nor bin Laden were consulted on the quite significant decisions that *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin* made on behalf of AQI.

Nevertheless, bin Laden stayed firm on his decision to present a front of unity. Bin Laden even ordered his lieutenants to defend ISI's declaration and "even provided the language for al-Zawahiri to use to justify its ally's decisions."³⁷⁹ Such a move demonstrated the relative weakness of al-Qaeda at the time. Like a parent trying to control a combative, young adult, al-Qaeda was fighting a losing battle.

After the death of Zarqawi, it initially appeared that ISI was on the decline. As earlier suggested, Zarqawi's strategy of extreme violence and sectarianism was not particularly popular with Sunni Iraqis in 2006. Moreover, by 2007, the *Majlis al-Sahwa* had spread throughout all of Iraq and even received American backing.³⁸⁰ The same year, thirty-thousand more U.S. troops entered Iraq, in a military feat now known as "The Surge."³⁸¹ It also hurt that by 2010, U.S. forces had captured or killed thirty four of the two forty two AQI leaders.³⁸² Together, these trends significantly crippled both ISI's popularity with Iraqi Sunnis and its ability to enact terror on its targets.

Ultimately, however, ISI's popularity re-emerged. In part, this was due to a reduced U.S. presence in Iraq. In November 2007, U.S. President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Kamel al-Maliki signed the "Declaration of Principles for a Long-Term Relationship of Cooperation and Friendship Between the Republic of Iraq and the United States of America."³⁸³ Despite what the declaration's long-winded title would suggest, the agreement's main impact was the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, *not* a robust, long-term plan for how the Iraqi government would function after the withdrawal.

³⁷⁸ Bacon and Arsenault, "Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break," 242.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁸⁰ Gerjes, *ISIS: A History*, 104.

³⁸¹ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 74.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁸³ R. Chuck Mason, "U.S.-Iraq Withdrawal/Status of Forces Agreement: Issue for Congressional Oversight," *Congressional Research Service*, July 13, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40011.pdf>.

The plan had major implications for the *Sahwa* movement. When the U.S. began to pull out of Iraq, the Maliki government began to go after the *Sahwa* adherents. Such a trend was detailed by terrorism specialist, Fawaz A. Gerges:

As long as US troops were in Iraq, the Sahwa were protected and their actions were heralded as a triumph, even though their tactics were not always lawful. After the transfer of authority to the Iraqi government, many of their members were incriminated and placed under investigation, thus deepening the divide between local and national politics...By 2009, tribal leaders were targeted by both ISI and the Iraqi forces.³⁸⁴

Dr. Jaber al-Jaberi, senior political advisor to the former deputy prime minister, also described this trend: “People don’t believe in the term ‘Awakening’ anymore because when the Iraqi government finished using the tribes, it turned against the Sons of Iraq.”³⁸⁵ What had once been a popular movement throughout the Sunni community became a sentence for imprisonment, or worse.

ISI’s media team was quick to take advantage of the newfound rivalry between the tribes and the Iraqi government. Much of ISI’s propaganda from this time used the term *sahwat* (practitioner of *sahwa*) in the pejorative and boasted of the destruction it enacted on the *sahwat*.³⁸⁶ With little trust in the government, the Sunni tribes of Iraq found themselves without allies and in danger. *Sahwa* became a dangerous affiliation and, thus, some of ISI’s biggest Iraqi resisters melted away.

The turn of the new Iraqi government on the *Sahwa* movement represented just one example of many of the sectarian policies that the Prime Minister Maliki, a Shi’a, would come to be known for. In the eyes of many Iraqi Sunnis, Maliki would treat Sunni Arabs like second-class citizens.³⁸⁷ For instance, since the formation of the post-Hussein government in Iraq, the new Shi’a government began a policy called de-Baathification. The policy is thought to have driven at least 50,000 Iraqis, mostly Sunni, from government jobs—though some estimates put the number as high as 100,000.³⁸⁸ Many of the jobs lost

³⁸⁴ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 111.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 81.

³⁸⁶ Weiss and Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 81.

³⁸⁷ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 118.

³⁸⁸ Alissa J. Rubin, “Ahmad Chalabi and the Legacy of De-Baathification in Iraq,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/world/middleeast/ahmad-chalabi-and-the-legacy-of-de-baathification-in-iraq.html>.

were in the Iraqi army. Thus, Sunni commanders were released from their duty in the favor of Shi'a commanders. The policies not only led to less competence when Iraq would come to battle ISIS; de-Baathification would mean that many highly trained militaristic Sunnis would be in search of employment. As a result, many former members of the Baathist army now joined ISIS. The trend was so profound that one expert estimates more than twenty-five of ISIS' top forty leaders were once part of the Iraqi military.³⁸⁹ Though, given its roots in post-2003 policy, de-Baathification does not explain exactly why the Iraqi Sunni community ultimately shifted its support back to ISIS, coupled with anti-*Sahwa* policies, de-Baathification would have a profound impact on Sunni disenfranchisement.

Four other major trends do explain the timing of the rise of Sunni radicalization: mass-imprisonment, a contentious 2010 election, the Arab Spring, and the formation of a robust social media apparatus for AQI.

First, the success of the *Sahwa* movement meant that, by the time U.S. troops began to withdraw, tens of thousands of Iraqis were in prison. By 2007, it was estimated that Camp Bucca, the prison that had formerly held Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, held 26,000 detainees.³⁹⁰ In 2007, an odd trend began to emerge. It seemed that some Iraqis *wanted* to be detained. Major General Doug Stone, who oversaw Camp Bucca, described, "If you were looking to build an army, prison is the perfect place to do it. We gave them health care, dental, fed them, and, most importantly, we kept them from getting killed in combat. Who needs a safe house in Anbar when there's an American jail in Basra?"³⁹¹ Such a sentiment was echoed by a former ISIS member interviewed by the Guardian: "We could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else....Here, we were not only safe, but we were only a few hundred [meters] away from the entire al-Qaida leadership."³⁹² If a Sunni Iraqi wanted to join the resistance against the Americans or the

³⁸⁹ Mark Thompson, "How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS," *TIME*, May 28, 2015, <https://time.com/3900753/isis-iraq-syria-army-united-states-military/>.

³⁹⁰ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 83.

³⁹¹ *Ibid*, 85.

³⁹² *Ibid*, 85.

Iraqi government, he would not need to personally know someone in the organization. Instead, he could simply find a way to be arrested, which, in the anti-Sunni environment that was increasingly clear through Maliki's governance, it was not that difficult to do. The trend of joining ISI after being imprisoned was so common that Major Stone referred to the US-run prisons as "jihadi universities."³⁹³ Many Iraqi prisoners that did not intend to join ISI were radicalized, simply by the nature of being surrounded by many powerful extremists. By recuperating in prisons, ISI was playing the long game. As of late 2007, it would just be a matter of time before the Americans would leave.

