

THE AL-QAEDA TRANSNATIONAL JIHADIST MOVEMENT IN HISTORICAL
CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING AND COUNTERING RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR
FORMS OF TERRORISM

Margaret Mary Egudo

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School of Social Sciences
The University of Adelaide
South Australia

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Abstract

Transnational terrorism promoted by the Al-Qaeda movement gained high-level strategic attention after 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, Shanksville, and Arlington in the United States of America that killed at least 3000 people. Attacks by Al-Qaeda inspired groups also occurred in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, West Africa, and East Africa. Al-Qaeda which means the 'base' or foundation in Arabic was established by Abdullah Yusuf Azam, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a small group of mujahideen volunteers who fought in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation during the 1980s. Under their leadership the movement expanded its ideology by establishing regional franchises with insurgent groups. The shifting pattern of its activism is highlighted through selected cases of transnational jihadist terrorist Sunni groups in the Middle East, North Africa, and East Africa that developed formal links to its senior leaders and facilitated ideological decentralisation whilst drawing from the Salafist model. Many groups used its brand name to conduct terrorist attacks on its behalf.

To gain further knowledge and understanding of the scale and security implications of the Al-Qaeda movement's ideology, comparative analysis has drawn from early forms of religious and secular terrorism to highlight the salience of religious, socio-political, and economic grievances that have formed the basis of insurgencies. Based on grievances, Al-Qaeda's transnational focus has projected unlimited objectives and differed from domestically focused groups whose campaigns declined or were ended.

The Al-Qaeda movement influenced the nature of domestic terrorism by hijacking and redefining its ideological space and narrative and turning it into a global conflict and holy war. This political model

was picked up by its more potent and zealous informal affiliate the Islamic State group (IS), successor to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) that sought to establish an Islamic caliphate in Sunni dominated provinces of north western Iraq and eastern Syria. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr Baghdadi the Islamic State group rapidly evolved from near obscurity into a global jihadist insurgent network despite facing heavy criticism from terrorist groups and Muslim communities because of its overly violent image.

The Islamic State group's excessive violence became an extension of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, at the time of growing opposition towards the presence of US-led coalition forces in mid-2003 to 2006. The group's hardline behaviour surpassed that Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), Al-Qaeda's informal affiliate that also operated in Syria in 2012. The strategic move by the group to change its name on 29 June 2014 from the Islamic State in Iraq and greater Syria (ISIS) to 'Islamic State' group (IS) reflected its transnational ambitions of establishing a caliphate, a move which by 2015 posed greater challenges when compared to earlier affiliates of the Al-Qaeda movement.

Al-Qaeda movement framework has posed new challenges for counter-terrorism strategists who had to continually modify policy approaches to deal with its emergent activities. In terms of ideological appeal, the Al-Qaeda brand name may not disappear from the political scene as its religious discourse is likely to inspire new generations of activists.

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Glossary

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| Al-Qaeda | the base (in Arabic) |
| Jihad | religious duty or struggle |
| Muslim | adherent of Islam (religion) |
| Salafism | a mode of Islamic practice |
| Sunni and Shia | denominations of Islam |

Abbreviations for sources

| | |
|--------|--|
| AFP | Australian Federal Police |
| AMISOM | African Mission to Somalia |
| ASIO | Australian Security Intelligence Organisation |
| ASIS | Australian Secret Intelligence Service |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency |
| COIN | Counterinsurgency |
| FATA | Federally Administered Tribal Areas |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| ICT | Information and communications technology |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and greater Syria (ISIS) |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| MIPT | Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| ONA | Office of National Assessments |
| PBS | Public Broadcasting Service |

| | |
|--------|--|
| PET | Danish Security Intelligence Service |
| PREACT | East African counter-terrorism |
| RAND | Research and Development organisation (USA) |
| START | Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| USA | United States of America |

List of terrorist groups

| | |
|------|--|
| AQAP | Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia) |
| AQI | Al-Qaeda in Iraq |
| AQIS | Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent |
| AQIM | Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb |
| BR | Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades), Italy |
| ETA | Basque Fatherland and Liberty (Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna), Spain |
| FSA | Free Syrian Army |
| FLQ | Front de Libération du Québec (Canada) |
| GIA | Armed Islamic Group (Algeria) |
| GSPC | Algerian Salafist group for Call and Combat |
| HASI | Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya |
| HSM | Harakat al Shabaab al Mujahideen, Al Shabaab (Somalia) |
| IEC | Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus |
| IS | Islamic State group |
| ISIS | Islamic State in Iraq and greater Syria |

| | |
|------|--|
| IRA | Irish Republican Army |
| JI | Jemaah Islamiyah |
| JN | Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front) |
| KIF | Kurdish Islamic Front |
| LeT | Lashkar-e-Taiba |
| LIFG | Libyan Islamic Fighting Group |
| LTTE | Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka) |
| PDPA | People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan |
| PLO | Palestinian Liberation Organisation |
| RAF | Rote Armee Fraktion or Red Army Faction, Germany |
| RRG | Religious Rehabilitation Group |
| SILF | Syrian Islamic Liberation Front |
| TTP | Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) |

Definition of key terms

Apostasy. Apostasy according to the *Encyclopaedia of religion and society* is defined as defection from both belief, and normative group identification and participation (Scherer 1998). Al-Qaeda portrayed its actions in cosmic religious terms similar to Armageddon. The latter has referred to inevitability or end of the world scenario (Blasi 1998).

Terrorism. Terrorism is violence or threat of violence that is designed to have psychological impact beyond the immediate victim or target. It is conducted by an organization with an identifiable chain of command or conspiratorial cell structure that can be a sub-national group or non-state entity (Hoffman 2006, p. 40).

Political Islam. Political Islam is a 'form of instrumentalisation of Islam by individuals, groups, and organizations that pursue political objectives' (Ayoob 2006, p. 2).

Ideology. Ideology can be considered as an 'image of society and a political paradigm' that offers a vision, purpose, and means. It provides an explanation of how the social world should operate in addressing perceived social problems (Stigler 2007, p. 5). Its references to attitudes, beliefs, and values suggest it can be used to influence and actualise a particular world view (Geertz 1973, in Freedman 1998, pp. 20-21).

Religion. Religion is a 'system of symbols' or 'cultural system' that serves as a vehicle to explain how people should view their social world (Geertz 1993, pp. 90-123). The concept is associated

with some transcendent truths and serves social and psychological roles in terms of imparting a range of intellectual, emotional, and moral experiences (Zubaida 2007).

Insurgency. An insurgency is a struggle between a non-ruling group and ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources (organisational expertise, propaganda, demonstrations, violence) to establish legitimacy by changing some aspect of the political system that is considered to be undesirable (O'Neill 1990, p.13).

Counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency involves 'political, social, civic, economic, psychological, and military actions taken to defeat an insurgency' (Australian Army Land Warfare Doctrine LWD 3-0-1, Counterinsurgency 2009, Glossary, p. xx).

Millenarianism. Millenarianism is the belief of a coming saviour, and the anticipated peace, prosperity, and righteousness that is linked to a new social order (Swatos, et al. 1998).

Social movement. A social movement is an organised collective acting with some degree of continuity in the pursuit of common objectives that seek to promote change in a society or group of which it is a part (Snow et al. 2004, pp. 8-11).