The second major timely event that impacted Sunni radicalization during this time period was the 2010 parliamentary elections. What is most important to note about these elections, was how negatively Sunni Iraqis viewed the 2010 elections. It was the first national election, in which "al-Maliki did not win as easily as he had expected to, and technically did not win at all."³⁹⁴ Through apt political maneuvering, al-Maliki, despite not gaining the majority of vote, was able to hold power and stay in his seat as Prime Minister.³⁹⁵ The plot exacerbated Sunni frustration with the central Iraqi government. As noted by former U.S. diplomat, Ali Khedery, many Sunnis were convinced they were purposefully being kept from power and the government did "little to dispel this assumption."³⁹⁶

Yet another major blow to the central government's authority came in the form of the Arab Spring. While initially the protests were peaceful and simply called for reforms, in Sunni areas the growing rage turned these protests into demands for Maliki to resign.³⁹⁷ While Maliki's government denied media coverage of key protests, such as the Day of Rage protest on February 25, 2011, protesters took to social media to spread the revolution.³⁹⁸ The Arab Spring protest in Iraq would have a mixed impact on the

³⁹³ Ibid, 82.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, 89.

³⁹⁵ For a full account of the election, see Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 90-93.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 92.

³⁹⁷ Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 120.

³⁹⁸ Ahmed K. Al-Rawi, *The Arab Spring and Online Protests in Iraq*, (International Journal of Communication, 8): 2014, 917.

emerging ISI movement. On one hand, many of the protests emphasized unity, thereby indirectly critiquing the sectarian messaging of ISI.³⁹⁹ Nonetheless, the protests brought a significant amount of activism online. The lack of regulation on the World Wide Web would prove crucial for ISI in the coming years and prove an inroad to radicalizing the Iraqi community. Moreover, the Maliki regime substantially repressed the protests, further enraging Iraqis. Sunnis, who already had reason enough to be frustrated, were only pushed into the hands of non-government militias such as ISI.

Though the socio-political conditions of Iraq are a bit beyond the scope of this paper, they are important to grasp in order to understand the ideal timing of ISI's campaign in Iraq. Without these underlying factors, ISI would likely not have been able to take such strong hold over the territory it would come to capture. Nor would ISI have had such a substantial following online.

The fourth and final factor that led to the radicalization of Sunni Iraqis was the formation of a robust media apparatus for AQI. On October 31, 2006, the formation of *Mu'assat al-Furqan li al-Llami* (*al-Furqan* Establishment for Media Production) was announced.⁴⁰⁰ By December, the organization began a popular bout of media publications. The first was the "Knights of Martyrdom," a series documenting suicide operations throughout Iraq.⁴⁰¹ A second popular series was news reports from the "Ministry of Information of the Islamic State of Iraq" which were issued on nearly a daily basis and were translated in both Arabic and English. While *al-Furqan* was the most popular media branch of ISI, there were also many unofficial media production centers: *Katibat al-Jihad al-Ilami* (The Media Jihad Brigade), *al-Markaz al-Iraqi al-Islami li l'Ilam* (The Iraqi Islamic Media Center), *Haqq* (Truth Agency), *Qaidat al-Jihad*, and *al-Buraq* Media

³⁹⁹ Ibid. For example, one banner read: "Sunni, Christian, Shiite, Sabean, Yazidi...all of this is not an identity...What is important is my blood is Iraqi." [Gerges, *ISIS: A History*, 121]

⁴⁰⁰ Hanna Rogan, "From 'Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007: al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies," *Department of Culture and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo*, (Master Thesis), November 2007, 81. The name of the media organization roots in the Qur'an; al-Furqan is the name of the 25th sura in the Qu'ran and means "the Criterion."

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 81.

Establishment.⁴⁰² Throughout their introduction in 2006, most of these media agencies posted content in both Arabic and English as well as short and long videos documenting *jihadi* activity in Iraq. Despite a series of coalition raids in the summer of 2007 that “took its toll on the central media office,”⁴⁰³ the diversity media operations allowed for ISI to continue producing content. Through ISI’s prolific media efforts during this time period, it becomes clear that media operations were central to ISI’s state-building strategy.

The four overlooked factors would come to haunt the U.S. as it withdrew in 2011. In fact, many in the U.S. and Iraqi military believed it was important to extend the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in order to allow U.S. combat troops to remain in the country longer.⁴⁰⁴ Yet, partially due to President Obama’s reluctance to bring the issue to a deeply divided parliament, SOFA remained as was. U.S. troops withdrew by December 31, 2011, leaving behind a country wracked in conflict. ISI was ready to strike both militarily and through its media.

Division in Syria

It was not simply ISI’s political activism in Iraq that mobilized recruitment for the group, ISI, through its affiliate, *Jubhat al-Nusra*, was extremely effective in taking territory in Syria. This was, in part, due to the similar sectarian environment fostered by Bashar al-Assad’s government. Notably, ISI did not try to extend its operations into Syria until 2011, the year the civil war in Syria began. *Jabhat al-Nusra* was founded by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani in 2011 with the intention to fight the Assad regime. This thereby suggests that ISI was neither operationally capable nor felt

⁴⁰² Rogan, “From ‘Abu Reuter...’”, 88-94.

⁴⁰³ Craig Whiteside, “Lighting the Path: the Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016),” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, November, 2016.

⁴⁰⁴ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 93.

that it would be popular enough with local Syrian populations to begin operations until the highly sectarian environment of 2011.

However, it is important that JN was only popularized by taking a slightly different strategy than ISI. If JN represented an initial test of ISI's popularity in Syria, ISI would fail the test. Ultimately, the strife from the two organizations would sow the seeds for ISI to split from its parent organization. In part, the divorce was due to an image campaign that al-Nusra had been attempting to wage among the Syrian Sunni community. John Turner describes:

Al-Nusra's image campaign was evident during the battle of Aleppo, where they attempted to ensure bakeries remained open and supplied, subsidized the cost of bread, and largely refrained from imposing themselves on the locals through mandating a conservative form of sharia. This is in stark contrast to attempts by ISIS [then, known as ISI] to deprive government-held areas of supplies, which also increased food shortages in Aleppo.⁴⁰⁵

ISI positioned itself as strongly against central government bodies, particularly against the Iraqi central government. In sharp contrast, al-Nusra was far more interested in generating a positive image; while JN represented an alternative to the Assad regime, Jolani was far more concerned with gaining the support of the local community through acts of service.

JN's desire to integrate with the Sunni community is a subtle but important difference between ISI and JN. In fact, initially, al-Nusra took on a strategy similar to ISI—at least, until the strategy proved unpopular in Syria. On January 23, 2012, JN released a video to al-Qaeda forums entitled, "For the people of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Fields of jihad."⁴⁰⁶ The video declared war on Assad but simultaneously stressed Jabhat al-Nusra's domestic Syrian focus. Yet, given that the group had already introduced itself with a bloody bombing of policeman buses, an operation that killed twenty-six Syrians, the video was not received well. In a historical survey of the group, scholar Charles Lister conveys, "Urban suicide bombings and videos tinged with jihadi

⁴⁰⁵ Turner, "Strategic Difference," 208-225.

⁴⁰⁶ Charles Lister, "Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra," (*The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, No.24): July, 2016, 10.

nasheeds [jihadist anthems] released onto al-Qaida internet forums brought with them the fear that the notoriously brutal ISI had come to town.”⁴⁰⁷ JN’s initial propaganda was out of line with the horrific attacks it was waging on Syrian soil.

In late 2012, JN changed strategies. In addition to subsidizing the cost of bread for many Aleppo residents, it also helped to deliver heating gas, water, cleaning and health care services, and other forms of civil assistance.⁴⁰⁸ The group also stressed its alliance with al-Qaeda over its affiliation with ISI. Al-Jolani even refused direct orders from al-Baghdadi to announce JN as part of ISI.⁴⁰⁹ The dual strategy by JN paid off: when the U.S. designated JN a terrorist organization in December 2012, a week of demonstrations began that promoted the slogan “We are all Jabhat al-Nusra.”⁴¹⁰ Just as ISI had begun to eclipse its own parent organization, Jubhat al-Nusra was eclipsing ISI in Syria.

The Great Divorce

By the mid-2013, long-standing tensions between both ISI and Jubhat al-Nusra *and* ISI and al-Qaeda Central began to reach their peak. AQC leadership began to publicly voice concerns about how ISIS’ violence could hurt its international reputation. The American al-Qaeda spokesman, Adam Ghadan, even argued that AQC had to split with ISIS lest it “risk the ruin of its reputation.”⁴¹¹

When al-Baghdadi released an audio message in April announcing that ISI was subsuming JN, al-Jolani immediately sought the ruling of al-Qaeda Central. While it is commonly known that al-Jolani sought the support of AQC in response to al-Baghdadi’s expansion, it is additionally

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁰⁹ Bacon and Arsenault, “Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break,” 242.

⁴¹⁰ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra,” 12.

⁴¹¹ Turner, “Strategic Difference,” 208-225.

important to note that al-Baghdadi also reached out to AQC for guidance when al-Jolani did not comply.⁴¹² As terrorism scholars Tricia Bacon and Elizabeth Arsenault describe, “This move belies the notion that the alliance between Al Qaeda and ISIS was already irrelevant, despite the ambiguity about al-Baghdadi’s Oath.”⁴¹³ This hereby suggests that al-Baghdadi did, indeed, rely on the leadership of al-Qaeda Central.

As earlier recorded, al-Zawahiri’s ultimate ruling that JN was separate from ISIS and that ISIS should return to the Iraq front significantly upset Baghdadi and led to ideological struggles between the JN and ISIS leadership throughout 2014. After al-Zawahiri formally denounced ISIS’ actions, claims reverberated throughout ISIS and al-Qaeda ranks that their opponent had lost its divine mandate. Throughout the remainder of 2014, some of al-Qaeda’s regional partners broke with AQC and pledged loyalty to ISIS, including some core al-Qaeda groups in the Arabian Peninsula and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.⁴¹⁴ Several former high-ranking al-Qaeda sheikhs also denounced al-Qaeda:

Together, with eight other al-Qaeda sheikhs, Salah al-Din accused al-Qaeda itself of numerous illegitimate acts: softness in dealing with the Shi’a, daring to declare that former Egyptian President Morsi was a Muslim, “excessive complimenting of what was called the Arab Spring,” supporting political work rather than fighting, and repudiating ISIS.⁴¹⁵

Nonetheless, most leaders remained faithful to AQC; only one establishment leader moved to support ISIS.

On the ground, violence broke out. By the end of 2013, ISIS commanders extended their indiscriminate violence to JN. Most of JN’s non-Syrian members began to defect to ISIS and took

⁴¹² Bacon and Arsenault, “Al Qaeda and the Islamic States Break,” 236.

⁴¹³ Ibid, p. 243.

⁴¹⁴ For more on al-Qaeda defections, see: [J.M. Berger, “The Islamic State vs. Al Qaeda,” Foreign Policy, September 12, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/02/the-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/>.]

⁴¹⁵ Mary Habeck, “Assessing the ISIS - Al-Qaeda Split,” Insite Blog on Terrorism & Extremism, June 18, 2014, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/about-us/21-jihad/4388-assessing-the-isis-al-qaeda-split-introduction>.

up arms against their former comrades, creating a “war within a war.”⁴¹⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, JN’s approach was to “comparatively more pragmatic and cooperative...deepening its relationships with supportive jihadi factions and Syrian Salafis.”⁴¹⁷ Some of the fighting ISIS perpetrated against JN was particularly brutal, leading to 1,400 fighters being killed in a sarin gas attack in northeastern Damascus.⁴¹⁸ Infighting between JN and ISIS is thought to have led to about four thousand deaths between the two groups.⁴¹⁹

Though fighting between AQC and ISIS never officially occurred, al-Zawahiri considered the ISIS attacks on JN to be direct attacks on al-Qaeda.⁴²⁰ Publicly, al-Zawahiri called for the end of *fitna* (infighting), but for ISIS, the calls would fall on deaf ears. By early-February 2014, al-Zawahiri officially renounced any organizational links to ISIS and its leadership.⁴²¹ Al-Qaeda in Iraq was officially dissolved.

Of important note during the split was the increasing role that media publications had on increasing the tension between al-Qaeda and ISIS. Zawahiri’s complaint with ISIS was not simply that ISIS was attacking fellow *jihadists*, but that those attacks were being publicized throughout their media operations. Moreover, ISIS specifically used its media operations to distinguish itself from al-Nusra and al-Qaeda, demonstrating the birth of ISIS’ own independent media strategy. By this point, media had centralized itself as a key component of each of the groups’ strategy. Reputation was almost tantamount to physical presence. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the role of media would only increase as ISIS firmly established itself in both Iraq and Syria.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, 237; Lister, “Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra,” 13.

⁴¹⁷ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra,” 13.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, 13.

⁴¹⁹ Byman and Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda.”

⁴²⁰ Shaul Shay and Ely Karmon, “Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham Did Jabhat Al-Nusra Split from Al-Qaeda?,” IPS Publications, August 2016, 1-6,

https://www.idc.ac.il/he/research/ips/Documents/publication/5/ShaulShay07_08_16.pdf.

⁴²¹ Lister, “Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra,” 14.

CHAPTER FOUR: CALIPHATE.COM

**“We keep hearing that the antidote is preaching moderate Islam. I tell people on the National Security Council, ‘Don’t you have kids? Does anything moderate appeal to them?’”
- Scott Atran, Former CIA analyst**

Baqiyya wa Tatamaddad (Remaining and Expanding)

2014 was a major year for ISIS. Despite tension with their former partners in crime, Jabhat-al-Nusra and al-Qaeda Central, throughout 2012 and 2013, ISIS had amassed significant territory in both Iraq and Syria. ISIS’ first major campaign began in July 2012. Called “Breaking down the Walls,” it had three main goals: (1) secure the release of prisoners; (2) recapture territory that had been lost through the U.S. offensive; and (3) target the Shi’a.⁴²² The campaign was a major success in many ways. 500 inmates were freed from Abu Ghraib prison and, during the last three months of 2012, there were thirty suicide bombings per month on mostly Shi’a targets.⁴²³ Not to mention, by December 30th, 2013, ISIS took control of Fallujah, a city just 43 miles from Baghdad.⁴²⁴ A month later, ISIS took over Raqqa, declaring it the capital of the ISIS emirate.⁴²⁵ ISIS’ most famous success came in the Summer of 2014 when, after capturing Mosul, Tikrit, and significant territory in North-East Iraq, on June 29th, ISIS officially declared a caliphate.

ISIS’s territorial expansion coincided with a simultaneous rise in ISIS fighters. The U.S. Department of State estimates that in 2005 and 2006, there were about 1,000 ISIS fighters.⁴²⁶ Figures from 2011 place the number of fighters somewhere around 1,000 to 2,000 men.⁴²⁷ These

⁴²² Ibid, 122; Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 95-96.

⁴²³ Ibid, 96.

⁴²⁴ “Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

⁴²⁶ Shannon C. Houck, Meredith A. Repke & Lucian Gideon Conway III (2017) Understanding what makes terrorist groups’ propaganda effective: an integrative complexity analysis of ISIL and Al Qaeda, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 12:2, 107.

⁴²⁷ Ibid, 107.

numbers shot up dramatically in 2013; a 2014 CIA report suggests that there were about 20,000 to 31,500 ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria.⁴²⁸ Not all these fighters were from the territory that ISIS had captured either. A 2015 report by the National Counterterrorism Center counts around 20,000 foreign fighters from ninety different countries to be in ISIS' ranks at this time.⁴²⁹ While, given that radicalization occurs for a variety of reasons, it is impossible to know exactly what mobilized such a massive number of fighters, there are two explanations of note.

One possibility that explains such a massive upsurge in recruitment around 2014 is that the creation of a caliphate was attractive to disenfranchised Muslims. Supporting this argument structure is the mere timing of an uptick of recruitment after the creation of the caliphate. Indeed, one anthropologist, Scott Atran, interviewed Muslims affiliated with ISIS in order to understand their support of the organization. He reports that one Spanish imam said, "We always rejected violence, but Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi put us [Muslims] on the map. The caliphate doesn't have to be violent. It can be just like the European Union!"⁴³⁰ Extrapolating from such an interview, it is highly possible that others felt similarly. Certainly, the Sykes-Picot breakup of the Arab states had been a headache for many Arabs, to say the least. The caliphate represented an Islamic State of their own—or, at least, a state for Salafi-affiliated Sunni Muslims.

While the caliphate argument holds some credence, there is a much more likely explanation for the rise in ISIS fighters. The diversity of fighters thereby suggests that there was more at play than territorial domination, something unique was attracting foreign fighters and native Syrians and Iraqis to join ISIS' ranks. That something special came in the form of media. As demonstrated by Figure 3, after the Islamic State's Caliphate was declared, a surge of accounts affiliated to ISIS

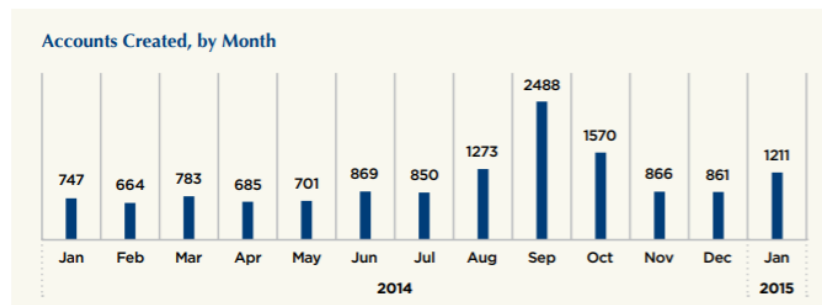
⁴²⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 107.

⁴³⁰ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 173.

appeared on social media sites. This hereby suggested that, additionally to building a robust physical following, ISIS was building a strong online community.

Figure 3⁴³¹: **Month of Account Creation of Twitter**



An Online Caliphate

When ISIS declared itself a Caliphate in 2014, it quickly became clear that this caliphate did not simply have physical properties; ISIS specifically leveraged the online landscape to expand its control. At first, it appeared that ISIS was relying significantly on al-Qaeda’s own strategy. As shown by Figure 4, a 2018 comparative study found that YouTube videos were the primary source of video distribution by both ISIS and al-Qaeda. Moreover, at least before the creation of the caliphate, many of the videos that ISIS initially produced had similar content to al-Qaeda’s productions.⁴³² For instance, the first key media published by ISI in 2012 was “The Expedition of the Prisoners #1,” a thirty-six-minute video released by al-Furqan. It used clips from Western and Arab media sources, critiqued the U.S. occupation of Iraq (the far enemy), and contained an overall

⁴³¹ J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, (The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, No.20, March 2015), 38.

⁴³² Urtak Hamiti, *The War of US against ISIS in Psychological Warfare and Internet as the New Frontline*, (*European Journal of Interde*

political message.⁴³³ This type of video was popular for al-Qaeda Central as well; the only aspect of the video that distinguishes it as an ISI video is a short audio clip of al-Zarqawi “denouncing the Shiites” and two audio clips of al-Muhajir “who says of the Iraqi Shiites, ‘kill them, crucify them, and cut off their limbs.’”⁴³⁴ This content is troubling, but in the context of a thirty-six minute video, these comments are not centralized as the focus of the video. Not to mention, as is typical of al-Qaeda videos, the quality of the videos themselves is quite poor, making the video have significantly less “watchability.” Before upgrading its media efforts, ISIS’ popularity was limited mostly to its territorial boundaries

Figure 4: **Type of Cyber-Resources: Al Qaeda and ISIS**⁴³⁵

	Al Qaeda		ISIS	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Facebook Post	2	9.1	9	16.1
Online Forum	2	9.1	2	3.6
Twitter Post	2	9.1	15	26.8
Website	8	36.4	6	10.7
YouTube Video	8	36.4	24	42.9
Total	22	100.0	56	100.0

By 2014, however, this all changed. “The Expedition of the Prisoners #1” is a far cry from what ISIS began to produce after splitting from al-Qaeda. One of ISIS’ most popular video series was “Windows Upon the Land of Epic Battles.” As a Brookings Study describes, “The production quality of the series is top notch. The videos no longer contain mashups of borrowed footage but

⁴³³ Alberto M. Fernandez, *Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks*, (Brookings: October, 2015), 4.

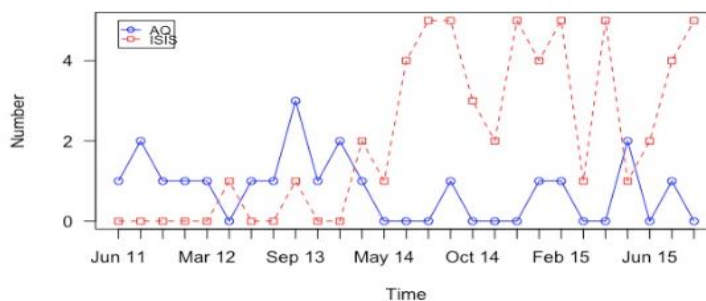
⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³⁵ Kyung-shick Choi, Claire Seugeun Lee, and Robert Cadigan, *Spreading Propaganda in Cyberspace: Comparing Cyber-Resource Usage of al Qaeda and ISIS*, (International Journal of Cybersecurity Intelligence & Cybercrime: 1 (1), 2018): 30.

are made up of 100% original material filmed by ISIS.”⁴³⁶ Taking a comparative lens to ISIS and al-Qaeda propaganda gives a better sense of why ISIS was able to amass such a significant following in both Iraq, Syria, and even abroad. While al-Qaeda was the first to weaponize propaganda, they were slow to develop with the ever-changing media landscape.

One may argue that, because many of al-Qaeda’s videos are older, they simply reflect the technological abilities of the time. This argument would suggest that, if one compares a contemporary al-Qaeda video to a contemporary ISIS video, the quality and content of the videos would be similar. However, there are a few points that undermine such logic. First, as demonstrated by Figure 5, al-Qaeda simply produced far fewer materials after 2014 than ISIS produced. In some cases, al-Qaeda was not even active online in any major sense. Secondly, as was evident from Figure 4, al-Qaeda failed to expand significantly on more novel forms of media, such as social media. Al-Qaeda’s methods of communication mostly consist of videos and websites, which are far less interactive. Not to mention, by failing to utilize social media, al-Qaeda cut itself off from younger demographics—exactly the age group that a militant group would want to target. Thus, while al-Qaeda may have inspired ISIS’ weaponization of social media, it is likely that ISIS’ use of social media is another entity altogether.

Figure 5: ⁴³⁷ Terrorist Cyber Activities: al Qaeda and ISIS



⁴³⁶ Fernandez, *Here to Stay and Growing*, 7.

⁴³⁷ Choi, Lee, and Cardigan, *Spreading Propaganda in Cyber Space*, 29.

Twitter Wars

Given ISIS' profuse usage of social media, it begs the question of how extensive ISIS' social media operations are. Indeed, the actual number of ISIS Twitter accounts is a topic of great interest to many scholars. As of September 2014, a study by The Recorded Future Internet security team found 60,000 pro-ISIS Twitter accounts.⁴³⁸ In March 2015, a Brookings study recorded a similar number of pro-ISIS Twitter accounts.⁴³⁹

However, work by J.M. Berger and Heather Perez through the George Washington University's Program on Extremism heavily curtailed such estimates. As Berger and Perez found, the vast majority of ISIS accounts were duplicates—a strategy utilized to avoid the devastation of account suspension.⁴⁴⁰ A later study by Berger and Morgan found that while there were likely 90,000 detected ISIS accounts on Twitter, only 46,000 were overt ISIS supporters.⁴⁴¹ Moreover, as Berger and Morgan note, “Much of ISIS's social media success can be attributed to a relatively small group of hyperactive users, numbering between 500 and 2,000 accounts, which tweet in concentrated bursts of high volume.”⁴⁴² In essence, Berger and Morgan's work dramatically reconceptualized the notion of ISIS' Twitter apparatus from a vast, grassroots network of active users to a centralized, well-planned schemata.

In order to ensure a cohesive message on its social media platforms, ISIS centralizes its media operations. Though thousands of jihadists participate in ISIS' media network, the network is controlled by one key figure, the group's head of media relations. This position was formerly

⁴³⁸ Daniel L. Byman. “Will ISIS and Al-Qaida Always Be Rivals?” Brookings Blog. Brookings, May 27, 2016 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/05/27/will-isis-and-al-qaida-always-be-rivals/>, 24.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ J. M. Berger and Heather Perez, “The Islamic State's Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions Are Limiting the Social Networks of English-Speaking ISIS Supporters,” report (George Washington University, Program on Extremism, February 2016), 4.

⁴⁴¹ Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census.”

⁴⁴² Ibid.

held by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, but, after al-Adnani was killed by an airstrike in 2016, the position was filled by Abu Hassan al-Muajjir.⁴⁴³ Those in charge of media operations are given the title of *amir* (prince)—a title also given to ISIS commanders on the battlefield—thus demonstrating extremely high status which media operations hold within the Islamic State apparatus.⁴⁴⁴ A Washington Post article, which interviewed hundreds of videographers, producers, and editors responsible for ISIS’ media operations, found that such media operatives “form a privileged, professional class with status, salaries, and living arrangements that are the envy of ordinary fighters.”⁴⁴⁵ Moreover, these media operatives are no novices; ISIS employs experienced filmmakers and technicians who are trained extensively before they begin working for the Islamic State.⁴⁴⁶ In the ISIS hierarchy, media operations are clearly central. This allows for the actual content produced to fall in line with the views and strategies of high-ranking ISIS members. While there may be many ISIS members operating online, there is a clear authority structure to approve and distribute content throughout the ISIS ranks.

Centralization of media content is also fueled by the authority of one main media center: *Diwan al-’lam al-Markazi* (the Central Media Office). Currently, it is unknown where *al-Markazi* is located, but it is thought to be somewhere in the Euphrates Valley.⁴⁴⁷ The hierarchical nature of *al-Markazi* is particularly evident in the insignias present in all regional productions, as demonstrated by Figure 6. While each video can have a provincial nomenclature, the videos always references back to their “parent” media organization, *al-Markazi*. Thus, each regional media office

⁴⁴³ Byman and Williams, “ISIS vs. Al Qaeda.”

⁴⁴⁴ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 173.

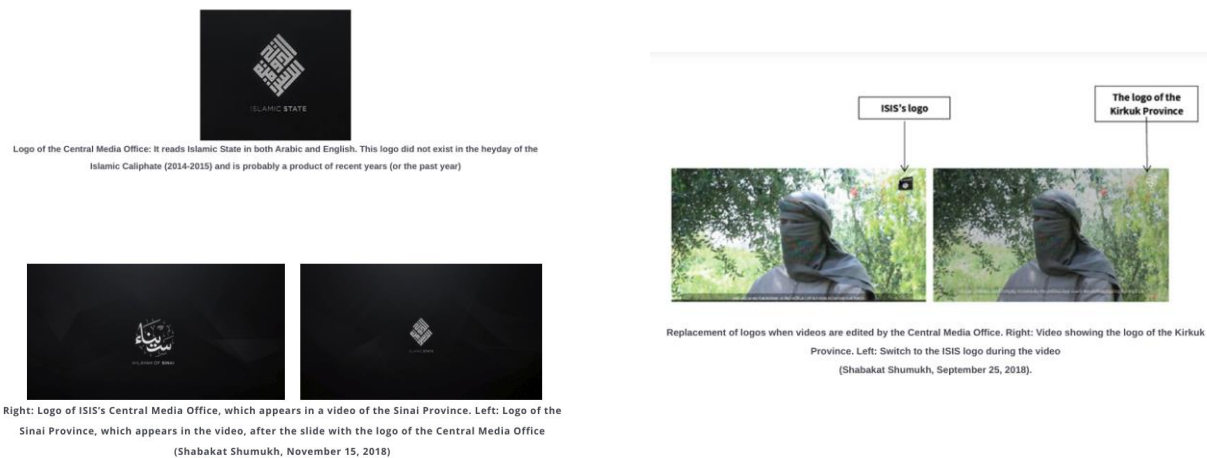
⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 173.

⁴⁴⁶ Lydia Wilson, *Understanding the Appeal of ISIS*, (New England Journal of Public Policy, Vol 29, Issue 1, Article 5), March 20th, 2017, 3.

⁴⁴⁷ Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census.”

is afforded enough autonomy to produce content against their individual “near enemy” targets, while still maintaining the overall ISIS branding. It is quite an adept media strategy.

Figure 6⁴⁴⁸: *al-Markazi Video Insignias*



ISIS uses many different operational tactics to distribute its propaganda through social media. On Twitter, the group particularly uses hashtag campaigns to promote engagement with their accounts. For instance, an Atlantic study found that, “the group enlists hundreds and sometimes thousands of activists to repetitively tweet hashtags at certain times of day so that they trend on the social network.”⁴⁴⁹ Moreover, ISIS attempts to get its hashtags trending on streams like @ActiveHashtags, an account that tweets each day’s trending hashtags. When a tag becomes part of @ActiveHashtags, it results in roughly seventy-two retweets per tweet, a feat that makes the hashtag trend even more.⁴⁵⁰ ISIS also hijacks popular hashtags. In 2014, ISIS took over

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ J.M. Berger, “How ISIS Games Twitter,” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

hashtags for the 2014 World Cup.⁴⁵¹ By manipulating Twitter's own algorithms, ISIS grows its reach and popularizes its brand.

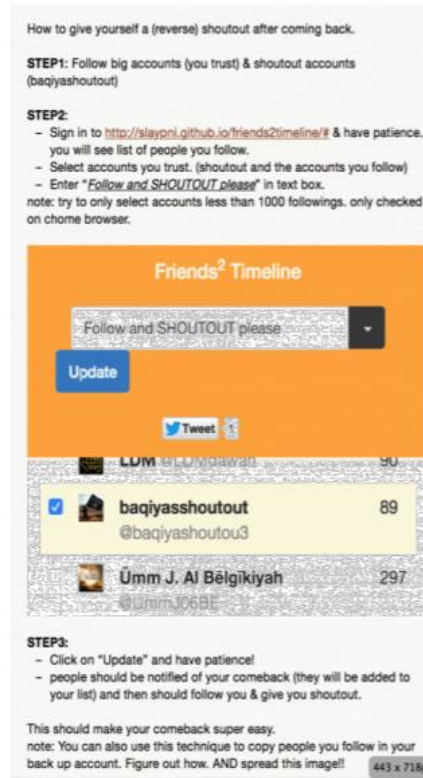
Twitter began an ISIS account suspension campaign in mid-2014 to mitigate ISIS' ability to utilize Twitter as a platform to spread propaganda. However, the utility of such suspension is widely debated. As J.M. Berger notes, to some degree, the suspensions "reduce the organization's ability to manipulate public opinion and attract recruits."⁴⁵² However, suspension is somewhat like a game of whack-a-mole—many of the accounts that are shut down simply reappear under different names. Moreover, suspension can lead to further isolation of alienated individuals, which may further radicalize potential ISIS recruits. At this point, it is unclear as to how effective the suspension of accounts is in the larger field of counterterrorism prevention measures.

ISIS even came up with a specific strategy to cope with Twitter's suspension campaign. As Figure 7 demonstrates, ISIS members are even instructed to follow specific accounts that help ISIS members whose accounts have been deactivated. The process is explained in a step-by-step format, as shown by Figure 7, and demonstrates how to ensure that ISIS followers maintain the same network of followers. This is particularly significant as it allows for ISIS members to maintain an online community, even during times of significant external pressure.

⁴⁵¹ One post even was shared in 2014 with "a video of the beheading of a police officer...with the message: 'This is our ball. It's made of skin #WorldCup.'" [Rod Nordland, "Iraq's Sunni Militias Take to Social Media to Advance Their Cause and Intimidate," *New York Times*, June 28, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/world/middleeast/iraqs-sunni-militants-take-to-social-media-to-advance-their-cause-and-intimidate.html>.]

⁴⁵² Berger and Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census*, 56.

Figure 7⁴⁵³: Instructions for Reverse Shoutouts



Twitter suspensions can only go so far, given that, in addition to its efforts on Twitter, ISIS uses other forms of social media to market its content. ISIS makes use of encrypted applications such as Telegraph, Whatsapp, and Zello. On these applications, ISIS members can share videos, photos, texts, and audio messages from their mobile phones for free. For example, Zello is “quite popular among ISIS’s younger audiences” and, in 2016, was recorded to have been “repurposed by ISIS as a simple how-to guide for pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi.”⁴⁵⁴ Given that studies

⁴⁵³ Berger and Perez, “The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns,” 15.

⁴⁵⁴ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 176.

demonstrate that young, foreign fighters are often not directly recruited—they, rather, seek out the organization—these commonly used mobile applications allow for the fighters to come to ISIS.⁴⁵⁵

Other ISIS media usage employs the services of apps to distribute propaganda. In April 2014, ISIS even emerged with its own app for Android phones, *Fajr al-Bashaa'ir* (Dawn of Good Tidings).⁴⁵⁶ As of June, 2014, the app was banned from the GooglePlay app store, but already allowed for ISIS members to easily reshare *al-Markazi* content thousands of times.⁴⁵⁷ The app collects a significant amount of personal data and, as a specialist on ISIS' social media, J.M. Berger narrates:

Once you sign up, the app will post tweets to your account—the content of which is decided by someone in ISIS's social-media operation. The tweets include links, hashtags, and images, and the same content is also tweeted by the accounts of everyone else who has signed up for the app, spaced out to avoid triggering Twitter's spam-detection algorithms. Your Twitter account functions normally the rest of the time, allowing you to go about your business.⁴⁵⁸

In other words, the app allows ISIS members to share ISIS content effortlessly. Like ISIS' use of hashtags, *Fajr al-Bashaa'ir* finds loopholes in Twitter's algorithms to popularize its content. Additionally, given that the app requires an abundance of personal data, it is highly possible that ISIS uses such information to its own advantage—whether that be to create registries of potential recruits or to better inform its own social media outreach strategy. In any case, J.M. Berger is spot on when he boldly declares that ISIS “owes a lot of that support to a calculated campaign that would put American social-media-marketing gurus to shame.”⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁵ Colonel John M. Venhaus, *Why Youth Join al-Qaeda*, (United States Institute of Peace, May, 2010), 1.

⁴⁵⁶ Wilson, *Understanding the Appeal*, 4.

⁴⁵⁷ Batsheva Moriarty, *Defeating ISIS on Twitter*, (Technology Science, September 28, 2015), <https://techscience.org/a/2015092904/>.

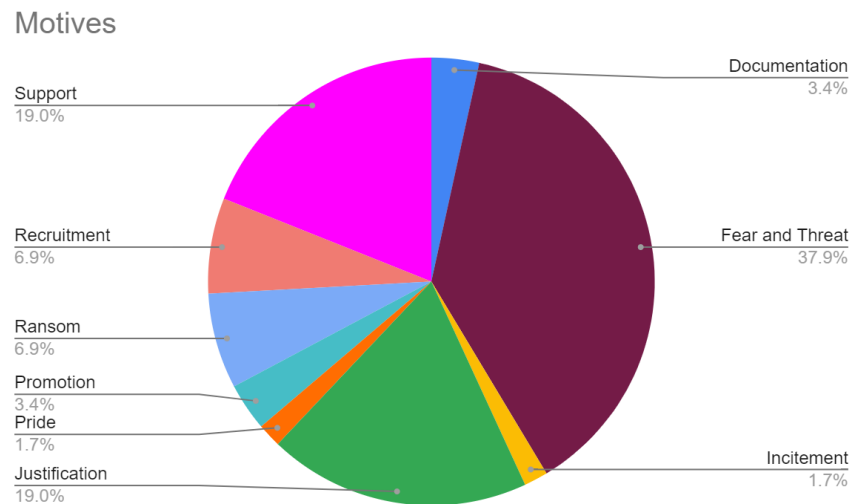
⁴⁵⁸ Berger, “How ISIS Games Twitter.”

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Virtual Target Practice

The prerogative of ISIS' media campaign appears to be three-fold: terrorize its enemies, legitimize its message, and support its operations. Figure 8 visualizes the data from an in-depth 2018 study on the content of ISIS propaganda. As the figure demonstrates, the primary purpose behind ISIS' content is creating fear and threat. This is followed by justifying and supporting their actions. Through this motivational analysis, it becomes clear that ISIS specifically uses violence as a form of legitimacy. Moreover, ISIS is just as concerned, if not more concerned, with how its enemies view ISIS' acts as ISIS is concerned with how potential recruits view ISIS.

Figure 8⁴⁶⁰: ISIS' Motives Behind Cyberterrorism



ISIS' motivations for its media content have major implications for the content it produces. The same 2018 study found that the most recurrent content in ISIS' propaganda was beheadings.

⁴⁶⁰ Choi, Lee, and Cardigan, *Spreading Propaganda in Cyberspace*, 30.

Using the framework of ISIS' motivations, it becomes clear that ISIS uses beheadings, a form of ultra-violence, both to spread fear and to recruit.

In some ways, fear can be utilized as a strategy of deterrence. While, to a more peaceable individual, this conception is perhaps difficult to understand, an example of this helps to explain how fear operates. One video published in July 2015 shows two men, Bashir Abduladhim al-Saado and Faisal Hussain, accused of spying on ISIS.⁴⁶¹ The video depicts al-Saado and Hussain being “tied to wooden posts and shot through the head with pistols at point-blank range by two ISIS gunmen. The camera lingers on their corpses and even captures the sound of blood dripping from their head wounds”⁴⁶² The filmography of the video begs the questions of why the men are so brutally murdered and why ISIS finds it beneficial to show such violence on film. Yet, it is important to understand that fear is a tool that greatly reduces the likelihood of rebellion against ISIS' authority; by utilizing fear, ISIS ensures compliance of its fighters and of the people residing in the territory that ISIS holds.

Moreover, fear can be utilized to reinforce ISIS' sectarian messaging. By combining fear with the “us vs. them” dichotomy, individuals are terrorized into choosing the “us” categorization out of sheer self-preservation. For example, in ISIS' most popular film titled “*Saleel al-Sawarim*” (“Clanging of the Swords,”), ISIS operatives called “Sahwat Hunters” raid the home of an Awakening commander. The video continues as follows: “Two young boys, the sons of a Sahwa commander, are digging a giant pit in the dirt. They explain that their father convinced them to work with Iraqi government. Then it is their father's turn to dig...He addresses the camera, advising everyone in the Awakening to repent. ‘I am now digging my own grave,’ he says.”⁴⁶³ Like the

⁴⁶¹ Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army*, 178.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*, 179.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, 175.

video of the ISIS “spies,” the message of this video is clear: Don’t affiliate yourself with the enemies of ISIS. Indeed, fear is a powerful weapon in the war of *takfirism*.

Yet, as earlier suggested, violence can also be a recruitment tool. In one respect, the abject violence on a human form serves to dehumanize the individual, as argued in a 2017 study, *The Communication of Horrorism*.⁴⁶⁴ When viewed in mass, ISIS videos serve an overt dehumanizing message against their victims, convincing impressionable viewers that anyone who disagrees with ISIS is lesser-than ISIS members. Yet, even more than persuading viewers to look down upon the Shi’a, liberal Sunnis, Christians, Jews, and other “heretics,” the violence itself may attract viewers. As one study of ISIS propaganda notes, “for all the disgust that scenes of graphic violence elicit, audiences are drawn to watch them because of the stimulation and curiosity they arouse.”⁴⁶⁵ This would certainly explain why, in the days immediately after its release, around 1.2 million people in Great Britain had watched the video of James Foley being beheaded.⁴⁶⁶ In essence, ISIS is able to use violence to attract attention. Violence draws viewers in, and, for some, the videos even are able to convince the viewer that the violence is justified against the “heretics.”

In addition to spreading violence, it is quite significant that ISIS uses its videos to justify and support its own messaging given that ISIS remains in battle for legitimacy with other jihadist organizations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the major themes that ISIS stresses in its videos is the legitimacy of its caliphate—a feature that sets it apart from other jihadist organizations. Throughout its media, ISIS refuses to refer to Iraq and Syria as Iraq or Syria, calling their territory *al-Sham* instead, a reference to the ancient Muslim territory that encompassed most of the northern

⁴⁶⁴ Lillie Chouliaraki and Angelos Kissas, *The Communication of Horrorism: A Typology of ISIS Online Death Videos*, (Critical Studies in Media Communication, 35:1, 2018): 24-39, <https://www.tandfonline.com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F15295036.2017.1393096>.

⁴⁶⁵ Simon Cotte and Jack Cunliffe, *Watching ISIS: How Young Adults Engage with Official English-Language ISIS Videos*, (Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, 43:3, 2020), 183-207 referencing Jeffrey H. Goldstein, ed., *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Levant. The symbolism is not lost on many Muslims, nor on many scholars of the region. “Iraq and Syria were the cradles of the first Muslim empires, the birthplaces of many of God’s prophets, and the grounds of End Times events foretold by Muhammad. These symbols are used as ammunition for ISIS to promote its ideology and gain legitimacy among conservative Muslims,” argue Hassan and Weiss. Indeed, eighty-one percent of ISIS’ content is thought to have originated in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁶⁷ Even Muslims who disagree with the messages of ISIS are forced to contend with ISIS’ narrative of Islamic legitimacy. ISIS’ narrative of holding a Caliphate over religiously sanctioned land pressures groups like al-Qaeda to either declare ISIS as *shirk* or to admit their own inferiority.

Whether one believes ISIS to be religiously credible or not, it is undeniable that strands of Islamic arguments run through ISIS propaganda. Moreover, as this chapter has made clear, ISIS prioritizes its media operations on the same level as its physical attacks. Of great concern, is the fact that, while physical attacks can only occur in isolation, social media allows for the permeation of ideas far beyond the initial release of propaganda. As every parent now must advise their young child: “Once you put it online, it is there forever.”

⁴⁶⁷ Bacon, Tricia, and Arsenault. “Al Qaeda and the Islamic State's Break,” 87.

CONCLUSION

“We are losing the battle.”

- Michael Steinbach, FBI Assistant Director on the war against ISIS propaganda

For nearly two decades now, it has been quite apparent that both al-Qaeda and ISIS’ media operations are profound. Both al-Qaeda and ISIS used and continue to use media to indoctrinate impressionable viewers, legitimize their organization, and instruct their followers on how to plan attacks. ISIS’ use of social media only furthers a trend that al-Qaeda began.

However, as the U.S. was unable to combat al-Qaeda’s media apparatus, it still seems unlikely that U.S. officials will be able to robustly address the media empire that ISIS now holds. As one U.S. Department of State official, who prefers to remain anonymous, told the author, “We need to go beyond saying, ‘ISIS is bad’. And that’s all we’re currently saying.” Indeed, despite its valiant attempts, the State Department’s current campaign against ISIS propaganda, *Think Again Turn Away*, fails to go beyond “ISIS is bad.”⁴⁶⁸

In fact, current counter-propaganda efforts fall directly into the narrative trap of “us vs. them” that al-Qaeda and ISIS both utilize in their own propaganda. Complete with shots of beheadings, executions, and other grotesque forms of violence, the propaganda released by the State Department directly mirrors that of al-Qaeda and ISIS. These videos do more to foster hate against the enemy than they do to shore up the reputation of one’s own brand.

The other challenge that *Think Again Turn Away* faced was the sheer amount of propaganda being created by ISIS on a daily basis. There are only so many Twitter monitors for English-language accounts, let alone accounts in other languages. Given ISIS’ global reach, this is particularly problematic, as content can circulate for days before being flagged or taken down.

⁴⁶⁸ To see an example of the State Department’s counter-messaging videos, see: <https://www.military.com/video/operations-and-strategy/terrorism/welcome-to-the-islamic-state-land/3775821940001>.

Moreover, ISIS' many regional offices allow for a multitude of content sources. *Think Again Turn Away*, at least initially, only employed fifteen operators and editors.⁴⁶⁹

In the first year after its formation, *Think Again Turn Away*'s Twitter account posted more than 1,900 tweets to keep up with ISIS' constant propaganda. Unfortunately for the State Department's campaign, the account only had 7,300 followers—a meager number if an account hopes to go viral. The author certainly concurs with the title of a TIME magazine article; in both content and impact, “The State Department's Twitter War with ISIS is Embarrassing.”⁴⁷⁰

There is some hope. As scholarship increasingly addresses the extent to which al-Qaeda and ISIS utilize media as an offensive strategy, academics are beginning to theorize new ways to curb ISIS recruitment. Most of these strategies involve engaging with the American Muslim community. For instance, a study presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers in 2015 suggested that “it would be most effective for the U.S. to establish its own positive narrative with regard to ISIS rather than simply focusing on its own counter-narrative. This positive narrative does not need to address the same issues as the ISIS narrative; instead, it could focus on the reasons why American Muslims do not need to join a militant group in the Middle East.”⁴⁷¹ Or, as another paper argues, utilizing the public-private partnership to create content would help to win the “war of propaganda volume” against ISIS.

This author is of the opinion that the inherent problem with the U.S.' counter-messaging propaganda is that it simply replicates the binary worldview of ISIS and al-Qaeda; by over-emphasizing that we are in a war, the U.S. alienates many potential allies in the Muslim community. A comprehensive counter-messaging strategy must be positivist—that is, it must be

⁴⁶⁹ Fernandez, *Here to Stay and Growing*, 15.

⁴⁷⁰ For the full article, see: <https://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>.

⁴⁷¹ William H. Allendorfer and Susan C. Herring, *ISIS vs. The U.S. Government: A War of Online Video Propaganda*, Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8698/6918>.

focused on the cultivation of a community rather than the degradation of another. Former President Barack Obama fostered this sentiment when he declared: “We are not at war with Islam.”⁴⁷² Yet, counter-messaging needs to go further than the negation of the negative; counter-messaging efforts in themselves need to inspire.

Finally, though more challenging, the historical purview provided by this paper makes clear that both al-Qaeda and ISIS achieve legitimacy through failures of foreign policy. While it should go without saying, “good foreign policy” negates terrorist organizations’ ability to foster resentment against the West. As U.S. officials look forward at how to combat al-Qaeda and ISIS’ propaganda, creating policies that help to build up Middle Eastern communities rather than destroy them should be tantamount to none. The challenge posed by al-Qaeda and ISIS’ media usage is complex but, by leveraging the strengths of U.S. foreign policy, policy makers can support both Middle Easterners’ interests and the U.S.’ own. It must be stressed that “we are not at war with Islam”; Muslims and the U.S. must be united in their fight against hate.

⁴⁷² Luis Ramirez, “Obama: ‘We Are Not at War With Islam,’” *VOA*, February 18, 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/obama-we-are-not-war-islam>.

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